

Introduction: How do I get started?	6
Why go back to learning now?	6
Can I go back to education without a Junior/Leaving Cert?	6
Where do I start?	6
How do I overcome my fears?	6
Why is it for me?	7
What if I have a disability?	7
What if I cannot afford it?	7
Section 1: The changing face of education in Ireland	7
Lifelong learning	7
The National Framework of Qualifications	8
Further education	9
Higher education	9
FETAC	9
HETAC	9
AONTAS	9
Section 2: How is learning delivered?	10
Full time	10
Part time	10
Distance learning	10
e-Learning	11
Higher education institutions delivering off site	11
Section 3: How do I find information on a course?	11
Finding information on educational opportunities	11
Further education	11
Higher education	12
Information sources for further and higher education	12
Access programmes	13

Section 4: How do I decide on a course?	13
Making choices about courses	13
Is there anyone I can talk to?	14
Mature Student/Access Officers	14
How can I find out what college is really like?	15
Do all courses have exams?	15
Who else can help?	15
Section 5: When do I apply?	15
Further education	15
Higher education	15
Timeline for CAO applications	15

Finance **18**

Introduction: Where do I start?	18
--	-----------

Section 1: How can I get help with paying for further and higher education?	18
--	-----------

What is the Free Fees Initiative?	18
Can I get tax relief?	18
What maintenance grants are available for further and higher education?	19
What is the Millennium Partnership Fund?	20
Are any scholarships available?	21
St Vincent de Paul	21
Student Assistance Fund	21
Department of Social and Family Affairs	21

Section 2: Who else could help me with finance?	22
--	-----------

Can my employer help?	22
What can I do?	22
What if I get into trouble with my finances?	22
What about working while being a student?	22

Introduction: How can I prepare myself for a return to learning?	24
Section 1: What services for courses are available from my local VEC to help me get started?	24
BTEI - Back to Education Initiative	25
VTOS - Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme	26
Adult Education Guidance Service	26
Adult Literacy	26
Community Education	26
FETAC - Further Education and Training Awards Council	27
Adult Education	27
Travellers Training Centre	27
PLC - Post Leaving Cert Courses	27
Section 2: What other learning providers deliver courses/ programmes that can help me ?	28
Access programmes	28
Community groups	29
FÁS	29
Section 3: Who can I talk to?	29
Mature Student /Access Officers	29
Adult Education Guidance Services	29
Section 4: What about supports for students with disabilities?	30
Section 5: What is mentoring?	30
Section 6: Do I need computer skills?	30
Section 7: What supports are available when I get to college?	31
Workshops on academic skills	31
Mature Student Society	31
Health and wellbeing	32
Orientation	32

Practicalities 34

Introduction: What about the practicalities? 34

Section 1: How will I get there? 34

Car 34

Car pooling 34

Private bus 34

Community transport 35

Public transport 35

Cycling or walking 35

Section 2: What are my childcare options? 36

How do I find local information? 36

Do colleges provide childcare facilities? 36

Can family and friends help? 36

Is there any funding for childcare costs? 37

Section 3: What are my options if I move closer to college? 37

Can I stay on campus as a mature student? 37

What are my other options? 37

Section 4: What if I find it difficult to overcome these obstacles? 38

Useful Contacts 39



Getting Started

GETTING STARTED

Introduction: How do I get started?

Why go back to learning now?

There really has never been a better time to consider a return to learning. Colleges, universities and other educational providers are changing and are encouraging more adults to return to learning. As an adult returning to learning you bring considerable life experience with you and there is growing recognition of the value of this in enriching the experience for all learners. Regardless of your educational background to date, this guide should enable you to see the education options open to you now.

This section will answer some of the questions that you may have when you first consider a return to learning.

Can I go back to education without a Junior/Leaving Cert?

As a mature student (over 23 on the 1st January in the year of application) you may not need to have completed a Leaving Certificate or Junior/Intermediate Certificate to apply for further and higher education courses. Your application can be considered on your experience, motivation and interest. It is important to note that some courses do have particular requirements, so you will need to check.

Where do I start?

This guide will set out information which will be of assistance to you. A learning toolkit is also available which can help you develop the skills you need for a return to further and higher education or during your course.

How do I overcome my fears?

You may not feel confident about your academic ability. This may be due to past negative experiences or because it has been some time since you were last involved in education.

People who are involved in the education of adults know that it is not ability but often a lack of confidence, that can be a barrier to returning to learning. Adult learners bring life experience to their learning. You can increase your confidence by doing short taster courses or return to learning courses. Your local VEC provide courses that will increase your skills and confidence. You could also talk to the Information Officer of the Adult Education Guidance Service in your local VEC; the contact number in Meath is (046) 9021447.

Why is it for me?

You may feel a burning desire to learn because of your interest in a particular subject or a particular career that you want to follow, or to prove that you can. Many adult learners experience personal growth and development as a positive result of returning to learning.

What if I have a disability?

Supports are available for students with disabilities, contact the Disability Office in the college you are interested in as soon as possible to find out the range of supports that are available. If there is no designated Disability Office, contact the college for information.

What if I cannot afford it?

This booklet has a section on funding your education, which will give you information on what is available. The Free Fees Initiative means that fees are no longer due for the majority of full time higher education courses. The Higher Education Grants Scheme also allows grants to those within specific income limits. While this may not apply to everyone, you should read the funding section to ensure you understand everything that is available. Bear in mind also that education is a significant investment in your future earning potential.

Section 1: The changing face of education in Ireland

This section covers the further and higher education sector in Ireland.

Lifelong learning

The term lifelong learning refers to learning throughout our whole lives. All the learning you do from cradle to grave is part of your lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is now central to understanding education and training in Ireland. All further and higher education is part of your lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is not just traditional education.

