

write on for work

Exploring a web-based approach to integrating literacy, numeracy and ICT as part of career preparation.



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh



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Guidelines for integrating www.writeon.ie in employability courses are available at www.nala.ie/resources

Executive summary

Writeon – personal pathways to work was a National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) - led partnership with Southside Partnership (SSP) and Local Employment Services (LES) that successfully delivered a labour market activation programme. Participants were aged 18-25 and selected from those who might benefit from additional support with basic skills and preparation for employment.

This report outlines the context and experiences of the project and highlights some issues for future programmes. Some of these are structural factors and relate to the policies and practices determined at national level. Others are particular to the culture of organisations and partnerships involved in delivering basic skills activation measures.

The conclusions and recommendations emphasise a literacy perspective and indicate how embedding www.writeon.ie in activation programmes might help meet some of the challenges that learners and providers encounter.

Conclusions and recommendations

Literacy, numeracy and employment policy issues

- ◆ Through the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study, Ireland now has up-to-date information about literacy, numeracy and Information Technology (IT) skills in the adult population. The data indicate that Ireland scores below the European Union (EU) average in literacy, numeracy and IT skills and that the Irish workforce is disadvantaged by lack of investment in this regard. Both the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) suggest that using www.writeon.ie could make an important contribution to resolving national skills challenges and strengthening the economic resource base.¹

¹ DES (2013) *Review of Adult Literacy and Community Education Schemes (ALCES) funded Adult Literacy Provision* Dublin: DES.

EGFSN Statement on the publication of PIAAC 2012: <http://www.egfsn.ie/newsevents/new/title,11236,en.php>

- ◆ EU policy on education and employment, expressed in the European Union's policy document 'EU2020', links attention to improving basic employability skills to future funding. The NALA website, www.writeon.ie, offers a learning platform that fits with EU goals and funding requirements, and should be integrated into all appropriate learning and work-related programmes.

- ◆ The output-related funding mechanism used in the government's MOMENTUM programme 2013 did not differentiate between those who required relatively little support and those whose needs demanded greater levels of resources. This has the potential to create inequalities in access to activation projects for those with unmet basic skills needs as providers may be reluctant to offer places to those most at risk of not completing a course. The www.writeon.ie website cannot redress this unequal structure although it can make a substantial contribution to addressing skills needs at a very low cost.

- ◆ As part of the ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** project, the SSP and LES offered intensive support with employability and work preparation. Their experiences illustrated the additional resources this element of the work needed. During the recession, there were immense difficulties accessing work experience for participants on the MOMENTUM programme and yet work experience is essential in demonstrating both employability and the ability to move into work. While the issue of developing employer networks is being resolved, the employability modules on www.writeon.ie offer a wider range of learning opportunities and accreditation that will demonstrate skills and virtual experience to potential employers.

Activation programme delivery issues – time

- ◆ As well as additional financial resources, the project showed that those furthest from readiness for work needed more time and smaller groups of learners. In the rush to satisfy statistical targets, the needs of those with the greatest challenges may not be thoroughly addressed. Some participants need intensive activation programmes of 1 or 2 years duration if they are to be enabled to move into the workforce with an appropriate level of skill. A staged approach in 12-week blocks might facilitate this approach and the long-term investment will have a generational impact. The diversity of levels and topics available on www.writeon.ie will provide a useful learning tool in such a blended learning situation.

- ◆ It was suggested that a longer lead-in time is needed for activation programmes with extremely disadvantaged people. Where someone is unclear about their needs and wishes in terms of work and learning, a 2-week induction programme would serve many purposes, such as:
 - helping someone to settle in and develop a positive, planned approach to learning and work;
 - offering advice, guidance and counselling where needed to help someone get on track;
 - teaching someone with little or no information technology (IT) skills how to use www.writeon.ie; and
 - establishing trusting relationships that would support successful engagement with employability and employment experience.

Activation programme delivery issues – initial assessment

There is a need for careful initial assessment and referral of those with literacy and numeracy issues and those who have been away from learning and work for a long time. Where possible, literacy expertise should be available in the early stages of selection for activation.

