



**Pre-Budget Submission 2017**  
**Department of Education and Skills**

*"The University of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Age helped me to explore new ideas and horizons, make new friends and experience the energy and enthusiasm for life of older people."*

Age Action  
30/31 Lower Camden Street  
Dublin 2  
01-475 6989  
[www.ageaction.ie](http://www.ageaction.ie)

## 1. Introduction

Age Action was established in 1992 as the voice for older people and Ireland's leading advocacy organisation on ageing issues.

We act both as a network of organisations and individuals, including older people and carers of older people, and a service provider, assisting tens of thousands of older people every year.

Our mission is to empower all older people to live full lives as actively engaged citizens and to secure their rights to comprehensive high quality services according to their changing needs.

This submission outlines our recommendations to the Department of Education and Skills with regard to the budget allocation for 2017 for lifelong learning.

Separate to this we will make individual submissions to the following Government departments:

- Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment;
- Joint submission to the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure Reform
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Irish Aid).
- Department of Health;
- Department of the Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government;
- Department of Social Protection;

## 2. Age Action's Lifelong Learning Programme

*"After working for close on 50 years I needed to know what was going on in the community – it is a completely different world and at times very frustrating, challenging – especially during the last seven year period of austerity and pension income cuts; increased taxation; cuts in health and other services etc. Coming to our U3A and Age Action meetings has helped me to survive."*

*(Member of Age Action U3A group)*

Age Action believes that lifelong learning is a key part of adult and community education. Learning should not be divided into a place and time to acquire knowledge (school) and a place and time to apply the knowledge acquired (the workplace). Instead, learning should be understood as something that takes place on an ongoing basis in every aspect of our lives from the cradle to the grave. Our lifelong learning programme instils this approach in the delivery of its aims and objectives, keeping older people active as engaged citizens who make valuable contributions to their local communities.

Age Action's *University of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Age (U3A) – Lifelong Learning and Generations Together* programmes are funded by SOLAS. At present we have 20 U3A groups with approximately 1,000 members.

U3A takes a non-formal approach to lifelong learning with no exams and no qualifications needed to join. Belonging to a local U3A group empowers many older people to remain healthy, active, members of their communities.

Members learn from one another by sharing knowledge and experiences and by engaging in shared activities which they choose themselves. U3A can be described as an empowering, flexible, DIY philosophy, which is why so many people are attracted to it in Ireland and internationally.

'Third agers' design their own learning programme to suit their needs and interests. U3A activities include creative writing, stress management and inviting various experts to give talks about anything from neuroscience to local history.

Other groups have learned new languages or musical instruments, toured museums and studied the legacy of the 1916 Rising.

A number of groups have travelled abroad together and liaise with U3A groups in Northern Ireland to organise exchange visits and campaign together for climate justice. Lifelong friends are made and social ties strengthened within and across communities.

Learning can result in a range of positive outcomes including – improving quality of life, reducing risk of social exclusion and isolation, growing self-confidence, keeping mentally and socially active and learning new skills.

Furthermore, the U3A-Lifelong Learning Programme facilitates the kind of cognitive stimulation/exercise older people need to prevent, slow down, and in some cases even recover from many of the symptoms associated with dementia and Alzheimer's Disease.

By ‘providing learning that stimulates cognitive abilities and develops social capital’<sup>1</sup> there is a direct positive impact on healthier behaviours and preferences, as well as indirect effects on income, opportunities and self-confidence<sup>2</sup>. The health benefits and potential savings from education-based policies for adults are significant, especially in light of rising healthcare costs due in part to an ageing population<sup>3</sup>.

Higher levels of education can also impede the onset of dementia<sup>4</sup>. Finding a way to cure dementia is a social and economic imperative. Dementia currently affects 44 million people worldwide, a number forecasted to reach 135 million by 2050<sup>5</sup>.

The Health Service Executive estimates that there are more than 35,000 people with dementia in Ireland<sup>6</sup>. With the population ageing this means that this figure will increase significantly over the next 20 years, as ageing remains one of the single strongest risk factors for Alzheimer's Disease (the most common form of dementia).

We support the department’s mission to facilitate ‘individuals through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development’<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. Context

The latest available data on lifelong learning among adults in Ireland, from Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) Q4 2014, notes that participation rates in Ireland (7.3 per cent) fall below the EU average (10.5 per cent). Ireland also lags significantly behind the top performing countries such as Denmark (31.4 per cent), Sweden (28.1 per cent) and Finland (24.9 per cent).

An EU education and training benchmark is to reach a participation rate in lifelong learning of 15 per cent by 2020. The National Skills Strategy, on the other hand, has set a target to increase the rates to 10 per cent in 2020 and 15 per cent in 2025<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> OECD (2013) ‘Trends Shaping Education 2013 - Ageing societies’, OECD

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2007), *Understanding the Social Outcomes of Learning*, OECD Publishing, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Valenzuela, M.J. and P. Sachdev (2005). Brain reserve and dementia: A systematic review, *Psychological Medicine*, Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 441-454.

<sup>5</sup> Prince M., M. Guerchet and M. Prina (2013). *The Global Economic Impact of Dementia. 2013-2050*. London, Alzheimer’s Disease International

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/olderpeople/tipsforhealthyiving/dementia.html>

<sup>7</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2015) *Statement of Strategy 2015-2017*, p.5 - <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/Department-of-Education-and-Skills-Statement-of-Strategy-2015-2017.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2016) *Ireland National Skills Strategy 2025*, p. 117 - [https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub\\_national\\_skills\\_strategy\\_2025.pdf](https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf)

In order to achieve these goals, we believe that much greater investment is needed to ensure that lifelong learning continues to play a vital role in enabling people of all ages to participate in the human, social, economic and cultural development of Irish society.

In 2015<sup>9</sup>, less than €200,000 was invested in 'Lifelong Learning Opportunities'. This level of investment falls short of what is required if we are to see a social return and begin to work towards meeting the EU average and later the benchmark of 15 per cent.

Increased funding would allow Age Action to bring the benefits of belonging to a U3A group to older people across the country.

Ultimately, investing in the U3A model for lifelong learning builds communities, brings together older people facing social isolation and challenges ageist stereotypes.

For all of these reasons, and more, this increase in Government funding represents excellent value for money.

**Recommendations:**

1. In order to increase participation rates in lifelong learning the department must commit to investing in this area. Funding should be at least doubled to reach the minimum lifelong learning participation target set by the European Commission and in order to achieve the goals around lifelong learning and social inclusion set out by the Department of Education and Skills.

**4. Conclusion**

If you wish to discuss the contents of this submission further or if you require any additional information please do not hesitate to contact us at the details below.

**For further information please contact:**

Naomi Feely, Senior Policy Officer, Age Action, 30/31 Lower Camden Street, Dublin 2  
T: 01-475 6989; E: [socialinclusion@ageaction.ie](mailto:socialinclusion@ageaction.ie)

The work of the Age Action policy team is supported by the Scheme to Support National Organisations, funded via the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and administered by Pobal.

---

<sup>9</sup> SOLAS (2015) Further Education and Training Plan, p.43  
[http://www1.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SOLAS %20FET Services Plan 2015.pdf](http://www1.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/SOLAS%20FET%20Services%20Plan%202015.pdf)