



# POLICY SUBMISSION

**Submission on the  
Green Paper  
Adult Education in an Era of  
Lifelong Learning**

**June 1999**

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**Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning**

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# **Combat Poverty Agency**

## **Submission on the**

## **Green Paper**

### **Adult Education in an Era of Life Long Learning**

#### **1. Introduction**

The Combat Poverty Agency warmly welcomes the publication of the Green Paper, *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*. The Agency would like to take this opportunity to respond to the Department's Green Paper and to make recommendations on the forthcoming White Paper. This submission draws on the Agency's experience of working to tackle educational disadvantage and of supporting the community and voluntary sector. The recommendations are based on consultations with key groups with whom the Agency works. The submission begins by putting adult education in the context of anti-poverty policy and practice and then addresses key issues of concern to the Agency regarding access to and participation in adult education, particularly for disadvantaged groups. The submission concludes by making recommendations as to what issues should be dealt with in the forthcoming White Paper.

#### **2. The Combat Poverty Agency**

The aim of the Combat Poverty Agency is to promote a more just and inclusive society by working for the prevention and elimination of poverty and social exclusion. The Agency pursues this aim through the four main functions set out in the Combat Poverty Agency Act, 1986: policy advice; project support and innovation; research and public education. The Agency also seeks to address the consequences of poverty by working for the empowerment of those who are marginalised and excluded as a result of poverty and by addressing the problems that are manifested in disadvantaged

urban and rural communities. It is a centre of expertise on poverty issues, policies and practices. A key element of its work is advising government on all aspects of social planning in relation to poverty.

Educational disadvantage has been a key priority for the Combat Poverty Agency over the last few years. The Agency believes that addressing educational disadvantage is a crucial element in tackling poverty and social exclusion, both in terms of improving the life chances of adults and young people and also in terms of reducing inter-generational disadvantage.

### **3. Response to Green Paper on Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning.**

The Agency believes that the concept of lifelong learning is important in highlighting the need for an holistic approach to education with opportunities to avail of appropriate education and training at all stages of the life-cycle.

There are established links between levels of educational achievement and access to employment and between levels of education and earnings from employment. A very low earning capacity usually correlates to low or limited formal educational qualifications.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the economic implications of educational disadvantage, it can also have a serious effect on the quality of life of those affected and frequently results in low levels of confidence and self-esteem.

There is a welcome recognition of these issues within the Green Paper. The Agency particularly welcomes:

- (i) The acknowledgement of the contribution adult and community based education has made and continues to make in tackling educational disadvantage and social exclusion
- (ii) The proposal to establish new structures in adult education at a national and local level
- (iii) The discussion on low levels of participation at third level by adults who are economically disadvantaged and the social and economic implications of this at a time of generalised growth

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<sup>1</sup> O'Flynn, J; 'Community Education: An Anti-Poverty Strategy' in *"The Adult Learner"*, Aontas, Dublin, 1998.

- (iv) The prioritisation of support structures as essential to improving access and participation in second chance and community-based education, third level and adult education initiatives and
- (v) The proposal to establish an interagency working group to make recommendations on the recognition of professional qualifications for adult education practitioners.

Whilst there is much of value in the Green Paper, it's potential to support growth and development within adult and community education provision can only be fully realised if significant additional funding is allocated to implement agreed recommendations in a full and pro-active way. Whilst there has been an increase in spending on adult education in the last two years, this increase was built on a very low base and current expenditure represents a very small, and insufficient, percentage of the overall education budget.

#### **4. National Anti Poverty Strategy**

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) was launched by government in April 1997. It is an important attempt to bring a strategic approach to tackling the underlying causes of poverty and social exclusion. It marks the development of agreed targets and goals to fight poverty and social exclusion. Educational Disadvantage is one of the five priority themes within the NAPS. The overall objective of the NAPS in relation to educational disadvantage is *to ensure that children, men and women living in poverty are able to gain access, participate in and benefit from education of sufficient quality to allow them to move out of poverty, and to prevent others from becoming poor.*<sup>2</sup> This commitment should be fully reflected in the White Paper.

#### ***Principles to inform the White Paper***

The community and voluntary sector have played a key role in developing new forms of adult education provision through community-based education, community development, women's education, community arts and second

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<sup>2</sup> NAPS, 'Sharing in Progress -national-anti poverty strategy', 1997

chance education. In developing the NAPS, extensive consultations were held with a broad range of groups in the community and voluntary sector, as well as government departments and agencies. Core principles that underpin the NAPS were subsequently adopted by government. In its submission to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs on *'Supporting Voluntary Activity: A Green Paper on the Community and Voluntary Sector and its Relationship with the State'*, the Agency argued that the NAPS principles should be strengthened to form the basis for state/community and voluntary sector relationships. These principles, which are equally relevant in the context of the White Paper on adult education, are contained in the table below.