Engaging in learning throughout your life can help your career development and enhance your life in many different ways.

The National Framework of Qualifications

How does it work?

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was introduced in 2003. It puts you, the learner, at the centre of education and training in Ireland. It is important that you are familiar with the NFQ and understand how it works.

There are ten levels in the NFQ. All qualifications can be found on the fan diagram. For example, the Leaving Certificate is at level 4 and 5, this is at the same level as FETAC level 4 and 5 courses. If you have completed a beginners computer course, this could be at level 3.

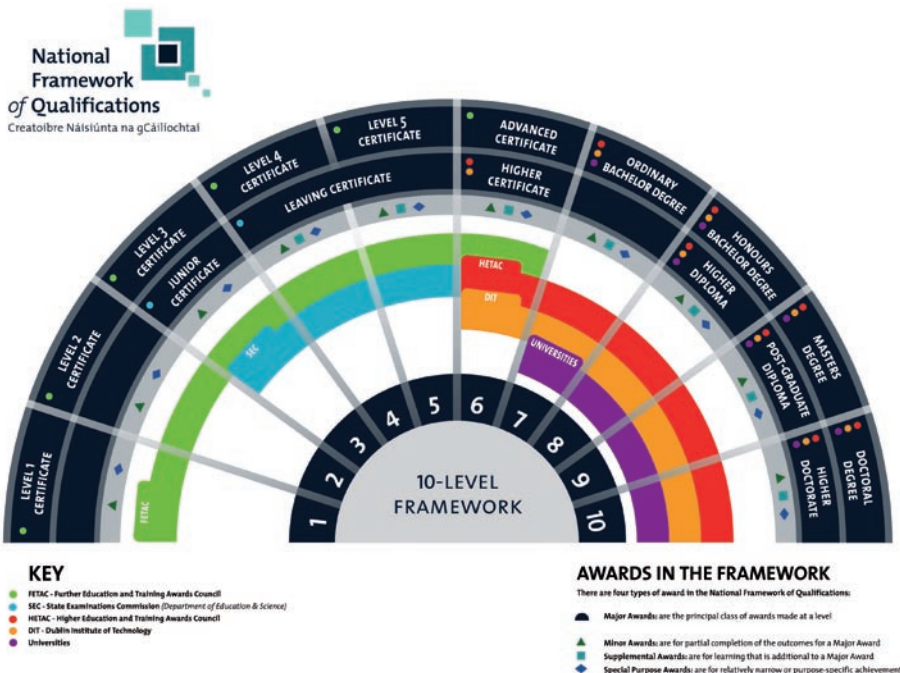
You can move both up and down the framework, for example, if you hold a level 6 qualification in hotel management you can do a level 3 course in computers.

What are the benefits for me?

The NFQ allows all education and training to be included and compared with each other. This helps you to make informed choices about your qualifications and opens possibilities for you to see where you might like to go next. It also makes it easier for you to explain to others what qualifications you hold. This is important when thinking about future learning, or applying for a job - at home or abroad.

The NFQ shows all levels of qualifications on the same fan diagram, highlighting your level of achievement at all stages.

A larger version of the fan diagram is printed on the foldout inside cover of this document



Aontas

AONTAS is the National Association of Adult Learning, an umbrella organisation which promotes the development of accessible and inclusive adult learning. They can be contacted at (01) 4068220, their website is www.aontas.com.

Further education

In the context of this guide the term further education means awards at level 5 and above. Further education refers to a wide range of courses and programmes offered by many public and private course providers.

Higher education

Higher education refers to accredited courses offered by the higher education institutes (HEI), this includes the institutes of technology, the universities, and other institutions.

FETAC

A FETAC award is an award from the Further Education and Training Awards Council. Programmes leading to FETAC awards are offered nationwide by a wide range of public and private providers in diverse settings, including VECs, Fáilte Ireland, FÁS and Teagasc centres, adult and community education and training centres, Institutes of Technology and in workplaces. Further details are available on the FETAC website, www.fetac.ie or by phoning (01) 8659500.

HETAC

A HETAC award is an award from the higher education training and Awards Council. Courses offered by Higher Education Institutions are accredited by HETAC. A list all recognised higher education providers in Ireland (including Universities) is available on the Department of Education and Science website www.education.ie. HETAC can be contacted at (01) 6314567 or www.hetac.ie.

Section 2:

How is learning delivered?

This section gives you information about the various ways in which courses can be accessed.

Full time

Attending a course full time is a big commitment. It is important to know that full time courses vary in length, the academic year varies for different courses, and work loads vary from course to course. If you are studying literature, you may have 12 hours of classes a week, whereas a science based course may have 25 hours of classes a week. Obviously literature requires considerable reading outside of the time spent at class so a significant time commitment outside of your class time is required for this course.

Before you begin check with the college what time commitment is usually expected outside of class time, to complete the course.

Part time

Part time courses are delivered in colleges, in the community, through distance learning, or on the internet. The appeal of a part time course is that you can achieve qualifications without a full time commitment. However if you study part time, it can take longer to achieve the same qualification.

Distance learning

Distance Learning is where your course provider sends you the course materials for you to study yourself. Usually you send back your assignments. This means you can take a course from your home or local community at your own pace. You must bear in mind that you are mostly on your own while studying, although some providers offer supports. This is an important consideration when selecting the course and learning provider. Classes can sometimes be attended at weekends, or on a part-time basis and may involve online, televised or on campus lectures. Some qualifications up to and including level 8 on the NFQ can be offered in this way.

