

Adult and Community Education as a Pathway to Further Study

Lifelong learning in support of social inclusion and access to work-based learning



Fiona Maloney
Director of
Further Education
and Training
Support Services,
Education and
Training Boards
Ireland

This article highlights the importance of adult and community education as a pathway to further study and work. It looks at how this form of education provides flexible, lifelong learning opportunities that support social inclusion and access to work-based learning for citizens, and how this learning option has been affected by the pandemic.

Ireland has a strong and vibrant adult and community education sector, which is a significant strand of the national network of Education and Training Boards' (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) provision. This strand of education represents an emancipatory process aligned to human, community, and societal development. Adult and community education provides lifelong learning opportunities that support social inclusion and access to work-based learning for citizens aged sixteen and over. SOLAS (2019) endorses the role of FET's vocation programmes in:

- strengthening employment prospects through their focus on regional and national critical skills needs
- progression opportunities to other education and training
- the development of transversal skills
- social engagement.

This is reflective of the Community Education Facilitators' Association report (2014), which concluded that FET's adult and community education opportunities 'pave the way for progression to a job or further education and training' (p. 23).

Profile of participation

An adult's life experiences and roles provide the platform for their learning trajectory, which is often focused on acquiring knowledge to support progression (Maloney, 2020). The decision to engage in adult and community education is highly individualised (Waller, 2006). Seminal work by Cyril Houle (1961) proposed three categories of adult and community learners: the goal-oriented learner, motivated by personal interest and with clear and defined goals to be accomplished; the activity-oriented learner, motivated by the opportunity of social engagement with other adults; and the learning-oriented learner, motivated by the enhanced opportunities and self-improvement that education offers.

The adult and community education pathway offers opportunities that can be accommodated with family, work, and other responsibilities. This pathway suits people who need a more flexible way to meet their education and training needs. Courses are delivered all year round and are developed using a learner-centred approach involving personal supports and tuition, leading to positive personal, social, and economic outcomes. Much of the ETB adult and community provision is offered in partnership with local agencies and community groups on a flexible, part-time basis to people inside and outside of the labour force. Importantly, adult and community education offers participants the option of pursuing either accredited learning opportunities at levels 1–8 on the National Qualification Framework (NFQ) or informal and non-formal courses, which are not accredited.

Accredited and non-accredited courses available

ETB FET colleges and centres that provide a range of both accredited and non-accredited adult and community education options are well established and familiar features in the learner's local community. The ESRI (2014) notes that the provision of unaccredited FET courses is particularly important 'when engaging with vulnerable groups, returning to education, and furthest from the labour market' (p. 88), as these courses build skills and knowledge and develop understanding and confidence for both the individual and the community.

The local nature of provision provides a sense of familiarity and flexibility for many learners who are juggling multiple responsibilities and enhances ownership of the learning process. This familiarity, in addition to feedback from previous learners and knowledge of the course location and tutors, makes the transition to adult learning less daunting. The important social capital that is generated through involvement in adult and community education provision in the learner's own community cannot be overstated. Schuller (2004) wrote that the benefits of increased social capital included 'better health, stronger social networks [and] enhanced family life' (p. 12).

FET's adult and community education opportunities pave the way for progression to a job or further education and training.

New horizons

Adult and community education provides an opportunity for those who deferred the decision to progress in education immediately after school as they entered employment or started a family, and who now want to pursue education and achieve a qualification (Watson et al., 2006). Life transitions such as bereavement, divorce, redundancy, unemployment, and children starting school have also been identified as triggers for commencing adult and community education. Santrock (2009) wrote that such events were 'not a catastrophe, but a turning point marked by both increased vulnerability and enhanced potential' (p. 23).

Adult learners have confirmed that their engagement in adult and community education opened up new horizons, was a reflective point from which they delineated positive changes, and led to the discovery or reclamation of aspects of themselves that had previously been neglected or submerged (West, 1996; Walters, 2000; Maloney, 2020).

