



The key role of the nonformal education sector, including community lifelong learning centres, in engaging part-time students from backgrounds of social marginalization and diverse ethnicities

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Submission: Dr. Paul Downes
Director, Educational Disadvantage Centre,
Senior Lecturer in Education (Psychology),
St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, A College of Dublin City
University
Member of European Commission Network of Experts on the Social
Aspects of Education and Training (NESET I & II) (2011-2012)
paul.downes@dcu.ie

International Research:

The bridge between adult education centres and the formal educational system is illustrated by the research cited by an OECD review, Nicaise et al. (2005) which observes that at least 28% of all young people admitted into tertiary education in Sweden had passed through municipal adult education or liberal adult education: adult education plays a key role in providing a second chance to students who were unable to complete gymnasium, as well as supplementing credits for admission into tertiary education. According to statistics of the Ministry, in 2004, no less than 28% of all young people admitted into tertiary education had passed through Komvux or Liberal adult education: ¼ of this group had actually completed gymnasium but supplemented their grades in Komvux in order to enter tertiary education; the others managed to obtain their upper secondary diploma in adult education. The 'second chance' role of Komvux and Liberal adult education has been strengthened thanks to the 'Adult Education Initiative', one of the national government's earmarked programmes which aimed to reduce the rate of unqualified school leaving and to boost lifelong learning.

Recent qualitative research across 12 European countries², with a strong focus on Central and Eastern Europe, involved 196 interviews with Education Ministry Senior officials and management of educational institutions across 83 institutions, including both formal and nonformal education (Downes 2011). Key issues which emerged for the nonformal education sector, encompassing also community based lifelong learning centres, included the following:

- Non-formal education as a key bridge to ethnic minorities, immigrants and those experiencing social exclusion;
- The need for a national and regional strategy for nonformal education to relate but not reduce nonformal education to the formal system. Notable gaps were observed in relation to structures and strategies at national and regional levels with regard to nonformal education in a number of participating countries. A distinctive focus on social exclusion also needs to be more to the fore in a number of countries' nonformal education strategies, which would thereby include a stronger focus on community based lifelong learning centres;
- The need for more focused strategies for the development of community leaders;
- The need for more proactive outreach strategies to marginalized groups than simply information based ones;
- Though there was a marked prevalence of local community lifelong learning centres in a number of the participating countries, there were only a few examples of *lifewide* lifelong learning centres (Downes 2011).

An example of a community based lifelong learning centre is that of *Citizenne* in Flanders, Belgium. Some of the main objectives of *Citizenne* are:

- Working on the bridging between communities and groups of people living in the different Brussels districts;
- creating opportunities for cultural and social involvement for all the people living in Brussels;
- enhancing social integration in and through the civil society.

In doing so, the organisation takes into account some of the specific characteristics of Brussels. Some examples are:

- there is a strong social polarisation in the city. This is reflected in, for instance, high unemployment among young migrants;
- Brussels is a city known for its cultural diversity: people with a lot of different nationalities and cultures all live together. Adults with Dutch as their mother tongue are actually a minority in Brussels.
- There are a lot of organisations offering non-formal adult education in Brussels.

There is also a wide range of high-quality training opportunities for the Dutch-speaking population of Brussels. Over the last six months of the year 2005 more than 2,200 non-formal educational programmes were offered by over 200 different organisations. Because of these characteristics, the organisation focuses on some specific target groups and target issues.

First of all, the organisation tailors her services to the needs of specific groups under-participating in the field of adult education in Brussels, such as low educated adults (especially those having left compulsory education without a qualification).

Planning intercultural programmes is also essential for the organisation. One can not presuppose that in a city like Brussels and its metropolitan area people and groups of people find each other spontaneously in the mosaic of cultures and communities. Therefore, *Citizenne* explicitly wants to connect different cultures and communities in the city with each other (Vermeersch & Vandebroucke 2010).

The organisation has been focusing on three types of issues over the last five years:

- *City and community development and urban characteristics*

Working on issues that urban communities and neighbourhoods are facing today (e.g. growing inequity, growing unemployment, economic recession, ethnic and socio-economic polarisation, etc.) by means of community building and urban development.

- *Intercultural dialogue in a multicultural society*

The ethnic diversity among its residents is a characteristic of any major city.

Guiding and supporting intercultural processes (debates, discussions, exchange of ideas, etc.) between different cultural communities and ethnic groups so that they can meet in a friendly atmosphere

- *Empowerment*

Helping people and groups that experience social discrimination to regain and increase their social strength, using methods like consciousness-raising and social action. This strategic focus arose from the region analysis and the SWOT-analysis the organisation applied when making a strategic plan. By doing so, the organisation is able to clearly analyse the needs of the people living and working in Brussels (Vermeersch & Vandebroucke 2010).

