

CONFERENCES AND SEMINARS

Connecting Communities for Collective Action: Report on the 2025 AONTAS Adult Education Summit

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At a time when democracy and social cohesion are challenged across Europe, the AONTAS Adult Education Summit highlighted how adult education connects communities and empowers people to stand up for collective action.

The Summit brought together adult education learners, practitioners, policy makers and academics in Dublin, Ireland, on 19th-20th November to reflect on adult education, and to ask critical questions about who our education systems serve, and who they leave behind. The event attracted some 200 participants from across the island of Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Europe and was officially opened by Ireland's Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Marian Harkin.

'We must resist': The Critical Role of Adult Learning in Fractured Times
Dr Sharon Clancy (University of Nottingham) delivered a powerful keynote address entitled 'Reclaiming Resistance and Resilience'. Sharon drew on her own research and activism on class, community, and culture to name the systems and inequalities creating division within our communities in the current political climate. Her address highlighted the importance of ensuring, as Raymond Williams once put it, that adult learning becomes part of a process of social change: 'Our education system is so often skewed toward a particular elite perception of social mobility. We must resist that. We need, at grassroots level, to think about

equitable participation and how we could affect democratic societal change. That comes from us all working together’.

In his keynote address, ‘Popular Education in Historical and Contemporary Practice’, Professor Peter Mayo (University of Malta) reminded participants that education grows from people, place, and struggle. Peter traced the roots of popular education - from the popular, anarchist movements in Spain to the radical, non-formal traditions of Latin America - to explore mutually intertwined ideas of learning and organising learning. Citing Antonio Gramsci, Gabriela Mistral, Ivan Illich, and Paulo Freire, he offered a tour de force survey of critical contributors to an ongoing international and intergenerational praxis centred on community-led learning, resistance to colonialism, and ‘learning webs’ grounded in local knowledge and lived experience. The struggle continues!

Learner Voice and Democratic Learning

Adult learners’ voices featured prominently throughout the Summit. In a vital contribution that received a standing ovation, Cathy Clear shared how she had hidden her literacy issues her entire life until she took the step to take classes with her local Education and Training Board. Cathy is now writing a book of short stories that she hopes will be helpful to adult learners in similar situations. Returning to education as an adult, Cathy said, transformed her life and her sense of self-worth: ‘I’m not ashamed anymore. I want to make a difference for other people and show them what’s possible’. This positive message found a joyful echo in a live music performance from the Forever Young Community Choir. On Day One of the Summit, AONTAS launched the 2025 Learner Voices Across Ireland report. Within Ireland’s adult learning system, the National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum represents a formally recognised space for FET learners to discuss their learning experience together and to inform its future development. The corresponding report draws attention to the voices of learners living with disabilities, learners in the International Protection system, as well as apprentices struggling at the intersection of work and learning. It further highlights the need to improve financial and mental health supports for all learners. Representatives from AONTAS, Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board, and Learning and Work, UK, discussed the report’s findings while the importance of Learner

Voice to future policy was highlighted in subsequent contributions by civil servants from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Adult Education Beyond Borders

Themes of increasing social polarisation and declining trust in institutions in Ireland, the UK, and Europe cohesion featured prominently throughout the Summit as did the role of adult education in supporting social cohesion and inclusion. On Day Two, AONTAS launched the 2025 Adult Learner journal which explicitly addressed this theme. This year's special edition focuses on Challenging Racism and Creating a More Inclusive Society, bringing forward the ideas of educators, practitioners, and learners pushing for meaningful transformation in policy and practice.

Panel discussions brought together colleagues from across Europe to share perspectives on adult education in their national contexts, and insights into trends and challenges across the continent. Panellists included Lubica Gálová (Lifelong Learning State Vocational Education Institute, Slovakia), Raffaella Kihrer (European Association for the Education of Adults), Dr John Evers (Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres), and Nessa White (SOLAS, Ireland).

Strengthening Care, Connection, and Community

Summit attendees could choose from a range of interactive panels and workshops exploring adult and community education from diverse perspectives. Topics explored included learner voice, transformative education in times of polarisation, and partnerships between community education providers and higher education institutions. Workshops enabled discussion around equality in apprenticeships, practical anti-racism, and storytelling as a means of connecting communities. The agenda reflected and enabled a diverse mix of insights, lived experience, and learning in action.

The final panel, Strengthening Communities through Community Education, brought together leaders from across the sector - Dearbháil Lawless (AONTAS), Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin (Conradh na Gaeilge and Glór na Móna), Philomena Abulu Obasi (Diversity and Inclusion), and Vivienne Glanville (Women's Collective Ireland). They explored how community education drives social change, strengthens language and

cultural identity, challenges racism, supports women's leadership, and builds collective power in communities.

Adult learner and AONTAS Board Member, Chidiogo Blessing Ebeledike, summed up the Summit's impact when she highlighted the importance of learning alongside people of all ages and backgrounds, brought together as a community. 'Community education is more than education', Blessing emphasised, 'It's where you find connection, support, and friendships'.

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You can find out more about AONTAS at <https://www.aontas.com/>