<u>Principles to inform State/Sector Relationships</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• respecting the autonomy and independence of the community and voluntary sector</li> <li>• ensuring equal access and equal participation for all</li> <li>• guaranteeing the rights of minorities especially through anti-discrimination measures and affirmative action</li> <li>• the reduction of inequalities, and in particular, addressing the gender dimensions of poverty</li> <li>• the development of the partnership approach building on national and local partnership processes</li> <li>• guaranteeing the involvement of the community and voluntary sector</li> <li>• enhancing social solidarity through empowerment approaches whilst respecting individual freedom and dignity</li> <li>• guaranteeing appropriate consultative and participative processes, especially with potential users of services</li> </ul>

The Agency suggests that the White Paper should adopt these principles, with the addition of the following:

- Learning is a fundamental right for all throughout life and
- There should be a holistic approach to life long learning and literacy education.

### ***Poverty Proofing***

A government commitment to poverty proofing has been a key element in the implementation of NAPS. Poverty proofing is a mechanism through which policies are reviewed to assess their likely impact on poverty before their

adoption and subsequent implementation. This process involves policy makers assessing proposals at design and review stage for their impact on poverty. Proposals within the forthcoming White Paper should be poverty-proofed with a view to ensuring a positive impact on those experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

## 5. **Recommendations**

The following are the recommendations proposed by the Combat Poverty Agency to be considered in the forthcoming White Paper on Adult Education.

### *Addressing Poverty and Social Exclusion*

Educational disadvantage can be defined as,

*'the complex interaction of factors at home, in school and in the community (including economic, social, cultural and educational factors), which result in many people deriving less benefit from formal education than their peers. As a result, they leave the formal education system with few or no qualifications, putting them at a disadvantage in the labour market, curtailing personal and social development, and leading to poverty and social exclusion'.<sup>3</sup>*

The connection between poverty, social exclusion and educational disadvantage is well established. There is an urgent need to address these issues in the context of equality of opportunity, access and outcome.

The White Paper should:

- Recognise the links between educational disadvantage and poverty
- Acknowledge and support the contribution that community-based education, women's education, community development, community arts and second chance education has made to adult education and Life Long learning
- Support the development of a pro-active national strategy on literacy, with a focus on both adults and children. Significant additional resources will be required to give effect to such a strategy.

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<sup>3</sup> Combat Poverty Agency, 'Information Pack - Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage', Combat Poverty Agency, 1998.

- Recognise that additional support and funding is needed to strengthen initiatives that tackle educational disadvantage
- Make a commitment to increasing significantly the percentage of the educational budget allocated to adult education
- Initiate measures to support the full participation of groups who experience particular difficulties in accessing education, e.g. Travellers, other ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities, and
- Ensure that all policy proposals put forward are fully poverty-proofed to assess their likely impact on poverty.

### *Access and Participation*

There is a need for more research to illustrate how access can be promoted and supported for those who are most disadvantaged. Financial support is essential for adults at an economic disadvantage to ensure active participation in adult education initiatives. Finance is however not the only barrier which hinders access to such programmes. Lack of premises and adequate space in which to house adult education programmes is a key problem faced by service providers and users in the area of adult education.

With regard to access and participation in adult education schemes the issue of childcare is central. The acute lack of appropriate and affordable childcare inhibits many parents (in particular women) from participating in any form of further education. As women continue to carry the bulk of responsibility in this area it is critical that this issue be addressed.<sup>4</sup>

The White Paper should:

- Recognise the links between access to education and training and the need to provide adequate childcare for adults who wish to participate in community-based adult education and mainstream third level education. All adult education and training provision should include childcare supports
- Support a curriculum that includes basic education, capacity building, social skills, confidence raising, civic education and cognitive learning. It

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Health, 'A Plan for Women's Health 1997-1999', The Stationery Office, Dublin, 1997.



developing such a curriculum it is essential that participative and learner centered approaches are used

- Make provision for adequate and appropriate spaces and buildings with a multifunctional capacity that includes adult and community education and other community development activity
- Encourage the removal of structural and financial barriers that hinder access and participation of mature students to adult education or third level programmes.
- Support research:
  - (i) that illustrates how access can be promoted and supported for those who are most disadvantaged and
  - (ii) that explores the links and differences within and between community education and community development, and suggests a rationalisation of funding and resources
- Recognise that there is a need to build relationships between parents, schools and local communities and to provide access for young people and their families and
- Promote outreach and support work to build and support infrastructure at community level.