Outreach to marginalised groups is a strong feature of *Citizenne*:

- *Within communities*

According to the staff interviewees, it is critical to ensure various learning opportunities as close as possible to the adults. Both interviewees accentuate that one can not expect all participants to come into a classroom. The educational activities should be 'home delivered'. Therefore the organisation makes efforts in providing education within the communities, decentralised all over Brussels (in mosques, sports clubs, pubs, etc.) (Vermeersch & Vandebroucke 2010).

- *Community leaders*

Another important outreach strategy is working together intensely with so-called community leaders (a person who plays a key role in organising or running activities for the community and who is well known and respected in that locality). As the community leaders are already engaged in processes of community building, they have the power and the role to enhance the participation of others in the community. That is why finding those key persons is an essential task of the organisational staff (tutors and educational experts).

Examples from Hungary of diverse community sites for lifelong learning centres include a garage (Derecske Open Learning Centre), a store in the pedestrian part of the main street in Hatvan (Open Learning Centre of Hatvan) and a ski boot manufacturing works (Open Learning Centre of Nagykallo) (Downes 2011a)

In an Austrian context, Rammel & Gottwald's (2010) qualitative research emphasises the distinctive role of non-formal education in meeting the needs of the individual learner, which is a key issue for basic education and beyond:

According to the [non-formal education] interviewee the basic education offered with its individual approach is particularly helpful in giving adults with low levels of prior education confidence to continue with education. There is always an extremely heterogenous group of participants within these courses, which requires individual adaptation of the contents to the regarded participants. This entails a different way of teaching, which also aims to ensure understanding.

People just notice, that everything is adapted very individually to them and that this is a different form of learning than they might have experienced at school (...) fear of contact is reduced. We make it possible that everybody can notice directly an increase of learning outcomes

The European Adult Education Association (EAEA) (2010) argues that certain factors of adult community based learning contribute to reducing the risk of poverty, which include the provision of supportive learning environments, cultural sensitive curricula, a bottom-up approach to decision making, reaching people in their natural settings, a focus on social mobilization with learner support (2010, p.8).

A review by Downes (2011a) highlights that nonformal and formal education can coexist in a common community based location to engage those high levels of educational disadvantage. The OECD (2007, p.75) highlight that has over 260 adult education centres, which have evolved from adult vocational training to offer wider learning opportunities for the entire adult population. They also illustrate the key role of municipal authorities in Sweden and Spain (as well as Spanish regional governments) in providing adult education centres. In the UK (Ofsted, 2009) a survey reported that in 16 out of 23 local adult and community learning providers, most adults progressed to further courses (depending on the emphasis placed on the qualifications). In Denmark it was observed that adult education in Denmark leads to further participation in education, which was particularly the case with general adult education courses (Clausen et al., 2006, p.114). Boyadjieva et al.'s (2010) qualitative research report from Bulgaria also provides evidence for the key role of community based learning centres, for personal fulfillment and active citizenship objectives, including for formal education:

The Community centres (chitalishta) play a crucial role in relation to the personal and citizenship perspectives on LLL. Being unique traditional self-managed units in Bulgaria, they function as 'training fields' for acquiring skills for managing collective activities. In the smaller towns they are the only organisations that provide access to libraries, internet and other types of information. Given their multitude (there are 3 450 chitalishta listed in the register of the Ministry of Culture), location and institutional sustainability, they may be regarded as a unique national resource for the implementation of various educational initiatives, including LLL. Some community centres (chitalishta) conduct qualification courses for adults following curricula with internationally recognised certificates. In recent years, the modern

information and communication technologies have been introduced and utilised in the community centres

The EU Council (2009/C 119/02) agrees that:

1. In the period up to 2020, the primary goal of European cooperation should be to support the further development of education and training systems in the Member States which are aimed at ensuring:

- (a) the personal, social and professional fulfillment of all citizens;
- (b) sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue.

The Lisbon European Council conclusions (paragraph 26) propose turning schools and training centres into multi-purpose local learning centres, all linked to the Internet and accessible to people of all ages.

Irish context

Community lifelong learning centres challenge the isolation experienced by many from communities where not many attend third level education. They offer a protection against fear of success (Ivers & Downes 2011) as they can provide key courses for a cohort of students from similar areas and backgrounds to challenge the isolation experienced by those obtaining a level of education that places them as distinct within their own communities

An Irish example *An Cosán* was cited as a model of good practice in Downes' (2011) twelve country report. *An Cosán* is the largest independent community-based education centre in Ireland. The organisation's Mission Statement '*is to contribute to the development of a culture of learning and leadership through educational and enterprise solutions for the particular challenges that face us*'. The organisation offers community based education, childcare and enterprise and is divided into three sections:

- The Shanty Education and Training Centre, which provides Adult Community Education,
- Rainbow House, the Early Childhood Education and Care facility,
- Fledglings, the Social Enterprise Centre. Over 600 people attend adult education and training in *An Cosán* annually (Dooley et al., 2010).