All staff need to complete the literacy awareness training provided by NALA and be clear about the www.writeon.ie learning menu and Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI) levels of accreditation and what these entail. All those involved in activation delivery need to have a high level of literacy awareness and know the role that www.writeon.ie can play in meeting learner goals.

- ◆ The Skills Checker and award assessment tools on www.writeon.ie may be used as part of a blended induction programme to accurately assess learning and employability needs and realistic personal progression planning.
- ◆ The experience of **Writeon – personal pathways to work** indicated that numeracy may be a barrier to the completion of major awards where numeracy is a core requirement. The substantial resources needed for adult numeracy learning needs to be recognised and the associated requirement for suitably qualified tutors taken into account.

Activation programme delivery issues – approaches to learning

- ◆ Adults who have negative experiences of formal learning institutions have found the privacy and autonomy afforded by www.writeon.ie allows them to successfully fill gaps in their skills. This may be through independent learning online, with telephone tutor support, or in a blended learning situation face-to-face with a tutor and a peer learner group. Men in particular liked the anonymity of distance learning with a telephone tutor supporting their work on www.writeon.ie. It is important that people are made aware that this service is available, meets employability needs and is free.
- ◆ Learning through www.writeon.ie has been shown to accelerate progress in reading, writing, calculating, IT and work-related skills. Through online learning, people are constantly practising and extending their IT skills. This is important for the society and workplace of the future. Those working in activation programmes

need to be proficient in supporting online learning and need to receive training appropriate to their role.

- ◆ Learning online through www.writeon.ie prepares people for a future that will allow them to extend their skills through an increasing range of online learning services. Many of these courses are free and promote a form of learning equality that is to be welcomed.

Activation programme delivery issues - accreditation

- ◆ The accreditation facility built into www.writeon.ie helped to exceed the accreditation targets on the project. Evidence suggests that adult learners are highly motivated to seek accreditation using www.writeon.ie and that this is an effective tool, particularly in a blended learning environment. Administration and related costs are reduced and certificates are given to the individual organisations where learners are located.
- ◆ Most participants on the **Writeon – personal pathways to work** project used the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) facility on www.writeon.ie to gain accreditation for their skills. This suggests that www.writeon.ie may be of great benefit to those who have skills and experience but lack formal schooling and qualifications. This also contributes to achieving national and EU skills targets.

Staff development

- ◆ Staff working on activation programmes should complete literacy awareness training. Where appropriate, this should include becoming familiar with www.writeon.ie and the integration of literacy, numeracy and information technology with other aspects of employability.

- ◆ Staff training should ensure that tutors have adequate preparation in online basic skills training and in the shifting relationship this involves between learner and tutor. The www.writeon.ie website has a bank of multimedia resources for many contexts, including preparation for work, that are freely available to tutors and learners.

Multi-agency partnerships

- ◆ A multi-agency partnership approach proved successful in this project. It allowed skills and expertise to be shared in a cooperative way motivated by commitment to those disadvantaged both in learning and work. Such partnerships need to be resourced if they are to develop good working communications structures. The blended learning collaboration on this project brought together organisations that had worked together before and this history may in part explain the success of the working relationship. A reflection on what makes for good working partnerships of this kind might be useful to others working in this way in the future.

All of the issues above arose from the data gathered from project staff, participants and those with an interest in activation programmes for those with literacy and numeracy difficulties. The context and detail of the *Writeon – personal pathways to work* project are outlined in the following parts of this report.

Introduction

Improving access to really useful literacy programmes and increasing employment, especially for those who have not reaped the full benefits of education, is the motivation for this report. Long-term unemployment affects individuals, households and entire disadvantaged communities and it has been a significant concern since the economic crisis radically reduced labour market opportunities. Ireland has one of the highest rates of jobless households in Europe (23% compared to an 11% average) and this emphasises the urgency of prioritising robust and creative responses to the complex and diverse needs of unemployed adults, especially those with unmet literacy needs².