### ***Women's Education***

Adult education can offer a route out of poverty for women who have not benefited from the education system in the past. It can also be important in tackling educational disadvantage among children. Research evidence suggests that children of mothers who have not benefited from the education system often do less well at school than others from more advantaged backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

The White Paper should:

- Recognise, resource and support women's education groups
- Provide opportunities for networking between groups with a focus on women's education and training

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<sup>5</sup> Kellaghan, T., Weir S., Ó Huallacháin, S., & Morgan, M., 'Educational Disadvantage in Ireland', Dept. of Education, 1995.

- Acknowledge the positive role adult education can have in breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage
- Put forward specific policy proposals to facilitate the participation of mothers in lifelong learning and second chance education and
- Ensure access to training for women outside of the live register criteria.

### *Structures*

The Green Paper establishes the need for new structures to co-ordinate and develop policy in adult education at a national and local level. There is an overall need for new structures that will help to build common approaches and facilitate progression. As the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) already have structures in place locally, there is a growing requirement for them to define their role *vis a vis* the Local Authority Learning Boards (LALBs). The provision of adequate finance and resources for these new structures is also critical. To support the formulation of new structures, the White Paper should:

- Provide for the representation of people living in poverty on the proposed new structures i.e. the National Adult Learning Council and the Local Authority Learning Boards and develop mechanisms for more broadly based involvement in the development and implementation of adult education provision
- Ensure representation from the community and voluntary sector, including local women's groups, on the proposed Local Adult Learning Boards
- Ensure that the proposed new structures take account of and complement existing structures and
- Consider complementarity with processes for representation of the community and voluntary sector with other initiatives and processes, e.g. partnerships and Strategic Policy Committees

### *Supports*

Access to adult education is made possible for many people by the provision of a range of supports. Supports vary from provision of transport and financial support

to provision of adequate childcare. Rural areas are particularly susceptible to exclusion due to social and physical isolation. Rural areas share a number of common characteristics that distinguish them from their urban counterparts. Such characteristics include *questions of distance, accessibility of services, the relative importance of land-based activities and the degree of spatial segregation between differing social groupings*.<sup>6</sup> It is such characteristics of isolation which prohibit access to adult or further education for many living in rural areas. The importance of childcare as a permanent support to accessing adult or third level education cannot be over-stressed. The White Paper should:

- Make provision for adequate support structures such as transport and childcare to promote participation in and access to adult education for people living in disadvantaged rural and urban areas, and those groups most at risk of marginalisation and
- Provide for a needs assessment to examine the supports required by groups involved in community based education provision particularly in areas of disadvantage and among particular groups who experience disadvantage. A commitment should be made to provide finance and resources to meet these needs.

### ***Accreditation***

The importance of adequate accreditation of adult and community education courses is a key issue for a broad range of groups and organisations involved in adult education. The Agency recommends that the White Paper should formally recognise:

- The right to accreditation for those who undertake adult education courses
- The value of accreditation in facilitating access to the labour market, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and
- The need for accreditation to ensure the development of progression routes to further education and training for those who engage in adult education initiatives, particularly within the community and voluntary sector.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Combat Poverty Agency, 'Poverty in Rural Ireland - A Political Economy Perspective', Oak Tree Press, Dublin, 1996

<sup>7</sup> Kelly, M B, 'Can You Credit It - Implications of Accreditation for Learners and Groups in the Community Sector', Combat Poverty Agency, 1994.

## *Professionalisation*

Related to the issue of accreditation is the issue of professionalisation of practitioners in the area of adult education. It is essential that practitioners be provided with opportunities to access professional training and be supported in this process. In this regard the White Paper should:

- Recognise the contribution and role of adult education practitioners to adult education and life long learning
- Support the development of relevant and accessible professional training programmes for practitioners in the community and voluntary sector
- Recognise the importance of equality of opportunity and provide adequate supports for individuals who wish to access these programmes in training for adult education
- Ensure training and education progression routes for practitioners
- Support the development of a national accreditation system for those working in community and voluntary organisations and
- Develop quality standards that validate experience, skills and prior learning.

## **6. Conclusion**

*"We pride ourselves on being among the best educated people in Europe, but our system of adult education is inadequate and out of date".<sup>8</sup>*

The recommendations made in this submission are aimed at effectively updating and improving the current system of adult education in Ireland. The Agency would like to highlight specific elements of this submission that should be prioritised in the context of the White Paper.

