

Planning for the future of the Adult Education Service: A challenge for VECs

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Introduction

The adult education service in Ireland has gone through five years of continuous development and expansion since the publication of the *White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life* in July 2000. Among the more important developments have been:

- The issuing of Circular Letter 46/00 which enabled the appointment of Directors of Adult Education in Second Level Schools.
- The significant increase in the ALCE budgets.
- The appointment of Community Education Facilitators in 2002/03.
- The introduction of the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) in 2002.
- The growth in the number of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrant Workers in Ireland since 2000.

There are signs that the salad days for adult education are over. Two recent straws in the wind involve a reduction in childcare provision within VECs and the capping of PLC numbers since September 2003. Adult education like other state services has started experiencing funding difficulties.

Now is an opportune time to reflect on the future development of the adult education service within the VEC system. In that context it is encouraging to note that a number of VECs have recently produced adult education strategies following extensive internal consultation. Some of the recently produced strategies include those of Co Clare VEC; City of Limerick VEC and North Tipperary VEC (as part of its overall education policy FÍS 2020).

Another encouraging development for the future of adult education in the VEC sector was the establishment of an Adult Education Strategic Planning Consortium by four VECs in 2002 – The Kerry Education Service; Co Dublin VEC; City of Limerick VEC and North Tipperary VEC. These VECs held four workshops over an eighteen month period in 2002 and 2003 to reflect on strategic planning for adult education in their own VECs. The reflective (Freirian) process involving staff in various roles in the VEC adult education service was productive and resulted in the sharing of practice and the gaining of valuable insights into the service.

As I pointed out at the start of this paper there has been a significant development of the adult education service in recent years. However, if the service is to become part of the mainstream of Irish education, the issue of structures at all levels within the system has to be addressed. Quite frankly the present system is very unsatisfactory and cannot and will not develop unless it is addressed. The Department of Education and Science took part in a Grundtvig project (NETA) with Spain and Viborg county in Denmark to examine what we are doing in adult education. The Department of Education focussed in the project on *the crucial importance of co-ordination, coherence and cohesion in the provision of learning opportunities for adults* (NETA, 2003). The NETA project in Ireland identified the development of national and local structures, greater national and local co-ordination, clear progression routes and support services as issues which needed attention in providing an overall service to adults.

So structures need to be developed at all levels within the system. In this paper, I will concentrate on what happens at VEC level. However, as all of the levels are inter-related and are co-dependent, I will also consider organisational structures at all levels within adult education.

To plan for the future structures of the adult education service it is necessary to review the present structures. This will give the reader an indication of the task facing those charged with the responsibility of putting appropriate structures in place for the sector. The first section of the paper will review the present structures while the second section will look at future structures.

To help the reader gain an understanding of the task involved it is necessary to review the present structures and look at future structures at the following levels:

1. National
2. Sub-national
3. Institutional
4. Community

Section One - Review of Present Structures

1. National Level

In reviewing the structures at national level I am going to consider the:

- (a) *Statutory Arrangements within the Education Sector.*
- (b) *Statutory Arrangements for Non-Education Sector Providers.*
- (c) *Voluntary Organisations in the Adult Education Sector.*

1(a) National Level - Statutory Arrangements within the Education Sector

The Further Education Section of the Department of Education and Science has overall responsibility for adult education policy and policy implementation. The section is headed by a Minister of State, approved in 1997 and a Principal Officer appointed in 1998.

The Principal Officer reports to an Assistant Secretary General and therefore has direct access to the Management Advisory Committee of the Department.

The following programmes fall within the remit of the section:

- PLC courses.
- Self-Financing adult education courses at second level.
- Second Chance programmes including VTOS, ALCE, Youthreach, Senior Traveller Training Centre programmes and the Back to Education initiative (NETA, 2003:150).
- Adult Guidance.

