

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta  
Department of Education and Science

# **Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education July 2000**

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## **Foreword**

The Green Paper: Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning set out the role of adult education as a vital component in a continuum of lifelong learning. It outlined the contribution of the sector in promoting competitiveness and employment, addressing inter-generational poverty and disadvantage, strengthening individuals, families and communities, and promoting democracy and social cohesion. A major selling point in the new knowledge society is a well developed education and training system and a workforce which is adaptable and willing to learn new skills. Research throughout the world has demonstrated the central influence of education on life chances, and in recent years, there has been a growing realisation that education must be lifelong if we are to have an inclusive and democratic society which can adapt successfully to meet new challenges. In addition, we know that increasing children's participation and benefit from education is heavily dependent on also

enabling parents to support their children's learning. Globalisation, increased competition, new technology, demographic change, a continuing need to upskill the workforce, more leisure time, and an emphasis on social and cultural development are all converging factors which make it an imperative to invest systematically in adult education.

The Green Paper set out the context for debate in this area and made recommendations on how the sector might evolve. Its publication was followed by a wide ranging consultation process with providers, funders, users, policy makers, research, social partner and community and voluntary sector interests. My thanks are due to all parties who contributed with expertise and enthusiasm to this process and whose contribution is helping to shape the future direction of our system.

A Lifelong Learning policy requires learning opportunities to be provided over a lifespan rather than only in the early years, a recognition that learning takes place in a wide variety of settings, the development of greater links with industry and other community services and between the formal and informal sectors, and ensuring that quality services are available to meet the diverse needs of a wide range of groups, both young and adult.

We are at the beginning of a new and exciting era. This White Paper sets out a blueprint for the future development and expansion of adult education, for a strengthened focus on access, quality, flexibility and responsiveness, and for the establishment of national and local structures which will help provide a co-ordinated and integrated approach. Adult Education is the last area of mass education which remains to be developed in Ireland. Many of the initial steps have already been taken and will be consolidated in the context of investment under the National Development Plan. This Paper provides for further development within the context of an over-arching policy and a comprehensive systemic approach. It will require the commitment and partnership of all -- Government, education and training providers, business, trade unions, communities, voluntary organisations, individuals -- to meet the challenge of bringing the concept of lifelong learning concept to reality.

Willie O Dea, T.D.  
Minister of State

Department of Education and Science

# Executive Summary

## RATIONALE AND CONTEXT

This is Ireland's first White Paper on Adult Education and marks the adoption of lifelong learning as the governing principle of educational policy. The Paper reflects on the role of adult education in society, builds on the consultation process following publication of the Green Paper, and sets out the Government's policies and priorities for the future development of the sector. It does not aim to provide a policy blueprint for the training sector given that this work is being advanced through the National Employment Action Plans and previous publications, and the work of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning recently established by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Rather, it seeks to ensure that there is a fit and complementarity between education and training provision, so as to ensure that learners can move progressively and incrementally within an over-arching co-ordinated and learner-centred framework.

The Paper defines adult education as "*systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training.*" As such it includes aspects of further and third-level education, continuing education and training, community education, and other systematic deliberate learning by adults, both formal and informal. In setting out a role for adult education in society, six priority areas are identified:-

Consciousness Raising

Citizenship

Cohesion

Competitiveness

Cultural Development

Community Building

The Paper recommends that adult education should be underpinned by three core principles promoting:-

- (a) **a systemic approach** which recognises that the interfaces between the different levels of educational provision, and the quality of the early school experience have a critical influence on learners' motivation and ability to access and progress in adult education and training. This requires that educational policies must be designed to embrace the life cycle, reflect the multiplicity of sites, both formal and informal, in which learning can take place, provide for appropriate supports such as guidance, counselling and childcare, and for mechanisms to assess learning independent of the context in which it occurs;

- (b) **equality** of access, participation and outcome for participants in adult education, with pro-active strategies to counteract barriers arising from differences of socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability. A key priority in promoting an inclusive society is to target investment towards those most at risk;
- (c) **inter-culturalism** – the need to frame educational policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population as opposed to a uniform one, and the development of curricula, materials, training and inservice, modes of assessment and delivery methods which accept such diversity as the norm. This refers not only to combating racism and encouraging participation of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in education, but also to a recognition that many minority groups such as travellers, people with disabilities, older adults, participants in disadvantaged areas may have distinct needs and cultural patterns which must be respected and reflected in an educational context. It also envisages a more active role by adult educators in the promotion of Irish language and culture.