What follows here will outline the ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** project undertaken in 2013 by NALA in partnership with the Southside Partnership (SSP). This account serves as an evidential base upon which NALA, in consultation with other stakeholders, has developed a set of guidelines for the effective integration of literacy, numeracy and other employment skills into future labour market activation programmes.

This is not an evaluation of the initiative³ but rather an illustrative account intended to clarify the contexts in which employment and basic skills learning may jointly be facilitated for the benefit of individuals, communities and Irish society in general. Nor is this a critique of labour market activation programmes in general but rather an attempt to learn lessons from ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** and to share them so that those who want to improve their skills can do so in a supportive environment.

A substantial consideration here is the role of distance learning and NALA's www.writeon.ie online learning platform to provide a flexible, accessible and cost-effective means of learning and accreditation for activation initiatives.

Before presenting the guidelines, the report will briefly explore the thinking behind activation programmes and some of the issues that they raise for policy makers, participants and providers concerned with the whole area of adult literacy and work. The

² National Economic and Social Council (2014) Report 137: *Jobless Households: An Exploration of the Issues* <http://bit.ly/1jNu1uz>

³ An evaluation of the entire MOMENTUM initiative, that will include *Writeon – personal pathways to work*, was commissioned by SOLAS, from Exodea Consulting, and is forthcoming.

experiences of *Writeon – personal pathways to work* will illustrate these issues in practice and give an insight into the reasoning behind different elements of the proposed guidelines.

The process

The content of this report and the emerging guidelines have resulted from a review of relevant literature and consultation with participants, providers and other interested stakeholders. A list of those consulted and the interview and focus group schedules are presented in Appendix 1 and 2. The guidelines that emerged from a series of interviews and consultations have been refined in discussion with activation programme providers to ensure that they are a close fit for participants' and providers' needs and are as user-friendly as possible. It is envisaged that this process of revisiting, developing and updating the guidelines will be pursued as the education and employment context shifts and changes.

NALA views literacy as a changing, socially-situated concept that is necessary for full inclusion in all aspects of society, including work. Literacy now includes a broad range of language and literacy activities in a wide range of contexts: listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using technology⁴. As with all NALA initiatives, the goal of these guidelines is to extend the reach of the supports and learning opportunities for those with adult literacy and numeracy needs and their providers⁵.

This mission sits comfortably beside the government's two strategies, 'Pathways to Work' first launched in 2012 and the 'Youth Guarantee' for 18-25 year olds announced in 2013. Both strategies combine an approach to improving employability through activation measures that link welfare payments, employment supports and development of skills, including literacy and numeracy.

⁴ NALA (2014) *Raising adult literacy and numeracy levels and working towards a more inclusive society - NALA Strategic Plan 2014-2016*, Dublin: NALA.

⁵ Ibid.

Part 1: The literacy and employment context

Adult literacy and numeracy in Ireland – PIAAC⁶

Levels of literacy and numeracy skills in both the current and future workforce are of ongoing concern. In October 2013, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published the results of a major international survey into literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments (PS-TRE). Twenty-four countries participated in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, 2012 (PIAAC). This now supersedes the data provided by the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which was conducted towards the end of the last century⁷.

The Central Statistics Office carried out the PIAAC survey in Ireland⁸ and gathered data from a representative 6,000 adults aged 16-65 in relation to a range of basic skills. Test results were provided in relation to five levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy with Level 1 being the lowest. There were three levels for problem-solving in technology-rich environments (PS-TRE). Those scoring at or below Level 1 in all three areas surveyed may be assumed to experience difficulty coping with literacy, numeracy and IT-related problems in everyday life, including in the workplace.

The PIAAC study shows that 18% or 1 in 6 Irish people are at or below Level 1 in literacy. These findings place Ireland 17th out of the 24 countries surveyed. In the IALS study, 22% of adults were at or below Level 1 so the PIAAC finding equates to a modest improvement having taken place. Numeracy outcomes in PIAAC placed Ireland in 19th place out of 24 countries with 25% of adults scoring at or below Level 1. Younger people scored more highly than older people. Men and women scored relatively equal in literacy but men outscored women by an average of 12 points in numeracy.