The main achievements of the Further Education Section were the issuing of a Green Paper in 1998 and a White Paper in 2000 and securing significant funding for adult education. The section was also involved in the following policy development initiatives:

- A consultation process on the *EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*.
- *The Report on the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning*.
- The Consultation Process on promoting anti-racism and inter-culturalism in education.
- A range of EU adult learning strategies.

The Further Education Section is also involved in co-ordination structures such as the National Adult Learning Council (NALC), the Education Disadvantage Committee (EDC) and a range of other Government co-ordination structures. The section has developed support structures since 1992 to help it in its work. The support structure is as follows:

(i) The National Adult Learning Council (NALC)

The establishment of NALC in accordance with the terms of reference laid down in paragraph 10.2 of the White Paper (2000) happened in March 2003. The Council was suspended in early 2004 to facilitate a redrafting of its terms of reference.

(ii) The Inspectorate

The Inspectorate has responsibility for the quality of programme delivery. One inspector has been assigned to adult education.

(iii) National Second Chance Programme Co-Ordinators

The Strategy of appointing National Co-Ordinators to support the Further Education Section on programme delivery started in 1992 with the appointment of a National Co-Ordinator for VTOS. The current state of the support services is outlined in Appendix I (p.54).

There is a considerable investment in the national co-ordination of these programmes. The programmes are at different stages of maturity and development. For example, VTOS and Youthreach are mature, well developed programmes. BTEI and Community Education Facilitation are at the introductory stage and the NCVA support service is in a period of transition.

The governance for Further Education has developed considerably during this period and now the Further Education Section has a voice at senior management meetings within DES. The development of the programmes with assigned Co-ordinators has also been a positive development. However, each programme has separate access, funding, reporting and staffing arrangements. These programmes therefore exist in parallel worlds. This fragments service delivery at national and VEC level. It also has the effect of having staff within VECs identifying with the National Co-ordinators rather than with the VEC adult education service. That is the case irrespective of where the service is located.

*1(b) National Level-Statutory Arrangements for Non-Education
Sector Providers*

The Green Paper on Adult Education (1998) identified ten other Government Departments involved in adult education or training. These are as outlined in Appendix II (p.55). A number of these Departments have executive agencies which deliver training on their behalf - these agencies include FÁS, Teagasc, BIM, Fáilte Ireland and RTE. There is very little, if any, co-ordination between Government Departments on education and training except around social inclusion measures.

1(c) National Level – Voluntary Organisations in the Adult Education Sector
There are three main voluntary organisations involved in promoting adult education at national level – AONTAS, NALA and the IVEA. I will briefly outline the role of each.

The most effective National Voluntary Organisation in the sector is AONTAS. Technically, AONTAS is an advocacy organisation to promote a comprehensive system of adult learning. In reality, AONTAS is also an adult education service provider through the funding it has received from DES and the DSFA.

NALA is an advocacy organisation on behalf of learners with literacy needs. It has achieved much and is widely recognised as a professional, efficient organisation which provides a good service. While technically it is an advocacy body, it is also a delivery organisation through funding from DES and the EU and through its partnership with Waterford Institute of Technology.

IVEA is the representative body for VECs, the main providers of adult education in Ireland. During the period 1990 – 1998 the IVEA was involved in a battle for survival and therefore devoted little time or energy to adult education. Since the future of the VECs and the IVEA has been secured, particularly through the passing of the VEC Amendment Act 2001, that situation has changed significantly. The IVEA embarked on a number of initiatives which should contribute to a much more effective service for all adult learners and for VEC staff in the adult education sector. These initiatives include: a review of its constitution and organisational structure; a strategic review of the organisation; the establishment of a PLC forum, a Literacy forum and an Adult Education Strategic Review Committee; the publication of two policy documents on Refugees, Asylum Seekers and non-nationals and the holding of joint

conferences with other professional management groups in the V.E.C. sector. It is important that the IVEA continues to develop its capacity to provide professional and policy support for its adult learners and staff and the changes outlined will facilitate this happening.

2. Sub-National Level

This section will review the VEC structures and the County Development Boards.