Chapter 1 of the paper draws attention to emerging trends in participation in education, including the predominance of early school leaving among males, differences in subject options at second and third-level by gender, the inter-generational socio-economic influences on school participation and performance, poor educational levels of older adults in the population, comparatively high levels of the population scoring at the bottom literacy level, difficulties for women in accessing a range of active labour market programmes, and barriers such as access to childcare.

Chapters 2 and 3 set out the broad policy developments and reports which have occurred since the Green Paper was published which influence the context for adult education developments, and the feedback from the comprehensive consultation process which followed. While there was a widespread welcome for the Green Paper and its priorities and policy proposals, the main concerns voiced in the feedback were:-

- that the policy objectives for adult education should embrace personal, cultural and social goals as well as economic ones, and be seen as promoting collective as well as personal advancement;
- that issues of socio-economic status and gender, equality and inter-culturalism should underpin all adult education policy initiatives, with the needs of marginalised groups being identified and addressed explicitly, and with strategies to strengthen and expand the role of community education providers in this area;
- that barriers to access and progression arising from differentiated fee

structures, accreditation difficulties, lack of flexibility and support services should be addressed. Almost all submissions stressed the urgency of developing flexible mechanisms for accreditation of prior and work-based learning;

- resounding criticisms of the proposals in the Green Paper to maintain the fee structure for part-time students in third-level education, and of proposals to charge fees for certain categories under the Back to Education Initiative. It was argued that this strategy would continue to discriminate against women in the home, and would present barriers to a return to learning for those with low skills and low educational levels in work.
- about local structures. There was widespread acceptance of the need for and the proposed role and functions of the National Adult Learning Council and the Local Adult Learning Boards, but little consensus regarding the hosting of the local structures. However, the level of attention given to this issue in the consultation process was less than expected, and where disagreement emerged, it crystallised around a pro-VEC or anti-VEC position.

## **PROPOSALS**

The Government notes the prominence given in the consultation process to issues concerning free access for all to part-time adult education options under the Back to Education Initiative, and in relation to third-level education. However, at this stage, it is not considered feasible to introduce such an arrangement. Within the adult education sector itself there is a number of competing needs to be addressed. These include the need to significantly increase the scale and flexibility of existing provision, to promote strategic shifts towards adult-friendly policies within existing institutions, to invest systematically in the development of core supporting services such as guidance and counselling and childcare, and to provide for an increased role and funding for community education. Large scale increases in adult literacy investment, expansion of capital provision, implementation of an ICT programme for adults, specific equality initiatives to improve participation of marginalised groups, and structural developments are also needed. In addition, the number of adults in the population with low levels of education is simply too large for a general free access policy to be feasible. Given the scale of change needed, the Government's priority is to expand the flexibility and supply of core programmes and services for adults, and to concentrate fee relief on those most at risk. The impact of this policy will be monitored to assess the take-up by different target groups, particularly those with less than upper second-level education.

The Paper focuses on the adult learner in a number of key learning sites namely:-

School

Community

Workplace

Higher Education

## FURTHER EDUCATION SCHOOLS AND CENTRES

In the Further Education sector, the recommendations provide for the development of a comprehensive framework for second-chance education for those with less than upper secondary education via:-

- **increased investment in adult literacy.** £73.6m is being provided under the National Development Plan to increase investment in this area, with a view to providing services over the lifetime of the Plan for some 110,000 adults. As part of the developments, a TV literacy awareness and tuition programme will be implemented to encourage a mass audience to access help and support;
- **a Back to Education Initiative** providing a major expansion of part-time options under PLC, Youthreach, and VTOS programmes, principally aimed at young people and adults in the population with less than upper secondary education. This will also provide for an increase in Foundation, Level 1, Leaving Certificate or equivalent options.

### **There will be 4 categories of beneficiary:-**

*Youthreach/VTOS-eligible on full time courses.* For full-time participants, there will be free tuition plus a training allowance or social welfare payment.