Flexible pathway to progression

ETBs offer a wide portfolio of flexible adult and community learning opportunities, including classroom, work-based, online, and blended learning. This is delivered by professional, skilled, and knowledgeable FET practitioners in an environment that recognises learners' competing responsibilities. Adult and community education programmes have inherent advantages for adult learners in that they are more affordable than higher education colleges and universities and more flexible in their offerings: programmes can be customised based on local-employer and other identified needs. The local nature of adult and community education, combined with work placement opportunities and linkages with local employers, makes this a very attractive route of learning that offers a flexible progression pathway to work or education.

The adult and community education sector has long been acknowledged as an important learning pathway into and across FET, a supportive progression route into higher education, and a valuable enabler of upskilling and re-skilling for those in the workplace. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019 set a target that 10% of new entrants to higher education – about 2,000 – would hold a FET qualification as the basis for their application. Currently FET graduates at level 5 and 6 account for about a quarter of the annual intake to the technological higher education sector (SOLAS, 2019). From 2001 to 2018 the number of applications to higher education that used a FET qualification for entry increased from under 3,000 to over 14,000 (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). Continuing study or advancement beyond adult or community education may not be an ambition for some participants when they begin, but the positive experience gained through engagement often makes them reconsider these possibilities (Maloney, 2020).

“ Adult and community education programmes are more affordable than higher education colleges and universities and more flexible in their offerings.”

The strategic direction of the FET sector is to increase the numbers of employers and employees who access FET as a resource for upskilling. As the world of work is constantly evolving, developing, responding, and adapting to technological innovations and economic globalisation, the importance of adult and community education pathways to progression, upskilling, and re-skilling are more important than ever. According to the OECD (2016), around a quarter of workers in advanced economies reported a discrepancy between their skills and those required for their job. As our economy flexes, adult and community education pathways will play a pivotal role in enabling learners to access flexible education and training interventions as and when the need arises in their lives.

This is particularly important as the adult and community education demographic will be shaped by an increasing and ageing population and raised retirement age. As people live and work for longer, the need to engage in upskilling throughout their lives will increase. The adult learner is therefore more likely to move horizontally as well as vertically between courses and NFQ levels as they choose offerings across the tertiary continuum that meets their needs to develop work and life skills (Anderson et al., 2004).

Future considerations

ETBs are aware of the heterogeneous aspirations of adult and community learners and the need for provision to be flexible, accessible, and affordable. A commitment to improving the access, transfer, and progression of learners across and from adult and community education is central to sectoral strategy and policy.

In the era after the economic crash, the labour market and policy environment were conducive for adults to pursue qualifications. This situation is evident again during the current coronavirus pandemic. Covid-19 has also reinforced the need to strengthen communities and make them more resilient, and adult and community education is central in this regard. In particular, the pandemic has copper-fastened the role of digital learning for the foreseeable future and has thrown into sharp relief the requirement for adult and community learners to have access to a good home internet connection.

Access to electronic devices is necessary in supporting participation and militating against any potential educational disadvantage. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), with SOLAS, provided €5m in funding for ICT devices for FET learners. Through an ICT device loan scheme, ETBs have made every effort to ensure that ETB adult and community education learners who require access to ICT devices can do so.

The societal challenges presented by Covid-19, digitalisation, and demographic change, among others, underscore the importance of the adult and community education pathway in achieving our national objectives of economic competitiveness, social inclusion, and active citizenship. The benefits reaped are not just for participants but also for their family, community, and society as a whole. I believe the adult and community education pathway will be a formidable force for connecting people and communities after months of isolation and will reinforce the value of supportive community networks while delivering a flexible, learner-centred solution that advances knowledge, skills, citizenship, and social capital.

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National Film School IADT is named by Variety as one of the top worldwide film schools of 2020



This is the first time that an Irish school has made it on this prestigious rollcall. The list includes the University of Southern California (USC), the Beijing Film Academy, the UK National Film and Television School and Moscow's VGIK (the oldest film school in the world).

Each year Variety selects the top ten global film schools and educators in their report "The Entertainment Education Impact Report: The Top Film Schools and Educators from around the Globe".

"We are thrilled to make Variety's list of top film schools," said David Smith, President, IADT.

"And, in particular, their acknowledgement that we are the only institute of its kind in Ireland offering an array of film and television disciplines, including production, animation and design"