PS-TRE tests also assessed the participants' ability to use IT to complete a number of tasks. The results show that more than 42% of adults in Ireland scored at or below

⁶ Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2012) *PIAAC 2012 Survey Results for Ireland*, Cork: CSO.

⁷ OECD (1998) *International adult literacy survey*, Paris: OECD.

⁸ <http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/education/2012/piaac2012.pdf>

Level 1 in technology-related tasks. Again, younger people scored higher than older respondents and men scored an average of 6 points higher than women.

PIAAC also gathered data about skills used in work and other areas of life. Analysis of the data showed a definite link between levels of literacy and the other skills tested, salary level and security of employment. Those with the lowest level of skills were most likely to have few or no qualifications, to earn less, to be unemployed and to have poorer health.

The Adult Literacy Service that is delivered through Education and Training Boards (ETBs) was comprehensively reviewed in a report published in 2013 by the DES⁹. This study made 32 recommendations for future literacy services including that renewed attention be given to those who are unemployed and whose skills in literacy and numeracy are below Level 3. The survey concluded that intensive courses produce more effective outcomes than a small number of hours a week over an extended period of time. The report also highlighted the potential of integrated literacy in vocational preparation and the role for www.writeon.ie in making literacy, numeracy, digital literacy and other relevant skills for employment available through distance and blended learning options.

Access to distance and blended learning should be integrated into all service delivery and these options should be promoted for all students...¹⁰

NALA suggests that the PIAAC findings should encourage us to think about the changing nature of skills and the evolving demands of the workplace. School-based learning will no longer satisfy the need for 'strong literacy and numeracy skills for life'. Rather, access to lifelong learning in response to shifting language and literacy requirements will be the key to developing a robust, vibrant and inclusive workforce that is able to satisfy the needs and interests of individuals and of the wider society.¹¹

⁹ DES (2013) *Review of Adult Literacy and Community Education Schemes (ALCES) funded Adult Literacy Provision*, Dublin: DES.

¹⁰ Ibid: 88

¹¹ <http://www.nala.ie/1-6-people-has-literacy-difficulties-ireland>

www.writeon.ie

NALA's website offers the possibility for online basic skills learning with the option of accreditation at Levels 2 and 3. Learners may use the online learning facility independently at home, supported by a telephone tutor or as part of a blended learning process that combines face-to-face support and online skills development. A learner may also combine these options to intensify or adapt their learning to their particular life style and level of skills.

Some online learners may use www.writeon.ie as a means of accrediting existing skills through the recognition of prior learning (RPL) process. Those who need to learn new skills may benefit most from using the online tools in tandem with a face-to-face tutor in a blended learning environment. Some may prefer to work and learn independently with a weekly phone call from a tutor who will clarify any issues that have arisen between calls.

Throughout the recent period of recession and scarce employment, an increasing number of adults have used www.writeon.ie to gain recognition for existing, unaccredited skills or to learn new skills. Since 2008, over 16,700 minor awards at Level 2 and 3,700 at Level 3 have been achieved through www.writeon.ie. In the same period, adult learners gained 1,500 major awards at Level 2 and 250 at Level 3 through the website.

In addition to aspects of literacy, numeracy and IT, www.writeon.ie offers work-related skills at Level 3 such as Career Preparation, Health and Safety, and Personal and Interpersonal Skills. QQI major awards include the certificate in General Learning at Level 2 and Level 3, and certificates in Employability Skills and ICT, both at Level 3.

The website also offers a significant service to small community-based providers of adult learning who may struggle to satisfy the stringent quality assurance criteria of the QQI Common Awards System.¹² The demands on providers to have extensive

¹² Stewart, J (2011) 'Extending the assessment of literacy as social practice', *The Adult Learner*, Dublin: Aontas. 41-55

administrative and verification structures and to provide progression routes for learners can mean that accreditation may not be offered to those with greatest need.