Oscail is the largest Irish distance education provider for higher education, (01) 700 5924 www.oscail.ie. Also many Irish people have accessed distance learning through the Open University (01) 678 5399 www.open-university.com/ireland

e-Learning

e-Learning refers to courses that take place on the internet. Obviously this is the best place to look for this type of course. FÁS offer an e-Learning programme from their website, which they call eCollege. Their website is www.fas.ie, click on *training*, and then *eCollege*. Fáilte Ireland also offer e-Learning programmes through their website www.failteireland.ie

Higher education institutions delivering off site

Higher education institutions outreach when they deliver an accredited course off site. The college and local provider work together to get the course running locally. These courses are delivered by college tutors and at the same level as if they were in the Higher Education Institution. On completion, courses are accredited by the Higher Education Institute.

Section 3:

How do I find information on a course?

This section covers where you can find information and advice on educational options.

Finding information on educational opportunities

QualifaX is the national database of all Further and Higher Education courses and can be found online www.qualifax.ie. This site has comprehensive information on courses at all levels, from hobby/interest night classes, to postgraduate level (FETAC levels 8 to 10). There is a really useful link to *Mature Student Entry to Higher Education*. Here you can search by *keywords/course title*, *qualification type* and *course provider*. The search results include information on mature entry policy for each course.

Further education

As well as searching QualifaX, to find information on Further Education courses contact your local Vocational Education Committee (VEC). VECs run a wide range of educational programmes for adults. Other organisations such as FÁS, Fáilte Ireland and Teagasc will also be able to advise you on further education. Higher Education Institutions are also involved in further education. Further education courses are often advertised locally, so keep an eye on the local press and library/community/church notice boards etc. Some areas have internet based local information, for example in Meath, the Meath Education and Training Database provides information on all courses running in Meath www.metd.ie.

Higher education

If you know where you want to study:

If you know which college you are interested in, look at their website (links to all higher education institutions can be found on the Higher Education Authority website www.heai.ie), or call the college and ask for their prospectus. This document lists college courses and entry requirements. You could also ask when they are next holding an open day, and if there is an open day for mature students.

If you know what you want to study:

If you are interested in studying a particular subject, use the QualifaX search to find out where courses that interest you are available. Then when you know which institutions you are interested in, look at their website and/or prospectus and arrange a visit.

For information on educational programmes for specific professions, for example nursing, contact the relevant body, in this case An Bord Altranais, on (01) 6398500, www.nursingboard.ie.

Information Sources for further and higher education.

	Print	Internet
Further Education	Brochure/Prospectus Local Press Notice boards	www.meathvec.ie www.metd.ie www.qualifax.ie www.fas.ie www.failteireland.ie www.teagasc.ie
Higher Education	Mature Student Directory Individual College Prospectus	www.qualifax.ie www.heai.ie individual college websites (links on HEA website) www.metd.ie

Remember there is internet access in all libraries.
Internet access in Meath libraries is free.

Contact details for Meath libraries can be found in our useful contacts section at the back or on www.meath.ie/library

Access programmes

These are courses designed to equip learners with the skills necessary to become successful students in higher education. They focus on building academic and computer skills as well as support and information on educational opportunities. Many are full time and run by higher education institutions. Some guarantee places on a course at the same institution when learners have been successful.

VECs and local education providers also sometimes run access programmes and return to learning programmes. The Mature Student Directory details some of the available access programmes.

The **Mature Student Directory**, which was written by Mature Student Officers, gives good advice and information about studying at higher education institutions. It also gives details about access programmes. You can find a copy at your library or Citizens Information Centre, or else online, via the QualifaX website www.qualifax.ie. Click on *Search Courses*, then *Mature Student Entry to Higher Education*, then *Mature Student Directory*.

Section 4:

How do I decide on a course?

This section covers making a decision on a course and what to consider when making the choice.

Making choices about courses

Think seriously about what you choose to study and put time and effort into your decision. Study can be stressful and you could add to your future stress by having concerns about whether you have chosen the right course. Include family in discussions early on to foster support. Do as much research as possible before you decide, find out answers to the following questions:

- What is your motivation for returning to study?
- What is the time commitment for the course?
- Is this the only place where you can study for this qualification?
- Have you explored all the delivery methods for this course?
- What subjects will you be studying?

- Do these subjects interest you?
- Is your final mark based on exams or assignments?
- How can you best prepare yourself for a return to study?
- How much will the course cost you?
- Who is accrediting the course?
- What National Framework of Qualifications level or professional qualification does the course lead to?
- Will this course lead you to a career?
- Is this a career you can see yourself doing?
- Are there good prospects in this career?
- Have you researched all possible options for you?

Is there anyone I can talk to?

It may be a good idea to seek advice before committing to a particular course. There are dedicated **Information Officers** at Adult Education Guidance Services in your local VEC where you can receive one to one advice on choosing the education option for you. This is a free service. A list of **Adult Education Guidance Services** nationwide is available on www.ncge.ie. Click on *Guidance in Education, Adult Education*, then *AEGI contact details*, or you could phone (01) 86090715/6 to find your local service.

Meath Adult Education Guidance Service can be contacted at (046) 9068249.

Private practitioners are also available, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors website has nationwide listings on www.igc.ie.

Mature student officers & access officers

All higher education institutions have Access Officers and some have Mature Student Officers. These are staff dedicated to assist mature students and students with disabilities in college life. As they are familiar with mature student challenges it is a really good idea to talk to them before you make your final decision. They are excellent sources of information and help. You can find contact details by phoning the college, or on the college website, alternatively your local Adult Education Guidance Service will be able to supply details.

How can I find out what college is really like?

Shadowing a student is a great way of getting a sense of college life. Your Adult Education Guidance Service or the higher education institution's Mature Student or Access Officer should be able to organise for you to shadow an existing mature student for a day or put you in touch with a mature student who you could talk to. Some education institutions also host open days for mature students, again the Adult Education Guidance Service or college, can give you this information.

Do all courses have exams?