An Cosán provides a service to an area of Dublin that is severely disadvantaged as a result of poverty and high levels of unemployment; this is a community living with high levels of poverty. It has a population of roughly 22,000 people, living mainly in rented housing in large, local authority estates. The area has a high immigrant population. The unemployment rate of principle earners is around 67%, and 40% of family units are headed by lone parents. The level of educational attainment is generally low, with 27% of the population having no formal education or only primary level education and over 34% of the population leaving school under the age of 16.

A strength of the organisation is the wide variety of courses and people that it caters for. There is the option of progression through levels of courses for participants. The starting point is courses on Personal Development and Communication Skills, Basic Literacy and Numeracy. A second series of courses reflect the needs of the local community for training in leadership e.g. training for community drug workers and community development. These courses have been developed at the behest of local community groups. The third series of courses are most important as they allow people to access further education. These courses include those run under the Young Women's Programmes. Some of their past students have gone on to third level colleges and universities, gaining certificates, diplomas and degrees. The majority of the students who access the service stay more than one year. The fourth series of courses have, as their immediate goal, retraining or formalising skills for employment; a state of the art computer centre allows courses to up-skill long term unemployed people. *An Cosán* supports participants 'to plot out a career path' and to access the programmes that they need to achieve this (Dooley et al., 2010).

They run programmes specifically for young women in the area who are lone parents and early school leavers. *An Cosán* caters for ethnic minorities who need to improve their English language skills, confidence or parenting skills. Parents, particularly fathers and their children come to some classes together. They cater for children in the local community in the early childhood education centre. They provide courses for men in the local area who are looking to up-skill or become computer literate - they run courses on Saturday mornings to cater for this hard to reach target group. They target community workers and leaders in the local community in order to support them and provide them with a qualification in the area. They cater for older people in the local area and provide support and advice for grandparents who help to rear their grandchildren (Dooley et al., 2010). This community centre adopts both a lifelong and life-wide focus.

The NESET review by Downes (2011a) concludes that:

Community based lifelong learning centres can simultaneously provide instantiations of a range of key lifelong learning objectives, such as active citizenship, social cohesion/inclusion, personal and social fulfillment, intercultural dialogue, as well as employment pathways. In other words, a notable potential they offer is as a kind of one-stop-shop for a wide number of core lifelong learning objectives of the European Council and Commission. Community learning centres offer a potentially key pathway and bridge in providing outreach to marginalized communities, including to ethnic minorities, and also connection over time between the non-formal and formal system. As is evident from a range of centres across different European countries, the community based location and proximity is an advantage in being able to engage with hard to reach groups who have tended to be alienated from the formal system.

Key features of good practice in community based lifelong learning centres include:

- a welcoming, supportive, nonhierarchical environment for the nontraditional learner, with a personalized learning focus,
- a proactive outreach strategy to engage those on the margins,

- a commitment to both leadership development within the organization and to fostering community leaders for communities experiencing marginalization,
- a commitment to democratic engagement with the voices and real needs of the learner, as part of a learner-centred focus and commitment.
- a commitment to both self-assessment and independent evaluation, to coherence between strategic objectives and activities engaged in,
- a commitment to engage in strategic partnerships as part of pathways for progression and communication between formal and nonformal education settings (pp. 27-28).

It is notable also that the European Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning, Brussels, 17 November 2011, for the first time explicitly referred to the needs of prisoners in a lifelong learning context. It is evident that much remains to be done in an Irish context for ensuring in practice that prisoners receive their rights to access education in prison (Maunsell et al., 2008; Downes 2011), as part of a strategy for part-time learners to access education.

Against this research backdrop, key recommendations of the Educational Disadvantage Centre in response to the HEA discussion document are as follows:

- A. There is a need for a much greater foregrounding of the key role of community lifelong learning centres in engaging those experiencing social marginalization and educational disadvantage in part-time education. This requires ring-fenced funding to support existing successful adult and community based education initiatives in Ireland and further investment to give expression to this as a national strategic priority

A1. In the HEA draft document, there is a need for a more explicitly tailored set of strategies for engaging distinct target groups (such as early school leavers, prisoners, diverse ethnic groups including members of the Travelling community) in lifelong learning. A key pillar of such a strategy is that of community lifelong learning centres.

A2. Key stakeholder representation in third level institutional structures to increase access: There is a need for structural reform across the university and third level sectors to ensure that key stakeholders from traditionally marginalized communities and community adult education centres have direct representation and voice in the structures of these academic institutions

A3. To engage members of diverse African communities in Ireland the issue of fees for nonEU citizens needs to be addressed as this is a potential barrier to engaging many in further education.

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