

AONTAS : Recognising adult learners

- 1) *Does your organisation recognise outstanding learners in any way? If yes, please specify how.*

Our STAR Awards initiative focuses on recognising adult learning projects, rather than individuals. However, as the ‘voice of adult learning’ AONTAS has a strong focus on adult learners – during the awards ceremony winning projects are encouraged to support their learners to speak at the ceremony and accept the award on their behalf. This can be an empowering experience for learners.

Una Buckley, adult learner and member of AONTAS steering committee for the Adult Learners Forum of Ireland (ALFI) says ‘In my opinion AONTAS sees all learners as “outstanding”. AONTAS advocates on behalf of all Irish Adult Learners. Advocacy is persuasion, using statistics and stories. The stories are the most persuasive part and these are from the learners. AONTAS invites learners to participate at local, national and international conventions and conferences, encouraging them as “Learning Ambassadors.”

Other ways that AONTAS recognises outstanding learners include a section of our website called ‘Inspiring Learners’ which features stories from adult learners. Our magazine *Explore* will also feature a different story in each edition. Finally, our advertising campaign for the Adult Learners’ Festival each year features outstanding learners, who are identified through a competition on social media. Last year we worked with three outstanding learners to develop their stories which we then produced into short 30 second audio and video pieces. These were disseminated through an advertising campaign on national radio, but also through social media. The participating learners were given a small prize.

- 2) *Is the recognition necessary and useful? Please explain.*

Una Buckley says ‘it shows that learners are included, visible, valued and have a voice - most importantly that they are listened too. They are also asked to be a part of the decision-making and strategy involved in the future of adult education.’

AONTAS hopes that adult learners can become strong role models for others taking up a similar challenge. By recognising their experience and showcasing their achievements, we can highlight the value that adult learning can bring both socially and economically. Many of the adult learners that we come across have overcome significant challenges on their learning journey – it is important that their achievements are given a wide audience.

- 3) *How has the learning experience/journey (of the outstanding learners) been shared and disseminated? What has worked especially well in this respect?*

The experience of learners is shared in a number of ways. These include

- A dedicated section of our website
<http://www.aontas.com/information/learnerstories.html>
- A regular feature in our magazine *Explore*.
- Through the AONTAS Blog
- Stories from adult learners are fed into the mainstream media, to highlight the benefits but also policy challenges
- Learners are invited to speak at different meetings and events, and to meet other learners (eg the Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland/ Forthcoming conference about community education)

By sharing their personal experiences of adult learning, we hope that both policy makers and the wider public will gain a deeper understanding of why adult learning is important and the supports that adults need to take up and fully avail of learning opportunities.

AONTAS supports learners to directly engage with policy makers. For example, a group of adult learners participated in a recent roundtable event with Education Spokespeople and the Minister for Lifelong Learning, during a recent Adult Learners' Festival. Delegations to meet Ministers and international delegations to important events (eg Confintea, ICAE Assembly) include a learner representative.

Social media has worked especially well in the dissemination of these stories – because learners will share posts/blog entries with their friends, family and networks.

In terms of gaining media interest, learner's stories with strong outcomes fare well. Recent stories which AONTAS promoted in national media included learners who started their own business as a direct result of their participation in adult learning.

4. Do the people, that are willing to share their learning experience, need support/special training? If yes, what kind of support/training? How should it be done?

AONTAS believes strongly in the power of networking – by bringing people together with experience of a particular issue they can share experience and collectively plan solutions to particular challenges they take. This experience allows those involved to develop their advocacy skills. The Adult Learners' Forum of Ireland is a new initiative by AONTAS which aims to develop a collective voice for adult learners. ALFI work is developed by a learner steering group and the Learning Advocacy Officer.

Training and support needs depend on the individual involved. AONTAS may offer training in the future to adult learners, depending on what emerges as the ALFI develops. Training that AONTAS may offer to learners includes training in using social media, dealing with journalists and preparing for media interviews.

Una says 'In my opinion, support is always available from all members of staff of Aontas. A very important part of this support is that we, as learners, have always been treated with respect and no matter what query or question is asked it is always dealt with in a very professional way. Any information needed on adult education is readily available.'