Many courses have ongoing assessments or assignments and experiential learning (credits given for your work/life experience) can be taken into account. Before you begin your course, you can find out if there are exams, or what percentage of your final mark is given for assignments.

Who else can help?

Family and friends

It is a good idea to get the support of family and friends from the beginning. Clearly explain to your family and friends why returning to education is important to you, and how it may impact them. Many adult learners find they experience significant personal growth during a return to learning. Your return to learning may also have an inspirational impact on your wider network and their attitude to the value of education. Some colleges organise family days to familiarise your family with your new life at college.

Section 5:

When do I apply?

This section gives information on when you should apply and what educational levels you need to have completed before applying for further and higher education courses.

Further education

Closing dates for colleges, universities and education providers involved in the delivery of further education vary. It is best to contact the institution directly to find out about the application process and closing dates relevant for your chosen course. Contact them as soon as you are interested to avoid disappointment. Entry requirements also need to be checked with the education institution. If you are unsuccessful, the institution may be able to advise you of a similar course elsewhere or preparation you may need to undertake before applying again.

Higher education

You need to check with the education provider but in the majority of cases, for applications to higher education institutions for full time courses you must complete a Central Applications Office (CAO) application form. Most forms are now completed online at www.cao.ie. Your local Adult Education Guidance Service will support you in the application process. They usually have paper CAO forms, these are also available from the CAO by phoning (091) 509800.

As a mature student (over 23 on the 1st of January on the year of application) you may not need to have completed a Leaving Certificate or Junior/Intermediate Certificate to apply for further and higher education courses. Your application can be considered on your experience, motivation and interest (some courses have particular requirements that you will need to check).

Before applying as a mature student, you should contact the Admissions Office or Mature Student/Access Officer of the appropriate Higher Education Institutions well in advance of the application closing date. They will also be able to tell you of any specific entry requirements for the course you are interested in and organise supplementary forms that may need to be completed. Supporting statements are often required for mature applicants, this is an important document where you set out your relevant work experience, informal/formal learning on the subject, and motivation for your application. Consider carefully what you write here, and allow yourself enough time to prepare your best effort. Ask someone you trust to read it for you, someone who will give you constructive feedback.

Timeline for CAO applications

Recommended Mature Student Application	December
CAO Application Deadline	February
College Year Begins	September



Finance

FINANCE

Introduction:

Where do I start?

The financial impact of returning to learning can be considerable. This section aims to inform you of the many sources of funding available or how to finance learning yourself, as a return to learning can be an investment in your future earning potential.

Section 1:

How can I get help paying for further and higher education?

In this section various sources of funding from the state and other organisations are outlined.

What is the Free Fees Initiative?

The Free Fees Initiative is a state sponsored scheme. The state pays fees for eligible students who are attending third level education for the first time. The student must be taking a full time course that is more than two years in duration and be an EU national. For further details on eligibility for non Irish nationals go to the Department of Education and Science website, www.education.ie.

You will have to pay a Student Service Charge to the college before commencing, if you do not qualify for a maintenance grant. Contact the college to find out how much this is.

Fees are payable in full for part time studies currently, however the political climate suggests that this may change soon.

Can I get tax relief?

If you have to pay fees, tax relief is available at the standard rate. This applies to third-level fees paid in respect of approved courses at approved colleges of higher education including those in the EU. For specific details check out the Irish Revenue Commissioners website at www.revenue.ie or Lo-Call numbers by region:

What maintenance grants are available for further and higher education?

There are four schemes funded by the Department of Education and Science which allow maintenance grants to full time students.

- Higher Education Grants Scheme
- Third Level Maintenance Grants Scheme for Trainees
- Vocational Education Committee's Scholarship Scheme
- Maintenance Grants Scheme for Students attending PLC courses

You must be studying in a college recognised by the Department of Education and Science. A list of eligible colleges can be found on the Departments website www.education.ie their Lo-Call number is 1890 40 20 40. The scheme is administered by your local VEC or local authority. County Meath VEC can be contacted at (046) 9068206. Check with your college whether it is your VEC or local authority administering the scheme for your course. Below are details of payments for the 2007/8 academic year.

In order to qualify your reckonable income must be below specified limits.

Rates of Grant

Rates of Ordinary Maintenance Grant applicable for the 2007/08 academic year:

2007/08	Non-Adjacent Rate	Adjacent Rate
Full Maintenance	€3,420	€1,370
Part Maintenance (75%)	€2,565	€ 1,030
Part Maintenance (50%)	€1,710	€ 685
Part Maintenance (25%)	€ 855	€ 345

As a mature student, you will qualify for the non-adjacent rate (for non-mature students to qualify for the non-adjacent rate, your normal residence must be 24km or more from the college you are attending).

Special Rate of Maintenance Grant applicable for the 2007/08 academic year:

This is a "top up" to the ordinary grant for disadvantaged students including those in receipt of long-term social welfare. Apply to your local authority or VEC.

2007/08	Non-Adjacent Rate	Adjacent Rate
Full Special Rate	€6,690	€2,680
Of which top-up represents	€3,270	€1,310

Income Limits

Reckonable Income Limits for the purposes of the Ordinary Maintenance Grant for the 2007/08 academic year:

No. of Dependent Children	Full Maintenance and Full Fees	Part Maintenance (75%) and Full Fees	Part Maintenance (50%) and Full Fees	Part Maintenance (25%) and Full Fees	Part Fees (50%) only*
Less than 4	€38,675	€41,085	€43,500	€45,920	€48,335
4-7	€42,490	€45,150	€47,805	€50,465	€53,120
8 or more	€46,140	€49,025	€51,905	€54,785	€57,665

*Full Student Service Charge is paid where income is at or below this level. Where two or more children (or the candidate's parent) are pursuing a course of approved study in third level or further education, the reckonable income limits may be increased by increments which, for the 2007/08 academic year will be as follows:

- €4,685 - where there are two such children
- €9,370 - where there are three such children and so on by increments of €4,685

Income for the previous tax year is taken into account when reckonable income is calculated, however as a mature adult learner, if you are giving up a job to return to study full time and supply a P45 for the application process, this is taken into account in assessing your reckonable income.

