

Community Education

- **Enhancing Learning**
- **Fostering Empowerment**
- **Contributing to Civic Society**





Executive summary

In *Community Education - Enhancing Learning, Fostering Empowerment and Contributing to Civic Society*, the Community Education Facilitators' Association (CEFA) presents its view on the ways forward for community education in Ireland. First, CEFA outlines the current state of development of community education and the special role which the Community Education Service (CES), through the Vocational Education Committees' (VEC's) Further Education (FE) Sections plays in achieving Irish and European objectives in further education. Second, the position paper identifies key issues arising before, third, presenting specific proposals for the future development of community education.

CEFA believes that community education plays a key role in personal empowerment, the development of critical thinking, equality, citizenship and social inclusion. Community education spans a continuum of personal development, community development, social analysis and political participation. Such principles and approaches are enunciated both in the Irish policy for community education, the white paper *Learning for life (2000)*, supplemented by the National Skills Strategy *Tomorrow's skills (2007)* and in European policy, principally *Action plan on adult learning (2007)* and the Council *Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training (2010)*. Community education, in the context of the VECs' FE Service, is delivered through tutors and facilitators; targeted at those socially and educationally disadvantaged; and organized in partnership with other voluntary and statutory providers. In 2010, community education reached 55,953 participants, was delivered through 35 Community Education Facilitators and was budgeted at almost €10m.

This position paper identified four main priorities:

1. The need to refine the objectives of community education in the light of changed economic and social circumstances, combining civic outcomes with making a contribution to the National Skills Strategy;
2. The need for improved knowledge and measurement systems. Hitherto, metrics have focused on throughput and accreditation to the exclusion of equally important, 'softer' social outcomes. A Community Education Technical Unit was promised, but not established. There is already compelling evidence of the value of the positive social impact of community education;
3. The need for improved targeting, with community education going out to the hardest-to-reach and most excluded social groups; and
4. The need for improved coordination of services, ensuring an integrated national and local approach by the many providers in the field.

CEFA sketches the future development of community education in Ireland and presents seven proposals:

1. A national debate on how community education may best be refined, developed and reinforced in the period to 2020 to meet our new social challenges, address structural inequality and contribute to the National Skills Strategy;
 2. A multi-stakeholder working group to agree systems that will measure outcomes and progression, setting qualitative internationally comparable indicators, with a research budget. Stakeholders are identified as the Department of Education and Skills, CEFA, AONTAS, the Community Education Network, academics and representatives of the learning community;
 3. To improve inter-agency working and referrals, a model Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with associated protocols to guide the work of the Department of Education and Skills, other departments (for example Environment, Community & Local Government), Local Education and Training Boards and local development companies;
 4. The new, due operational guidelines to reflect the ethos of community education which we outline, including definitions, learner focus and participation, collective processes, targeting, tutoring, evaluation, continuous professional development, inter and intra agency approaches and appropriate accreditation; followed by a period of structured dialogue with stakeholders;
 5. A ring-fenced budget for community education as a distinct line in the public service estimates so as to give it the visibility and prominence already enunciated in Irish and European policy;
 6. The Community Education Service to be designated a nominating body for the new Local Education and Training Boards (LETB), so as to achieve the representation of the service and its learners, each LETB having a working group on community education;
 7. Resumption of progress toward a Community Education Technical Unit (CETU), with a target date of 2016. This should comprise:
 - A dedicated unit in the department, with its own staff complement;
 - A national coordinator for community education;
 - A specialist expert in community education to advise the unit and the department;
 - A structured action research budget to improve our knowledge of community education, its impact; and fund pilot projects and innovation;
 - Technical support and advice for community education providers; and
 - An advisory forum of the stakeholders already identified.
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