*Other means-tested welfare payments, unemployment payments/Family Income Supplement recipients and their dependants, and VTOS/Youthreach eligible participants on part-time courses* – free tuition will be provided but entitlement to continued welfare payments will be subject to their satisfying the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs regarding the conditions of the relevant scheme (e.g. for instance, in the case of unemployment payments that the persons concerned are still actively available for and actively seeking work and that the course is likely to enhance their chances of gaining a job). For Youthreach eligible participants attending part-time courses free tuition and a training allowance on a prorata basis may apply, to be funded by the Department of Education and Science.

*Other unwaged participants with less than upper secondary education* – a reduction to 30% of tuition costs.

*Remainder* - people in this category will pay fees;

- **an adult ICT Basic Skills programme** will be included as part of the Back to Education Initiative;
- specific **capital provision** for the Further Education sector will be provided, to increase on a phased basis to at least £10m per annum;

- improved flexibility and organisational structures for **self-funded adult education** programmes;
- **a review of PLC management, organisational, administrative and technical support arrangements** to assess the appropriateness of existing structures to changing needs.

## COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Community education, particularly in the form of community-based women's groups has been one of the most dynamic and distinctive elements of the Adult Education sector in recent years. Its self-directed, learner-centred character and its capacity to reach marginalised women in disadvantaged communities are particularly noteworthy. Its growth, however, has been constrained by a number of factors including:-

1. low levels of financial or other resource supports;
2. relative detachment from other elements of the education system, especially in areas such as assessment, accreditation and certification of the learning;
3. inadequate research support.

The Government now proposes to address these constraints by:-

- the appointment of **a national team of Community Education Facilitators** to be based in the Local Adult Learning Boards to support the development, maintenance and mainstreaming of such groups;
- exploring through this team of animateurs and through **central technical support from the National Adult Learning Council**, the approaches pioneered within the community-based women's groups to other sectors, specifically in relation to:-
  - disadvantaged, hard-to-reach men;
  - travellers and ethnic minorities;
  - people with disability;
  - community arts groups;
  - the elderly;
- developing more streamlined, longer term and diverse funding channels to community education groups - **10% of all Back to Education Initiative increases in funding will be earmarked exclusively for community education**, in addition to the existing base under the Adult Literacy and

Community Education Scheme. The community education sector will be one of the range of providers represented on local and national adult education structures;

- looking at a role for such groups in providing education and training services, particularly in disadvantaged communities on behalf of statutory bodies;
- promoting community arts both as an end in itself and as an accessible and powerful educational tool.

## **WORKPLACE EDUCATION**

Skill shortages both in terms of new entrants to the workforce as well as the skills of those already in the workforce are now a major barrier to the sustainable development of the Irish economy. Both the *National Employment Action Plan (2000)* and the *National Development Plan (1999)* in recognising this, have now elevated lifelong learning to a pivotal role in labour market policy. The central thrust of the proposals in this White Paper regarding workplace learning is the emergence of the workplace as a learning organisation committed to the ongoing development and empowerment of all its members. To support such a development, it is proposed to encourage the development of partnerships/consortia of education/training and industry interests along the lines of FIT, IBEC Business Education Links Scheme and European Orientation programmes advancing such issues as:-

- expanded industry and work placements in higher education institutions;
- agreements between education and industry on time-tabling and modularisation of course provision;
- recognition of work-based learning for accreditation purposes;
- delivery of courses in the workplace.

**Flexible education and training options will be progressed, allied with a focus on addressing barriers to participation** of those in the workplace in ongoing education and training, particularly those with the lowest skills. These issues will be addressed through the work of the recently established **Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment Task Force on Lifelong Learning.**

A **working group** will be established to explore and cost the feasibility of treating all investment in education and training by employers on the same basis for tax relief purposes as other capital investment, and of providing tax relief for all participants for fees incurred in engaging in nationally certified learning programmes, irrespective of their location and duration

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland will be asked to explore with the National Adult Learning Council the feasibility of a national training programme to establish a pool of highly skilled **Learning Assessors** to support **mechanisms for the accreditation of prior learning or work-based learning.**

The expansion of adult literacy services will include a focus on the development of **workplace literacy initiatives**

A **unit will be established within the National Adult Learning Council** to provide technical support and advice on initiatives and policies to promote education and training for those in the workplace.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION**

The participation levels of mature students in Higher Education in Ireland is amongst the lowest in the OECD. *The Programme for Prosperity and Fairness 2000* sets a target for mature student representation in higher education - 15% by 2005.