You can find updates of these euro values for future years at www.education.ie or Lo-Call 1890 40 20 40.

The Process

In order to receive these grants you must complete the relevant application form, this is available at your local authority/VEC. A sample can be found on the Department of Education and Science website, www.education.ie. It is a complex form, Co Meath VEC hold public workshops during the summer to help with form completion.

What is the Millennium Partnership Fund?

The Millennium Partnership Fund is a fund which supports people from disadvantaged areas to participate in further and higher education courses. Local Partnership Companies and Community Groups listed on Pobal's website (www.pobal.ie) administer this fund. Funds may be provided for academic supports, information and student costs. To find out more visit www.pobal.ie, click on *Millennium Fund*, then click on *groups implementing the fund*.

Are any scholarships available?

A scholarship is an award given to a student for financial support in education. The following organisations provide scholarships:

- Bank of Ireland Millennium Scholars Trust.

Contact by phone at 1850 221 721. Details also available on the Bank of Ireland website, www.bankofireland.ie, click on *about us* and then click on *in the community*.

- SIPTU Education and Support Scheme

For SIPTU members, awards of up to €1000 can be made. For details go to the *Education and Support Scheme* on their website www.siptu.ie, or phone (01) 4530199.

- IMPACT Industrial relations scholarship scheme

IMPACT also offer grants to members for specific courses. They can be contacted at (01) 8171500 and their website is www.impact.ie.

St Vincent de Paul

This organisation provides financial assistance for education and training. Applicants are assessed by the local society. Generally it is for people who have not been successful with other agencies. Head Office phone number is (01) 8386990 and their website is www.svp.ie.

Student Assistance Fund

The Student Assistance Fund is funded by the National Development Plan, it is for students that experience financial hardship while in college. Contact the Access Officer, Chaplain, Finance Officer or student services (depending on the college) who administer this fund. The fund is for students who run into financial difficulty when at college, often it is used for help with childcare and eldercare, it is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

Department of Social and Family Affairs

The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme allows you to keep your Social Welfare payment and return to approved full time second and third level courses.

For third level courses you need to be in receipt of specified benefits for 12 months before the start of the course. Contact your local Department of Social and Family Affairs office for details. The Departments Lo-Call number is 1890 66 22 44 their website is www.welfare.ie.

Section 2: Who else could help me with finance?

Can my employer help?

As you see a return to learning as an investment in yourself, your employer may too. Ensure you make your employer aware that you are studying, and discuss assistance with fees, especially if your course is relevant to your job. Also enquire about time off for attendance, study and exams. Talk to the HR section of your organisation or manager/owner of the company where you are employed.

What can I do?

Education is an investment in yourself and in a lot of cases your future earning potential. The costs associated with a return to education can be significant. Most people find that in some way they need to personally finance their studies. Some mature women studying full-time suggest that saving is the best way to prepare for a return to learning. This requires planning in advance and a lot of people in reality, find themselves incurring debt while studying. However, making a financial plan and being realistic can help reduce the stress involved.

In the Learning Toolkit, we have set out a budgeting plan which will help you to be realistic about the costs involved. You should complete this before you begin so that you can plan the best way to finance your studies. Talk to your credit union or bank about finance options, such as personal loans or equity release. Personal loans are medium term options where you pay back a loan over three to five years. Equity release is where you borrow money on the strength of the difference between the current value of your home and how much you still owe on your mortgage. You either increase your mortgage payments or the term of your existing mortgage. It is a long term option. Consider all options carefully. Your ability to pay back in the future, should be your most important consideration.

What if I get into trouble with my finances?

If you are in trouble with your finances you can talk to MABS (Money Advice and Budgeting Service). Their helpline number is 1890 283 438. They also have nationwide branches where you can drop in, details are on their website www.mabs.ie. In Meath, their branch is in Navan and the phone number is (046) 9072836.

What about working while being a student?

Most students work during their studies. Many part time students have full time jobs. For full time students, most work part time and/or full time during the summer. How much you work depends on your circumstances and is something you need to judge for yourself in terms of your own study/life/work balance.



Learning Supports

LEARNING SUPPORTS

Introduction:

How can I prepare myself for a return to learning?

A return to learning can be daunting, especially if it has been some time since you have been in an educational environment. If this is the case for you, you may not be aware how much education has changed since you were at school. Returning to learning as an adult means that you have already gained significant life experience which you bring with you to third level. Courses run by adult education providers particularly focus on the value of life experience. You do not need to have any formal school qualification at all to begin, and you can begin your return to learning at any level.

A return to learning is usually a very rewarding journey. In order to overcome your fears you could participate in a return to learning course or complete an access programme. These options are discussed in detail in the following sections. For adult learners it is confidence and not ability that can be their greatest barrier.

Section 1:

What services or courses are available from my local VEC to help me get started?

This section outlines the services of your local VEC.



County Meath VEC's contact details:

Phone: (046) 9021447

Website: www.meathvec.ie

BTEI – Back to Education Initiative

The Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) provides part time courses for adults and young people who are returning to learning. Courses take place on a part time basis and are free to those without a Leaving Certificate. The courses create an opportunity to combine a return to learning in a wide choice of subjects, with family, work and other responsibilities. For BTEI services in Meath, contact (046) 9021447.

