

Reducing Educational Disadvantage in the Pandemic

One working group's efforts to tackle inequality



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Marginalised groups have seen their disadvantages worsen during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of the supports that were in place must now be offered in a different way. A working group dedicated to mitigating educational disadvantage, set up by the author, met throughout 2020 with a singular practical focus on disadvantaged learners in Ireland. This article outlines its work.

Introduction

'The Covid-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption to education in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries,' according to the UN Sustainable Development Group. Over the course of the pandemic, marginalised groups have experienced an exacerbation of disadvantage. The barriers that learners faced before, without adequate supports, are being compounded as a result of the crisis, and many of the supports that were in place must now be offered in a different way.

People with lower levels of qualifications are most likely to have lost their job, to have poorer health, and to have fewer resources to make the shift to remote learning. The challenges impacting on learning are complex, and are made worse by poverty, poor housing, domestic violence, isolation, mental health, marginalisation, and lack of essential supports. While significant investments in learner supports were made, it vital to build on collective efforts to identify and address issues across the tertiary education system if we are to tackle educational inequality in a post-Covid-19 context.

Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group

At the onset of the pandemic, in March, the Department of Education and Skills quickly established a set of groups to support the continuity of provision in further education and training, higher education, and community education through the crisis, via the Tertiary Education System Steering Group.

As part of this structure, I was tasked with establishing and chairing the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including community education issues) Working Group (MED). The group comprised representatives from across the tertiary education system: thirty-one members representing twenty-three agencies in addition to academic experts (Prof. Tom Collins, Dr

Fergal Finnegan, and Dr Michael Hallissey). It identified issues affecting marginalised learners and offered high-level solutions.

Over the course of twenty-one meetings, most of which were held in March and April, ten papers were produced on a range of key themes: Digital Learning, Assessment, Learner Engagement, Community Education, Educational Equity and Learner Cohort, Tutors and Practitioners, Financial Barriers, Mental Health, Progression, and Barriers in the Return to Remote Learning.¹ The papers scoped out key issues in the short term and proposed recommendations, many of which were supported in the July Stimulus package, Budget 2021, and the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund, which was aimed primarily at community education providers.

Advocacy for supporting community education

During this time, Ireland had a change of government and created a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), under which community education was set, with the associated ministers. AONTAS was delighted to meet the new Minister, Simon Harris TD, in his first week of office. In July we shared our Proposal for a Covid-19 Community Education Support Fund.

On the eve of Budget Day, 12 October, we welcomed Minister Harris for a virtual visit of community education organisations as part of the event 'Community Education in a Time of Covid-19: Building back better together for community education'. We also shared the AONTAS pre-budget submission, which called for immediate action to address the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on individuals and communities across Ireland.

The Minister's announcement of a specific budget of €8 million aimed at mitigating educational disadvantage was welcome and vital in supporting community education organisations to meet the increased need of their learners. This is important, because we know that community education effectively engages people who are most socially excluded, in a supportive local centre that is committed to addressing the multiple forms of disadvantage that learners experience.

Yet despite Ireland having a great tradition of community education, the area remains overlooked and under-resourced, lacking the recognition it deserves at policy level. Notwithstanding the efforts made, emerging data reveals a significant reduction in disadvantaged adults participating in education, particularly in accredited programmes at the early levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Compared to 2019, in 2020 there was an average reduction of 50% in Major Awards attainment at NFQ levels 1-4.

AONTAS members report a demand for community education courses, but because of restrictions, not all learners can be accommodated on-site in centres, or learners do not have the IT devices necessary to engage in learning remotely. This is a particular challenge for non-accredited programmes. The newly announced €8 million fund will go some way to

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giving greater opportunities to those who are not currently engaging in learning.

Innovation for evidence-informed policymaking and educational access

A key learning from the MED group was the value of a singular focus on disadvantaged learners, bridging the gap across community, further, and higher education in furthering efforts to mitigate educational disadvantage exacerbated by the pandemic. In taking a tertiary-wide approach to addressing educational disadvantage, high-level themes of access were identified, resulting in a Tertiary Education Student/Learner Support Framework (see image), which brought together six overarching pillars affecting access, while allowing for appropriate sectoral responses.

“It is a critical moment to make significant systemic inroads in making Education for All a reality.”

Commitment to medium- and longer-term monitoring of the impact of Covid-19 necessitates the collation of learner-informed, qualitative, and quantitative research on disadvantaged learners. Proposing methods to mitigate the impact is essential, given the complexity of access and the persistent structural marginalisation of learners.

As the MED group closed in December 2020, there was broad agreement that the new government department, under the leadership of Minister Harris, has an opportunity to make headway in its quest to further its agenda of social inclusion. It can achieve this by building on the work of the MED as a unique structure that focuses on educationally disadvantaged learners through a holistic, learner-centred, rights-based approach.

This cross-sectoral approach, drawing on the expertise of community education organisations, FET providers and bodies, higher education institutions, civil society organisations, learners, and additional experts, would offer a coherent structure that draws together the knowledge, experience, and evidence to inform the Department's access-policy priorities. With the Minister and DFHERIS's commitment to educational equality, and our collective efforts as a community of stakeholders dedicated to access, it is a critical moment to make significant systemic inroads in making education for all a reality.

ENDNOTES

1. The ten papers were developed in collaboration with the MED group by AONTAS: Dr Eve Cobain, Dr Leah Dowdall, Dearbhail Lawless, and Dr Niamh O'Reilly.