To enable the realisation of this target it is now proposed to introduce **a targeted higher education mature student fund** which will increase on a phased basis to at least £10m per annum to enable third-level institutions to make innovative strategic shifts towards adult-friendly policies. The fund will be a competitive one to be disbursed on the basis of national criteria to institutions which display institution-wide directional shifts along the lines advocated in the Paper. Cross-faculty approaches, partnerships with other colleges, participation in networks to share results and mainstream good practice will be part of the requirements.

**Fees will no longer apply to third-level part-time students who are means-tested social welfare or unemployment payment recipients or dependants, medical card holders or dependants**, or Family Income Supplement holders or dependants and who are pursuing first time under-graduate, nationally certified distance learning, or nationally certified certificate or diploma programmes (including university) or access programmes which guarantee entry.

## **SUPPORT SERVICES**

The Government recognises that there are fundamental foundation blocks which must be put in place in building a comprehensive system of Adult Education within an overall framework of lifelong learning. In particular these include expanded provision for:-

- **Training of Trainers**— An **inter-agency Working Group** will be established to make recommendations **on the recognition of qualifications for adult education practitioners**;
- a **Forum of Adult Education Practitioners** -- the National Adult Learning Council will be asked to establish such a forum in order to share good practice and input to policy developments;
- new approaches to assessment, accreditation and certification will be developed through the work of the of the **National Qualifications Authority of Ireland**;

- development of an **Educational Adult Guidance and Counselling service** on a phased basis. This will focus on improving and streamlining access to information, and developing a help-line service and ICT information points. Preliminary consultations with an advisor will be provided free to adults, with services also being put in place for more specialised counselling and assessment, and for referral to psychological services where needed. The full range of services will be free for participants on adult literacy, VTOS and Youthreach programmes, and to those entitled to fee remission or reduced charges under the Back to Education initiative, but the remaining categories will be charged fees for intensive follow-up consultations;
- **Research** -- the National Adult Learning Council will incorporate a research role within its remit and will be given resources and staff for this purpose;
- **Childcare** -- Additional funds will be provided under the National Development Plan to consolidate developments in childcare provision for VTOS, Youthreach and Traveller programmes, and to expand provision on a phased basis. This will be complemented by the £250m childcare programme under the National Development Plan being co-ordinated by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and by the investments in the development of after-school services by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

The paper also includes a range of recommendations to promote increased access to mainstream adult education programmes for people with disabilities, Travellers, refugees and asylum seekers, and to address barriers in rural areas.

## **NORTHERN IRELAND**

Cross border co-operation will, under the direction of the North/South Ministerial Council, build on the valuable linkages which have been developed to date, and promote inter-active approaches in Further and Higher Education in such areas as R&D support for small and medium sized enterprises, the development of lifelong learning, adult literacy and adult guidance and counselling programmes, information and communications technology in schools, and educational underachievement.

## **STRUCTURES**

The White Paper proposes two layers in an over-arching structure for Adult Education -- A National Adult Learning Council and, at local level, Local Adult Learning Boards.

**The National Adult Learning Council** will be established by the Minister for Education and Science as an Executive Agency of the Department to:-

- promote the co-ordinated development of adult education and training provision within an agreed national strategy and policy framework;
- to liaise with the wide variety of stakeholders in the field;
- to advise on quality standards and
- to engage in evaluation and research in the field of adult education.

The Council will also have a specific role in the funding, co-ordination and monitoring of programme and staff development initiatives for designated adult education programmes in the education sector.

The Council will have a governing body which will include representation from a broad range of interests including social partners, education and training providers, learners, community and voluntary pillar interests and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. The Council staff structure will have four broad units within it, focusing on Adult Education and the Formal Education Sector, Workplace Learning, Community Education, and Research.