VECs

Each VEC has a responsibility for the provision of adult education under the Vocational Education Acts 1930 – 2001. They are the main providers of adult education within the education system. When adult education and training are considered as a single category the VECs and FÁS are the main providers.

Ad-hoc Adult Education Sub-Committees of VECs were established by the Department of Education and Science in 1984 to co-ordinate the delivery of adult education services within each VEC area. These Committees were criticised in both the Green and White Papers on Adult Education. Both papers imply that these sub-committees were established by the VECs. The reality is that they were established through a Circular Letter issued by DES. That Circular specified the role and membership of ad-hoc Committees. The Department of Education and Science had not reviewed the arrangement until the Green Paper. It is a bit simplistic to criticise VECs in these circumstances.

The VECs typically employ the following staff in delivering their adult education programme: AEOs, ALOs and Literacy Tutors, Community Education Facilitators, Adult Guidance Officers, VTOS Co-Ordinators and Tutors, Youthreach Co-Ordinators and Tutors, Senior Traveller Workshop Managers and Tutors.

The growth in the number of full-time staff and the insistence in the letters authorising appointments for new categories of staff that such staff would have appropriate third level qualifications is an important stepping stone to building the adult education capacity at VEC level. As the NETA report points out co-ordination and coherence is a major issue at sub-national level. The reason for this is that the budgetary, staffing, pay, reporting and learner access mechanisms are different for each programme and as pointed out earlier each pro-

gramme reports to a different national co-ordinator. There is also a second problem at VEC level which mirrors a national problem. Adult education is at the margin of the education service and many VEC and DES staff who are not directly involved know very little about adult education and do not take it into consideration in their day to day work or thinking.

County Development Boards

The County Development Boards were established in 2000 to facilitate the integration of Government funded economic and social initiatives at county and county borough level. The Boards have a special remit in the area of social inclusion. VECs play an active part in the work of County Development Boards and in the social inclusion committee established by these boards. The VEC is one of the statutory bodies represented on the Board. Since the establishment of their regional offices the DES is represented on each CDB.

3. Institutional Level

This is the third tier in the adult education structure. The main institutions involved in the delivery of adult education in VECs are second level schools which provide self-funded adult education and PLC courses. In some instances second level schools also provide Youthreach, VTOS and BTEI courses. The Principal has the overall responsibility for managing all aspects of the school, including adult and further education programmes operating there. In the case of self-financing courses, the Principal is supported by a Director of Adult Education under the terms of Circular Letter 46/00. The method of funding these courses insisted on by the DES is punitive and has the effect of reducing the amount of money available to spend on second level education because receipts generated have to be returned to the Department of Education and Science. In the case of PLCs, the Principal is supported by a staff member with a post of responsibility. If second chance programmes such as Youthreach or VTOS are delivered in a second level school, the Principal will be supported by a co-ordinator for each programme. The challenge for the school and the Principal as manager is to integrate and co-ordinate these services to adults; to provide a seamless education service for the public and to move adult education from the margins to the mainstream at the institutional level.

The second type of institution within VECs is the adult education centre or single programme centres. These tend to have a programme manager or co-ordinator with limited numbers of fulltime staff and few supports.

4. Community Level

Generally, there is no structure at community level operated by VECs except in the larger urban centres or through co-operation with and representation on local ADM Boards. The recent appointment of Community Education Facilitators will help redress that situation.

Conclusion on Present Structures

In my view, the greatest single weakness in the adult education service at all levels is the very poor structural arrangements that are currently in place. They have tended to develop in an ad-hoc way and are usually programme driven. The most disappointing aspect of the structural issue was the failure of the White Paper to tackle the matter in an analytical way. Because it was almost the only aspect of adult education policy contained in the Green Paper that caused controversy the White Paper ducked the structures issue.

The second structural weakness is that the service is staffed overwhelmingly by part-time employees. Both of these weaknesses are interlinked. For example, if there were more full-time and permanent staff they, through their unions and their presence in the system, would bring about an improvement in structures.