VTOS – Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) offers full time courses for people over 21 who have been in receipt of a Social Welfare payment or signing for credits for at least six months. Participants study for Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, FETAC awards and Post Leaving Certificate courses. Meath's VTOS services can be contacted at (046) 9073084.

Adult Education Guidance Service

There are dedicated Information Officers at Adult Education Guidance Services in your local VEC where you can receive one to one advice on choosing the education option for you. This is a free service. A list of Adult Education Guidance Services nationwide is available on www.ncge.ie. Click on *Guidance in Education, Adult Education*, then *AEGL contact details*, or you could phone (01) 86090715/6 to find your local service.

Meath Adult Education Guidance Service can be contacted at (046) 9068249.

Adult Literacy

Literacy services provide confidential literacy and numeracy services for adults from introductory courses to Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and FETAC levels. They provide one to one as well as group tuition. Services are also supportive of anyone on a return to study/learning programme. Contact NALA on (01) 855 4332 for your local service. Alternatively their website is www.nala.ie.

Meath Adult Literacy services can be contacted at (046) 9021447.

Community Education

Community Education Services deliver community based learning. They are managed by Community Education Facilitators (CEF). They offer a range of services to community groups. These services include - educational courses leading to recognised certificates for community groups, support to new and existing groups in the area of funding advice, training etc. In County Meath VEC the Community Education Service is also responsible for an e-Learning programme. A mobile unit can deliver training at any location in the county. Contact your local CEF to find out what is available in your area.

County Meath VEC's CEF can be contacted at (046) 9021447.

FETAC – Further Education Training and Awards Council

Many part time and evening courses run by VECs and other training organisations lead to an award from FETAC. This means they are nationally accredited and have a place on the National Framework of Qualifications. An explanation of these awards is in the 'Getting Started' section.

Contact details: www.fetac.ie Phone (01) 865 9500.

Adult Education

VECs offer courses on a part time basis on a wide variety of subjects from personal development to arts and crafts. Some of these courses lead to accredited awards. If you would like more information contact your local Adult Education Officer. County Meath's Adult Education Officer can be contacted at (046) 9021447.

Travellers Training Centres

Traveller training centres cater for the educational, training and personal development needs of travellers. A wide variety of courses are on offer from basic education to Leaving Certificate and FETAC accredited courses. Contact your local VEC to find out what is available to you locally. The Travellers Training Centre in Meath can be contacted at (046) 9021778.

PLC – Post Leaving Certificate Course

Post Leaving Certificate courses are full time courses aimed at the achievement of a specific trade or employment or further education and training. Traditionally aimed at school leavers, these courses are also open to mature learners and offer a broad range of courses in many subjects. Contact your local VEC to find out what is available to you locally. In Meath, the Adult Education Guidance Service can be contacted at (046) 9068249.

Section 2:

What other learning providers deliver courses/programmes that can help me?

This section covers return to learning courses offered by other educational institutions.

Access programmes

An access programme is a course which prepares a mature or non traditional student for third level education. Courses can be run locally or in the college you plan to attend. Some providers deliver full time courses and some courses are part time. In order to gauge whether you should attend one, talk to the college you intend applying to and ask their advice. You may know already that you need to build on your current academic skills in order to consider a third level course. Some higher education courses have specific academic requirements which you will need to fulfil before beginning, an access course can be an excellent way to do this. Some also guarantee a place in their college on the basis of completion of the access programme.

Most programmes access courses cover the following topics:

- Writing skills
- Reading skills
- Study skills and techniques
- Basic IT (computers)
- Liberal Arts / Science, Maths
- Guidance

To find out who is running access programmes, contact the Mature Student Officer or Access Officer of the higher education institution you are interested in attending. Alternatively, the Information Officer of your local VEC's Adult Education Guidance Service will also have this information.

Community groups

Community groups are often the first to recognise a training need in their locality and regularly run training programmes on a broad number of subjects. Keep an eye on local notice boards and the local press for details. Use a local directory or Citizens Information Centre to find local community groups. National information is available on www.citizensinformationboard.ie or by phoning 1890 777 121. The main Citizens Information Centre in Meath can be contacted at (046) 9074086.

FÁS

FÁS is Ireland's national training and development authority, they offer a range of courses with an employment focus. They have a network of offices nationwide where you can drop in for advice on training and employment. All participants are entitled to a FÁS training allowance. FÁS can be contacted at 1800 611 116, their website is www.fas.ie

Section 3: Who can I talk to?

Mature Students / Access Officers

Mature Student Officers and Access Officers are professionals who work in higher education institutions. Their brief is to support the mature or non traditional students in that institution. For this reason they are excellent sources of information regarding their institution and the challenges of mature students. They are very supportive and approachable individuals. It is highly recommended that you contact this person in the institution you plan attending. You can find contact details by phoning the college, or on the college website, alternatively your local Adult Education Guidance Service will be able to supply details.

Adult Education Guidance Service

As already mentioned in the section on VEC services to adults, there are dedicated Information Officers working in the Adult Education Guidance Services in your local VEC where you can receive one to one advice on choosing the education option for you. This is a free service. A list of Adult Education Guidance Services nationwide is available on www.ncge.ie. Click on *Guidance in Education, Adult Education*, then *AEGI contact details*, or you could phone (01) 86090715/6 to find your local service. Meath Adult Education Guidance Service can be contacted at (046) 9068249.

Section 4:

What about supports for students with disabilities?

The Fund for Students with Disabilities is funded by the Government and the European Social Fund, under the National Development Plan 2000-2006. This fund provides financial aid for additional supports and services for students with a disability. All higher education institutions have disability support services, and it is essential to get in touch with this service before you make a decision to study there. The various supports that are on offer include, physical access to study and practical areas, assistive technology for example, voice recognition software, text scanners and support with computer use.

Section 5:

What is mentoring?

