




Development Groups Summary

Country: Ireland



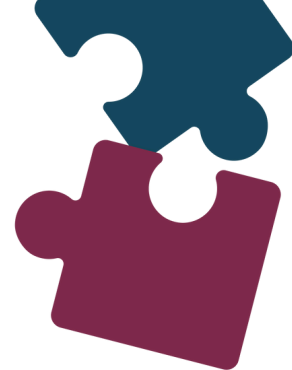
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Stakeholders involved

AONTAS, as the independent national organisation for adult learning, has a unique role in fostering collaboration, building capacity, and sharing knowledge in Ireland. The work of AONTAS is guided by its member organisations, and the engagement of adult learners and responds to emerging issues in the field of further education and lifelong learning in communities. We used these connections to invite relevant stakeholders together to share their expertise through the development groups. Our in-person and online event brought together adult and community education practitioners, educators, and centre staff from across the island of Ireland. Altogether, we engaged with 90 stakeholders in our development group activities.

Activities and methods for stakeholder engagement

We organised three stakeholder engagement activities, including a panel discussion, roundtable discussion, and an online focus group. The panel discussion was successful with adult learners who have overcome huge barriers to accessing education sharing their journeys. The roundtable discussion allowed stakeholders to give input while using learner personas. For the online focus group, we also used learner personas as a tool for discussion. This approach facilitated focused and productive sharing of ideas.

Opportunities

Education and Training Boards provide education, training, and youth work in Ireland. Education and Training Boards run Community National Schools, Post-Primary Schools and Further Education Training (FET- in Ireland, the term FET is used in place of VET, which is preferred at the European level) colleges. There are 16 Education Training Boards (ETB) across Ireland and a coalition of stakeholders within each ETB come together and share knowledge and information. This forum can be a place to share information regarding support and responses to learner needs to ensure widespread awareness of good practice and all available resources. The Education and Training Board of Ireland, which oversees the operation of the ETBs, can ensure that all hubs have up-to-date information regarding developments in the sector to support this action further. These coalitions and governance structure within the further education and training system in Ireland are key to the enhancement of practice that can support the implementation of the key steps in the Upskilling Pathways and identify ways to support pathway validation. The National Recognition of Prior Learning Practitioner Network can assist with further support developing assessments and validating skills by integrating unrecognised skills into learner assessments.

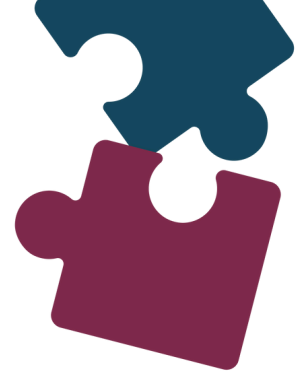




Solutions

To overcome personal barriers to engagement, education providers must consider soft skills, such as confidence, educational support, and support within the community as part of the assessment process. This would allow the education providers to respond with to learners needs with holistic support and ensure a positive experience of engaging with adult learning and education. This would mean that a suite of wraparound supports for learners are in place, including childcare, food, mental health supports, and transport, if barriers to engagement are to be addressed. Adult guidance staff should play a key role in this by supporting the identification of learner needs through a holistic assessment of their circumstances and educational experience while maintaining links with different organisations that can provide support for the learners. They also support the learner throughout their progression, provide feedback and support after the skills assessment, and encourage learners to progress. For people who have been left behind by mainstream education, and from communities or groups at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion, awareness of further education and training opportunities is key to support engagement on upskilling pathways. Two solutions were offered to this challenge. The first was to build the capacity of learner champions who could spread awareness of the value of upskilling pathways amongst their social networks. The second was engaging support organisations already active in the communities to help generate awareness of opportunities and encourage participation in an upskilling pathway. This could include volunteer centres family resource centres, or family support organisations. Developing micro-credentials that could support progression through pathways through the Unified Tertiary Education sector (a new Government of Ireland approach unifying adult learning across a broad range of levels and programmes) was also discussed as a topic in one of the development groups. This could provide learners with an adaptable, flexible way to identify areas of interest to them. It was suggested that there should be a move beyond looking at micro-credentials as a tool for professional upskilling, which focused on funders needs, and expand the opportunity to support learners with the development of soft and vocational skills. This could include an enhanced understanding of literacy and numeracy to assist learners with their development including health literacy, and voter awareness. This could include the expanded use of the National Training Fund, which focuses on learning at levels 5-10 but not levels 1-4 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications.





Members were concerned that this may be because levels 1-4 are seen to be “social inclusion” measures rather than an entry point into upskilling pathways. One group felt that this needs to be considered by policy makers as there is a recognition of the social dimension in progression pathways in Europe, and that the connection between social dimension and upskilling is highly relevant. In focusing on upskilling and training from levels 5-10, disadvantaged cohorts of learners can be excluded from upskilling pathways and opportunities.

Group members also highlighted the relevance of Recognition of Prior Learning and its integration into published pathways to promote learner engagement and practitioner understanding. The Development Groups discussed the implementation of upskilling pathways as a framework for practice. They considered the idea that the three phases of learner engagement on this pathway might be better integrated into existing plans and strategies across community education, FET, and the wider higher education system. If the upskilling pathways framework is integrated into policies, and plans across the higher education sector, sector stakeholders felt that this would align with the goals of the Unified Tertiary System Strategy. This plan states that the different needs of all learners should be met so that learning can benefit learners, the economy and society. However, due to the various barriers relating to finances and infrastructure, a whole government approach will be required to support access to upskilling pathways. One group felt strongly that this should include a greater recognition for the community sector as a stepping stone on pathways to upskilling with a dedicated funding stream for resources and core operating costs.