Section Two - Future Structures

Future structures should be examined at four levels as I have indicated in the earlier part of this paper. The next section will outline these.

1. National Level

There is a need to complete the educational legislative process initiated by the White Paper in Education 1995 by enacting legislation in the adult education sector. Pending the enactment of legislation the Department of Education and Science should:

- i) Issue a Statutory Instrument to re-establish NALC with its revised terms of reference to enable NALC to become the co-ordination body for delivering national adult education and training policies.
- ii) Establish Local Adult Learning Boards with carefully worked out terms of reference following consultation with the IVEA and other stakeholders.

- iii) Establish clear relationships between the Further Education Section and NALC and between NALC and the LALBs. These will have to be negotiated with all the stakeholders.
- iv) Fundamentally review and restructure the second chance programmes that have been established during the past ten years. I welcome the fact that the Further Education Section has commenced this process as indicated by the Principal Officer, Pauline Gildea. In the review I recommend the following be considered:
- VTOS, Youthreach, STTC, Adult Literacy : The national oversight of these mature second chance services be taken over by the inspectorate and the staff currently employed seconded to the inspectorate. This will help mainstream the programmes. In my view the co-ordination should not become part of the work of NALC because NALC would then become a deliverer of services. If there is a need to continue providing a support service that should be hosted by the IVEA.
 - BTEI, Community Education Facilitation: Because these programmes are delivered by VECs the support service needs to reflect that fact. If this does not happen the capacity of VECs to manage the programmes properly will be severely undermined and the mistakes in the first phase of support services will be repeated. When these programmes are developed the quality assurance of the programmes at national level should become part of the work of the inspectorate. If a support service is needed that service should be located in the IVEA. At sub-national level VECs should be given resources to manage these properly.
 - English for Non-Nationals: There is an urgent need to establish a national forum to make recommendations to DES on policy.
 - FETAC Support Services: Because of the changes in legislation and the onus placed on providers the focus of this service should change to enable all providers meet the requirements under the national qualifications framework and certifying bodies. The role of the support service will be to support all providers in the further education sector.
- v) Implement the provisions of the McIver Report on the management and organisation of PLCs. This is a major task and will need to be phased in.

- vi) Initiate research on self-financing courses offered by all providers in the education sector. These courses have been largely ignored because there is very little data available on them. As a result of the research a strategic plan should be prepared for the development of these courses.

2. Sub-National Level

VECs

It is critically important for VECs to integrate the delivery of adult education into their overall organisational and management structure and ensure that adult education is recognised and treated as a mainstream VEC programme by all VEC staff.

To achieve the mainstreaming of adult education within VECs I suggest the following:

- i) Establish a management team for further education services within each VEC. The management team might have the following membership: the senior manager from each second level college, further education institution and programme (Literacy, Community Education, etc.) and appropriate representation from VEC senior management including administration.
- ii) Through integration within adult education and between adult education and second level significantly increase the number of fulltime staff in the service.
- iii) Provide inservice training and development opportunities for all adult education staff.
- iv) Contribute to and lead the educational dimension of the work of the Social Inclusion Committee of the County Development Board.
- v) Establish area based co-ordination teams based on second level catchment areas which report to the VEC further education management team.

Each VEC needs to start planning now for the establishment of the Local Adult Learning Boards and prepare a strategy to allow it to be both a provider of adult and further education services and a host to the LALBs.

Because adult education is at the margins of the education system bringing it into the mainstream will involve leadership, debate, analysis and hard work.

County Development Boards

Each VEC should adopt the following strategies vis-a-vis the County Development Boards:

- i) Become or continue to be actively involved in the work of the County Development Board. To achieve maximum benefit the VEC should be represented on the board itself by the CEO where this is feasible. The board affords an opportunity to build good working relationships with other statutory bodies.
- ii) Become or continue to be actively involved in the social inclusion committee. The VEC needs to be represented at senior level on the social inclusion committee by either the appropriate Education Officer, AEO or the CEO.
- iii) All of the educational social inclusion measures should be co-ordinated by the VEC and should be managed by a broadly based co-ordinating group.