A mentor is someone with experience who offers support, advice and information to a less experienced learner. Education institutions often have mentoring programmes where students are assigned a mentor. Sometimes this can happen informally, especially with mature students. If it is not set up for you, talk to your education institution or Mature Student/Access Officer, if you would like a mentor.

Section 6:

Do I need computer skills?

Computer skills are essential skills for further and higher education. Information Technology (IT) is another name for computers. Try to overcome any fears you may have about IT by doing a course. There are many organisations that could help you to get started: VEC, library, community organisations, women's groups, FÁS, Citizens Information Centre. Computers are increasingly becoming the way that the world communicates information. Using the internet is probably the easiest way to explore your education options. With internet access in libraries, you don't even need to own your own computer.

Courses which prepare you for a return to learning will usually include a module on computer (IT) skills.

In County Meath VEC there is a mobile e-Learning unit which can deliver IT training in any location. The contact number is (046) 9068245.

Section 7:

What supports are available when I get to college?

This section covers supports available after you start your course.

Workshops on academic skills

Colleges offer workshops on relevant academic skills such as study skills, essay writing, research skills, using the library. The length can vary, also the timing, sometimes they take place in the summer before the course begins, sometimes during term time. You can usually find information on the college website, ask your Mature Student/ Access Officer if you cannot find information. Sometimes these workshops are for mature students only. Your local further education provider may offer summer school programmes for students due to start that autumn. Contact your local VEC for details. County Meath VEC can be contacted at (046) 9021447.

Mature Student Society

Some colleges have a mature student society, this enables mature students to get together and share the experience. Mature Student Societies sometimes have a common room within the college for the exclusive use of mature students.

Career Guidance

Many students benefit from career advice during or when they complete their course. Larger educational providers have dedicated career guidance services to assist students individually. Your course provider should be able to put you in touch with a service that you can access. Alternatively, you can contact the Institute of Guidance Counsellors who could put you in touch with someone locally. They can be contacted at (01) 6761975 and their website is www.igc.ie.

Health and wellbeing

Some higher education institutions have health centres and many educational providers have counselling services where you can access free confidential support. The Mature Student/Access Officer should be able to give you details of these services.

Orientation

Orientation days familiarise new students with the practical aspects of student life, for example, how to find your way around, where services are located, how to use the college library and general guidelines on college life. Some institutions organise separate mature student orientation which can be combined with workshops on academic skills. This is an excellent opportunity to network with other mature students. At orientation sessions other student services will be highlighted, for example Students Union and Chaplaincy.



Practicalities

PRACTICALITIES

Introduction: What about the practicalities?

Many people find that in order to study they have to overcome the challenges of travelling to college, organising childcare or considering a move closer to college. This section covers options that may be available.

Section 1: How will I get there?

This section talks about the options that may be open to you if you need transport.

Car

People, from rural areas especially, find that they need to drive in order to access further and higher education. You will need to check whether parking is available at the college you are interested in, when considering your options. You should also consider the cost of driving and compare this with other transport options, if you have any.

Car pooling

You may find this is an option for you. When you begin a course you may get to know someone else who is travelling in the same direction. If this is the case you could share the driving or contribute to costs if you are the passenger. Try advertising on college notice boards if you have difficulty linking with someone else.

Private bus

Many colleges recognise the importance of putting on buses for their students, for example, Dundalk Institute of Technology, NUI Maynooth and Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown operate buses which bring students from towns all over Meath daily. These services mainly operate a return journey once a day.

Community Transport

Most counties have community transport services. In Meath, Flexibus operate an excellent wheelchair accessible community transport service. They can be contacted at (046) 9074830, their website is www.meathtransport.com.

For details of other community transport schemes, check out www.pobal.ie, click on the *rural transport programme*.

Public transport

Public bus services are operated by Bus Eireann, phone (01) 8366111 or their website is www.buseireann.ie. Dublin Bus have extensive services in the Dublin area, phone (01) 8734222 or their website is www.dublinbus.ie. You may find trains are a good option for you, details can be found on the Irish rail website, www.irishrail.ie or by phoning (01) 8366222.

If you are a full time student, you will be eligible for discounts on public transport services. This information is available on the websites listed above, or by phoning the relevant numbers above.

Cycling or walking

This is a healthy alternative if you are lucky enough to live near your place of study. Not only will you get to exercise, but it is also a low cost option. It is important to have researched your options close to home, in case a course that suits you is running locally and then you may be able to cycle or walk.

Section 2:

What are my childcare options?

This section considers childcare services, how to find them, if they are available in colleges, whether family and friends can help, the costs involved, and finally what, if any, financial supports are available.

How do I find local information?

If you are considering a return to learning you may need to engage the services of a childminder or crèche. A good place to find information about available childminders and crèche services or estimate the costs involved, is your local County Childcare Committee. There is a list of all such committees at www.pobal.ie. Click on the *childcare link* and then *useful contacts*.

Meath County Childcare Committee can be contacted by phone on (046) 9073010, their website is www.mccc.ie. The Parents Information Officer is available at this number.

Do colleges provide childcare facilities?

Some education providers offer childcare on site, for example, County Meath VEC operate a sessional childcare facility in Navan and NUI Maynooth have a crèche on campus. Ask the Mature Student/Access Officer at the higher education institution or member of the local education provider team what is available on site or locally.

Can family and friends help?

If you are calling on family and friends for support with childcare, clearly explain why returning to education is important to you, and how they can help. People are far more likely to help if they realise why you want to return to learning and understand that this education opportunity will have a positive impact on your future. Be clear about how much childcare you need and for how long when asking for a commitment. If the person you ask says no, respect their decision and see if you can find an alternative before giving up on your goal. Your return to learning will be an excellent example for your children.

Is there any funding for childcare costs?