## **LOCAL ADULT LEARNING BOARDS**

Thirty-three Local Adult Education Boards will be established throughout the country to promote a co-ordinated area-based approach to the delivery of adult education services, to promote and develop comprehensive information services, to ensure complementarity with training and employment services and to provide organisational, administrative, professional and financial support to adult education services in the area. The Boards will report annually to the National Adult Learning Council on the delivery of services in their regions

Membership of the Local Boards will include representation from social partners, education and training providers, learners, community and voluntary pillar interests, Traveller and disability organisations, area partnerships, library services, health boards and adult literacy interests.

The Local Adult Learning Boards will be established as statutory sub-committees of the VECs. They will function as autonomous sub-committees which are administratively hosted by the VEC, and where the VEC also provides a technical service as the employer of additional staff appointed to the Boards. The Boards will have authority to make decisions on the deployment of resources within each region in regard to designated programmes within the Further Education sector.

In addition, Local Adult Learning Boards will be required to ensure parity of esteem between the different interest groups, and that each member of the Board has full and equal status.

The Local Adult Learning Boards will be required to formally convene local **community fora** through which the views of a wide range of interests can be channelled. The fora should be convened by way of public meetings to which all interest groups with a role in adult education should be invited.

In view of the expansion of activity, the extra work associated with the role of the Local Adult Learning Boards and the need to promote an enhanced adult learning dimension to the role of community, comprehensive and secondary schools, a further **thirty-five Adult Education Officers** will be appointed. Of these 33 will be appointed to the Local Adult Learning Boards on a flexible needs basis, to be deployed in accordance with the priorities for the region identified by the Boards locally. The local Adult Education Officers will pay particular attention to the need to convene local networks of secondary, and community and comprehensive schools and develop good linkages with the other stakeholders and providers in the area, supporting and promoting an increased role for these sectors in the provision of adult learning. This work will be further supported through the appointment of the remaining two adult education officers to the National Adult Learning Council to co-ordinate this task at a national level and ensure a democratic and streamlined framework for representation of these sectors in the work of the Local Adult Learning Boards and that of the National Council. Provision of appropriate staff development programmes, networking in national fora, and co-ordination of policy inputs and responses will be part of this task, working in close collaboration with the Department, the NALC and the relevant management bodies.

The Local Adult Learning Boards will have a key role to play in ensuring a co-ordinated area-based input in respect of adult education into the strategic plans to be developed by the County/City Development Boards.

Given the expansion of services in this area in recent times, and the new developments now proposed, a comprehensive assessment will be undertaken in relation to professional and administrative staffing levels in VECs.

## **PRIORITIES**

Adult Education is the last area of mass education which remains to be developed in Ireland, and it will require significantly increased investment on a phased basis if adult learning opportunities are to reach a stage of parity with those in other countries. In facing such a challenge the top priorities are:-

- to allocate priority resources to addressing adult literacy needs;
- to systematically increase opportunities for adult learners within the system, prioritising the needs of those with less than upper secondary education;
- to develop supporting services such as adult guidance and counselling and childcare;

- to enhance the responsiveness, relevance and flexibility of education and training provision to meet the needs of young people and adults alike, optimising participation of and benefit to, those at risk;
- to promote and develop a co-ordinated integrated role for adult education and training as a vital component within an over-arching framework for lifelong learning.

The programme of change and development set out in this White Paper will be implemented on a phased basis in the light of the resources made available in the context of the National Development Plan and the annual Estimates for Public Services provisions.

[http://www.cavanvec.ie/html/pdf/CE\\_WhitePaper.pdf](http://www.cavanvec.ie/html/pdf/CE_WhitePaper.pdf)

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### **Developments in Community Education**

While community education has been a form of adult education since the 1980s in Ireland, it has been seen as the poor relation to adult and further education. The White Paper - **Learning for Life 2000** was the first government document to put community education firmly on the agenda.

The community based sector is described as "*amongst the most dynamic, creative and relevant components of adult education provision in Ireland*" and the White Paper also acknowledges the contribution of community education providers in reaching large numbers of participants frequently in disadvantaged settings.

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### Links

#### **White Paper on Adult Education**

[http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/special/2000/whitepaper/adult\\_educ.pdf](http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/special/2000/whitepaper/adult_educ.pdf)

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