3. Institutional Level

Adult education will not thrive in Ireland unless proper structures are put in place in educational institutions at both second and third level. Essentially the key issue at both levels is having adult education accepted and recognised by institutional managers as important, and that adult learners are entitled to a properly structured and resourced service. At third level this means a full professor of adult education being appointed in universities and a school of adult education established in each IT. At second level mainstreaming will involve the director of adult education and second chance course managers/coordinators becoming part of the senior management team of the school. In addition, DES has to end the nonsense of the present method of dealing with the finances of self-funding courses. The School Development Planning Initiative needs to hire staff with expertise in adult and further education so that it can promote an integrated model for each school/institution.

VECs have a special responsibility for self-funded adult education within their own second level schools because they are the main providers of these adult education courses nationally. Part of its responsibility is supporting principals in VEC schools to ensure that VEC schools are not just second level schools but are community colleges providing a range of educational services to the whole population. VECs have two further responsibilities in putting structures in place at institutional level. The first is to establish further education colleges as

envisaged in the Mc Iver report with an ethos and structures to reflect the fact that they are serving adults. VECs should not go down the road of establishing PLC colleges only. These colleges need to provide a wide range of adult learning opportunities for adults and benefit from having a range of courses and provision. It is also important for VECs in rural areas, in particular, where there is not a further education college or it is not possible to integrate Youthreach and other second chance courses into the colleges, to establish adult learning centres which integrate these programmes and encourage and support the development of community education.

4. Community Level

To develop structures at community level VECs should in the first instance integrate and co-ordinate the delivery of their own services. Having achieved that they should plan the integration of all adult education and training in their area drawing on the expertise of the community education facilitators. This can happen through coordinating at County Development Board level and through LALBs when they are established. However, there is a need to develop proper structures to ensure co-ordination at community level.

Conclusion

The biggest single task facing adult education is the establishment of proper governance and management structures at four levels:

- National
- Sub-national
- Institutional
- Community

There will be no real development until that happens at all four levels outlined. VECs have a critical role to play at national level through their representative organisation the IVEA and through co-operating with AONTAS and NALA. VECs also have a key role at County, Institutional and Community levels. That role at County and Community level will involve partnership with other providers and a separation of the VECs' function as provider and partner.

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References

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- Department of Education and Science, (1998). *Green Paper on Adult Education: Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*. Dublin : Stationery Office.
- Neta, (2003). *What are we doing in adult education?*. Madrid: Ministerio De Educación, Cultura y Deporte.

Appendix I

National Co-Ordinators – Second Chance Programmes

Programme	Name	Location	Reporting Arrangements
VTOS	Helen Keogh	CDVEC	Admin. VEC Policy DES
Youthreach	Dermot Stokes	CDVEC	Admin. VEC Policy DES
STCC	Gerard Griffin	Co. Clare VEC	Admin. VEC Policy DES
Adult Literacy	John Stewart	NALA	Admin. VEC Policy DES
BTEI	Berni Judge	CDVEC	Admin. VEC Policy NALA/DES
BTEI	Mary Kett	CDVEC	Admin. VEC Policy DES
Community Ed Facilitators	Maureen Kavanagh	AONTAS	Advisory Committee
English for Migrant Workers	Martin Berridge	IILT	Management Committee
FETAC Support Service	6 Co-Ordinators One in each VEC listed	CDVEC, Wicklow VEC, City of Cork VEC, City of Galway VEC, Cavan VEC, North Tipperary VEC	Management Committee

Appendix II

**Government Departments other than DES
Involved in Adult Education and Training**

Arts, Sport and Tourism ¹	Agriculture and Food
Health and Children	Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Communications, Marine and Natural Resources	Justice, Equality and Law Reform
Social and Family Affairs	Environment and Local Government

¹ Current names of government departments used.