Firstly, the policy proposals in the White Paper should be fully poverty-proofed, to assess their impact on poverty. It is crucial that the White Paper reflects the government's commitment to address issues of poverty and educational disadvantage.

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<sup>8</sup> Aontas, 'A case for adult education in Ireland', Aontas, Dublin, 1989.

Secondly, the White Paper should make a commitment to providing adequate and appropriate childcare for all adults with children participating in adult, third level and mainstream education. As women continue to carry the bulk of childcare responsibilities, this is an important commitment from a gender equality perspective.

Thirdly, adult education should be recognised as a key to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and disadvantage. The White Paper should reflect the principles outlined in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Fourthly, the White Paper should respond positively to the call for a pro-active national strategy on literacy.

Fifthly, the White Paper should ensure that adequate financial and social supports are put in place to facilitate participation by the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in adult education.

Finally, it is worth noting that many of the issues raised in *Supporting Voluntary Activity: A Green Paper on the Community and Voluntary Sector and the State* are equally relevant within the sphere of adult and community based education. It will be important where there are common issues that these are dealt with in a consistent way.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

The forthcoming White Paper on adult education should:

- Recognise the links between educational disadvantage and poverty
- Acknowledge and support the contribution that community-based education, women's education, community development, community arts and second chance education has made to adult education and Life Long learning
- Support the development of a pro-active national strategy on literacy, with a focus on both adults and children. Significant additional resources will be required to give effect to such a strategy
- Recognise that additional support and funding is needed to strengthen initiatives that tackle educational disadvantage
- Make a commitment to increasing significantly the percentage of the educational budget allocated to adult education
- Initiate measures to support the full participation of groups who experience particular difficulties in accessing education, e.g. Travellers, other ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities
- Ensure that all policy proposals put forward are fully poverty-proofed to assess their likely impact on poverty
- Recognise the links between access to education and training and the need to provide adequate childcare for adults who wish to participate in community-based adult education and mainstream third level education. All adult education and training provision should include childcare supports
- Support a curriculum that includes basic education, capacity building, social skills, confidence raising, civic education and cognitive learning. In developing such a curriculum it is essential that participative and learner centered approaches are used
- Make provision for adequate and appropriate spaces and buildings with a multifunctional capacity that includes adult and community education and other community development activity

- Encourage the removal of structural and financial barriers that hinder access and participation of mature students to adult education or third level programmes
- Support research:
  - (i) that illustrates how access can be promoted and supported for those who are most disadvantaged and
  - (ii) that explores the links and differences within and between community education and community development, and suggests a rationalisation of funding and resources
- Recognise that there is a need to build relationships between parents, schools and local communities and to provide access for young people and their families
- Promote outreach and support work to build and support infrastructure at community level
- Recognise, resource and support women's education groups
- Provide opportunities for networking between groups with a focus on women's education and training
- Acknowledge the positive role adult education can have in breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage
- Put forward specific policy proposals to facilitate the participation of mothers in lifelong learning and second chance education
- Ensure access to training for women outside of the live register criteria
- Provide for the representation of people living in poverty on the proposed new structures i.e. the National Adult Learning Council and the Local Authority Learning Boards and develop mechanisms for more broadly based involvement in the development and implementation of adult education provision
- Ensure representation from the community and voluntary sector including local women's groups on the proposed Local Adult Learning Boards
- Ensure that the proposed new structures take account of and complement existing structures

- Consider complementarity with processes for representation of the community and voluntary sector with other initiatives and processes, e.g. partnerships and Strategic Policy Committees
- Make provision for adequate support structures such as transport and childcare to promote participation in and access to adult education for people living in disadvantaged rural and urban areas, and those groups most at risk of marginalisation
- Provide for a needs assessment to examine the supports required by groups involved in community based education provision particularly in areas of disadvantage and among particular groups who experience disadvantage
- A commitment should be made to provide finance and resources to meet these needs
- The right to accreditation for those who undertake adult education courses
- The value of accreditation in facilitating access to the labour market, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- The need for accreditation to ensure the development of progression routes to further education and training for those who engage in adult education initiatives, particularly within the community and voluntary sector
- Recognise the contribution and role of adult education practitioners to adult education and life long learning
- Support the development of relevant and accessible professional training programmes for practitioners in the community and voluntary sector
- Recognise the importance of equality of opportunity and provide adequate supports for individuals who wish to access these programmes in training for adult education
- Ensure training and education progression routes for practitioners
- Support the development of a national accreditation system for those working in community and voluntary organisations
- Develop quality standards that validate experience, skills and prior learning.