

ADULT EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

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»Learning for Life« heißt das im Jahre 2000 veröffentlichte Weißbuch zur Erwachsenenbildung, in dem die irische Regierung erstmals den Gedanken des lebenslangen Lernens zum Prinzip erklärt hat. Die Vorgeschichte und die bleibenden Aufgaben werden von McDonnell so kompakt erschlossen, dass den Leser(inne)n mit diesem Beitrag eine kleine Geschichte der irischen Erwachsenenbildung vorliegt.

The publication in 2000 of Ireland's first White Paper on Adult Education »Learning for Life« signalled the beginning of a new and exciting era for the adult education sector. The Paper marked the adoption for the first time by an Irish government of the principle of *lifelong learning* to underpin its education strategy. Preceded by the publication of a Green Paper »Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning« in 1998 and a lengthy process of consultation within the sector, the White Paper 2000 addressed many issues that adult education representatives had lobbied on over many years. AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education in Ireland welcomed the White Paper, which maps out a strategy for the development and growth of adult education services, and has worked to ensure its implementation. However the historical development of adult education in Ireland has been far from strategic, rather being a random ongoing struggle.

The present day adult education service in Ireland stems from the 1930s when the core infrastructure began to be put in place. Vocational Educational Committees (VECs), which today form the backbone of adult education

in Ireland, were established as a result of the 1930 Vocational Education Act. These statutory committees, set up in each of the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland and in some of the larger cities, had a duty to establish systems of »continuation education« in each area. Continuation education was defined as education to supplement that provided in elementary school including practical training for employment in trades, manufacturing, commerce and industrial pursuits.

The origins: »Vocational Educational Committees«

The period from 1930 to the 1960s saw enormous expansion of VEC services. Vocational schools were built nationwide and alongside the activities of the daytime secondary school ran vibrant night classes where most of the adult programmes were offered. These evening classes became a hallmark of adult education in Ireland and are still popular today.

In 1979 Adult Education Organisers were appointed to each VEC, the first dedicated staff working on adult learning needs. Their role was to organise

an annual learning programme, provide information and advice to adults and prepare an annual report on their activity. Funding was sparse, but in 1984 a significant development came with the introduction of the Adult Literacy and Community Education budget, the first specifically earmarked for adult provision. This budget though small sustained adult education services through the 1980s when other support was absent. Thus emerged the basis of VEC adult education services.

Alongside formal education a new movement emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. This was the growth of daytime education organised by community based groups, known as »community education«. A plethora of voluntary and community groups began to provide adult literacy, second chance education, personal development and other courses in response to local learner needs. Such courses were largely organised by women and for women who experienced barriers to education and training. These barriers included the inflexibility of timetabling, the lack of childcare facilities and the invisibility of women who could not register unemployed as they worked in the home. Women's groups often tackled social exclusion, and though poorly funded, created an alternative vision of adult education where learners stepped outside the statutory system to determine their own needs. Community education provided not only a social outlet for women, but a confidence-building step for those seeking to return to work.

Still Ireland lacked a national strategy on adult education. In 1973 and again in 1983 the government appointed commissions to research and make recommendations in relation to adult education. The radical 1973 Murphy Report highlighted a serious literacy problem among certain adult groups, but little action was taken on the recommendations of this commission.

The 1984 Kenny Report was received more positively and two significant recommendations were implemented: the establishment of ad hoc Adult Education Boards within the VECs, and the creation of the Adult Literacy and Community Education Budgets previously described. However beyond these initiatives there was little systemic change and national policy remained weak.

By the 1980s the mood in Ireland in relation to literacy was changing, as media highlighting of literacy problems in Britain helped de-stigmatise the issue. In 1980 the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) was founded which later received grant support from the Department of Education. This allowed a focus on literacy provision to emerge, which has since become a cornerstone of Irish adult education. But the 1980s were economically very harsh in Ireland, and the country witnessed massive levels of unemployment and emigration. In response to growing numbers of unemployed, an Educational Opportunities Scheme, now known as the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) was introduced through the VECs, whereby unemployed adults could attend courses and keep their social welfare benefits. VTOS provides approximately 5.700 places today and is one of the main strands of adult provision at VEC level. Other schemes tackling unemployment emerged in the 1980s.

And so by the 1990s there were loose adult education structures in place, but a variety of distinct and non-connected groups were providing programmes. Following a period of unprecedented growth in the Irish economy during the 1990s, »the Celtic Tiger boom«, full employment levels were reached for the first time in Ireland's history. Demand for a skilled workforce forced the government to place adult education high on its policy agenda for the period of government

1997-2002. Other pressures also focused attention on adult education: In 1997, the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey showed that 500.000 adults in Ireland (25% of the adult population) were at the lowest level in terms of literacy skill. This figure was therefore highly significant. These developments triggered a government commitment to developing a coherent adult education service. Following sustained pressure from lobby groups such as AONTAS, a junior ministry was created within the Department of Education to look specifically at adult learning issues. A Green Paper in 1998 mapped out key areas for improvement within the sector; the professional status of tutors, the need for national monitoring structures, the need for guidance and other supports for participation.

The 2000 White Paper was born of the debate on these issues, and its recommendations are now being implemented as the basis of an improved adult service. A key pillar of the White Paper »Learning for Life« is the *National Literacy Strategy*. Since the 1997 OECD survey, increased investment in literacy has enabled the scale and quality of services to improve. Schemes now exist to provide workplace literacy, family learning and tuition through TV. The literacy budget has risen from EUR 1m in 1997 to 16.4m in 2002 and improvements in quality are ongoing. Another pillar of the White Paper is the *Back to Education Initiative*. This programme is designed to provide a re-entry route for those with less than upper secondary education. It also provides flexible options (part-time, modular or flexible learning options), making mainstream education accessible to adults with jobs and families. 6.000 places have been made available in 2002, to increase to 20.000 by 2006.

The White Paper makes recommendations on the development of new structures. A National Adult Learning

Council providing policy direction and coordination at national level was established in spring 2002. At local level, the creation of Local Adult Learning Boards is proposed by 2004. 35 Community Education Facilitators are currently being appointed to support this sector. In sum, these new structures should ensure that a more coordinated and strategic approach to adult education is effected and that investment is efficiently targeted.

»Blurring of the lines between education and training«

Beyond the scope of the White Paper, further structural developments are taking place in Irish education. In 1999 a National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was set up which is now in the process of developing a unified national framework of qualifications for the education and training sectors. This and other developments has led to a blurring of the lines between education and training which contributes greatly to the development of a culture of lifelong learning in Ireland.

Although visible improvements in adult education are taking place, there remains much to be done to render the Irish service effective and of high quality. However, the unprecedented period of development in adult education that Ireland has experienced in recent years has left the sector in a much stronger position to lobby for increased resources than ever before.



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