There are no specific sources of grants for childcare costs to students. However it is a good idea to talk to your college and exhaust all possibilities, manage your expectations though, it is likely to be of a contributory nature if at all. Higher education institutions also administer the Student Assistance Fund (see finance section). FÁS training course participants are entitled to a childcare allowance, details can be found on the FÁS website, www.fas.ie, click on *training*, then *allowances & funding*, and then *childcare allowances*. FÁS can be contacted at 1800 611 116

Section 3:

What are my options if I move closer to college?

If you are attending a full time course some distance from home you may consider accommodation near to your studies for some or all of your course. Also check out the funding section of this booklet to check your eligibility for a maintenance grant.

Can I stay on campus as a mature student?

Some mature students find that staying on campus is a good option for them, especially if they cannot commute or find their commute would be too long. It is a good idea though, to enquire first if dedicated mature student accommodation is available as you may find it distracting to live with younger students.

What are my other options?

Your college Student's Union or Accommodation Officer is probably the best person to talk to regarding local accommodation. They will help you with the best places to look and give you an indication of how much it is likely to cost. As a mature student you are likely to find that more doors are open to you.

You could also consider the possibility of staying near the college for one or two nights a week. An indication of what is available can be found on the internet, for example, the website www.daft.ie or www.myhome.ie. A local auctioneer would also be able to advise you of local availability. Do not rule out staying with friends you make on the course for shorter stays, think creatively about your options.

Section 4:

What if I find it difficult to overcome these obstacles?

If you find that the practical obstacles in this section cannot be overcome, do not give up on your learning goal. Research all of the options available. Use our 'Getting Started' section to find more information. In this you will find sections on how learning is delivered and how to decide on a course. This guide may enable you to find an alternative that suits you better. If now is not the time for your return to learning, use the time to prepare yourself, forward plan and perhaps save the necessary money you will need, consider one step at a time on your lifelong learning journey.

Useful Contacts

Services in Meath	Phone
Meath Adult Education Guidance Service www.meathvec.ie	(046) 9068249
Co Meath VEC www.meathvec.ie	(046) 9021447
Back to Education Initiative	(046) 9021447
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme	(046) 9073084
Adult Literacy	(046) 9068218
Community Education	(046) 9021447
Adult Education Organiser	(046) 9021447
Travellers Training Centre	(046) 9021447
e-Learning Unit	(046) 9021447
Citizens Information Centre (Navan) www.citizensinformationboard.ie	(046) 9074086
Meath Education and Training Database www.metd.ie	
Flexibus www.meathtransport.com	(046) 9074830
Meath County Childcare www.mccc.ie	(046) 9073010
MABS (Meath) <i>(Money Advice and Budgeting Service)</i> www.mabs.ie	(046) 9072836
Meath County Council Library Service www.meath.ie/library	
Ashbourne	(01) 8358185
Athboy	(046) 9432539
Duleek	(041) 9880709
Dunboyne	(01) 8251248
Dunshaughlin	(01) 8250504
Kells	(046) 9241592

Laytown (can be contacted through Navan)	(046) 9021134
Navan	(046) 9021134
Nobber	(046) 9052732
Oldcastle	(049) 8542084
Rathcairn	(046) 9430929
Slane	(041) 98224955
Trim	(046) 9436014

National Services	Phone
Department of Education and Science <i>www.education.ie</i>	1890 402 040
Irish Revenue Commissioners <i>www.revenue.ie</i>	
Lo Call numbers by region:	
Lo-Call East and South East Region	1890 44 44 25
Lo-Call Dublin	1890 33 34 25
Lo-Call Border Midlands West Region	1890 77 74 25
Lo-Call South West Region	1890 22 24 25
National Centre for Guidance in Education <i>www.ncge.ie</i>	(01) 86090715/6
<i>(Click on Guidance in Education, Adult Education, then AEGI contact details)</i>	
Institute of Guidance Counsellors <i>www.igc.ie</i>	(01) 6761975
FETAC <i>www.fetac.ie</i>	(01) 8659500
HETAC <i>www.hetac.ie</i>	(01) 6314567
Higher Education Authority <i>www.hea.ie</i>	(01) 2317100
AONTAS <i>www.aontas.com</i>	(01) 4068220
Oscail <i>www.oscail.ie</i>	(01) 7005924
Open University <i>www.open-university.com/ireland</i>	(01) 6785399

FÁS	
<i>www.fas.ie</i>	1800 611 116
Faite Ireland	
<i>www.failteireland.ie</i>	1890 525 525
Teagasc	
<i>www.teagasc.ie</i>	(059) 9170200
QualifaX	
<i>www.qualifax.ie</i>	
Central Applications Office	
<i>www.cao.ie</i>	(091) 509800
An Bord Altranais	
<i>www.nursingcareers.ie</i>	(01) 6398500
National Adult Literacy Agency	
<i>www.nala.ie</i>	(01) 8554332
Citizens Information Centre	
<i>www.citizensinformationboard.ie</i>	1890 777 121
Pobal	
<i>www.pobal.ie</i>	(01) 2400700
Bus Éireann	
<i>www.buseireann.ie</i>	(01) 8366111
Dublin Bus	
<i>www.dublinbus.ie</i>	(01) 8734222
Irish Rail	
<i>www.irishrail.ie</i>	(01) 8366222
Bank of Ireland	
<i>www.bankofireland.ie</i>	(01) 6615933
SIPTU	
<i>www.siptu.ie</i>	(01) 4530199
IMPACT	
<i>www.impact.ie</i>	(01) 8171500
St Vincent de Paul	
<i>www.svp.ie</i>	(01) 8386990
Department of Social and Family Affairs	
<i>www.welfare.ie</i>	1890 662 244
Money Advice and Budgeting Service	
<i>www.mabs.ie</i>	1890 283 438