It is also clear that community-based providers of adult education are struggling to access the CAS... Adult learners in the Irish education system do not yet have equal access to the option of accreditation for learning at these levels. In 2011, eight years after the NFQ was launched, where a person lives, and which provider a person accesses services from, are still determinant factors in the availability of Level 1 and 2 awards to learners, including adults returning to basic education.¹³

Using www.writeon.ie considerably reduces the administrative costs and demands of building and verifying portfolios for accreditation and, as such, could provide greater access and equality for adult learners. NALA provides this service free of charge for learners. However, this does not mean that organisations involved in blended learning which incorporates the use of www.writeon.ie lose any credit for the number of learners with which they work or their learning outcomes. In a context of output-related funding, www.writeon.ie offers activation programmes an effective and efficient way of reaching and verifying targets and accessing funding.

Users of www.writeon.ie say that working online reduces negative associations with school and eases their way back into learning.¹⁴ There is an added status and in-built privacy in computer-based learning that enables self-directed learning and dispels negativities in both younger and older learners. At a time when IT skills are highly prized in the workforce, technology becomes both a means and an end in terms of filling skills gaps identified by learners. As such, it is key to national and European labour force strategies.

www.writeon.ie and blended learning

As a way of harnessing the diverse learning preferences of a range of people, a combination of an online and face-to-face approach to basic skills has proved most effective for the greatest number of learners.¹⁵ This blended learning allows more

¹³ Ibid:43

¹⁴ Feeley, M and Hegarty, A (2012) *Distance literacy: filling the gaps in a time of recession*, Dublin: NALA.

¹⁵ NALA (2011) *Distance Learning Services: Blended Learning Report*, Dublin: NALA.

choice for learners about the content, timing and pace of progression of learning. It means that those who like the social aspects of learning in a group have access to this dimension. Providers found that those offered a blended approach to basic skills were more easily recruited, engaged and retained than was the case in a traditional literacy model.

A number of influential groups have supported the approach to blended learning and RPL taken by NALA on www.writeon.ie and suggest that it should be used more extensively. The EGFSN report, *Developing RPL*, recommended development of an integrated RPL service at levels 1-3. The report described the NALA process of RPL on www.writeon.ie as 'an effective RPL mechanism', and recommended 'the development of an integrated RPL service to be developed and delivered at levels 1-3...with the input and support of NALA'.¹⁶

In a similar vein, the DES *Review of Adult Literacy and Community Education Schemes (ALCES) funded Adult Literacy Provision*¹⁷ and the DES *Adult Literacy Programme Operational Guidelines for Providers 2013*¹⁸ recommended blended learning should be integrated into adult literacy service delivery through use of www.writeon.ie.

Commenting on the launch of PIAAC 2012, the Chairperson of the EGFSN, Una Halligan, specifically encouraged the use of 'online literacy and numeracy improvement courses available on www.writeon.ie'.¹⁹ As well as the contribution of www.writeon.ie to raising skills levels, in a blended learning context the website has the potential to integrate rehearsal of many of the digital and collaborative aspects of the workplace that can be challenging for the long-term unemployed person.

New approaches to literacy and numeracy have a significant impact on tutors as well as learners. A new relationship between learner and tutor is formed in a blended learning environment. The tutor's role becomes one of facilitation and support of the autonomous learner where sometimes the learner's level of IT skills matches or exceeds that of the

¹⁶ EGFSN (2011:6) *Developing RPL*, Dublin: EGFSN.

¹⁷ DES (2013) *Review of Adult Literacy and Community Education Schemes (ALCES) funded Adult Literacy Provision*, Dublin: DES.

¹⁸ *Adult Literacy Programme Operational Guidelines for Providers 2013* Dublin: DES.

¹⁹ EGFSN Statement on the publication of PIAAC 2012: <http://www.egfsn.ie/newsevents/new/title,11236,en.php>

tutor. At a time when robust literacy, numeracy and digital skills remain high on the skills agenda, blended learning and the use of www.writeon.ie offer a destigmatised learning environment that removes many of the barriers posed by more traditional learning approaches.²⁰

Unemployment and national skills strategy in Ireland

In July 2014, the percentage of jobless people in Ireland fell to 11.5 percent, from 11.6 percent the previous month²¹. It was the lowest number of unemployed people since April 2009 at the outset of the economic crisis. On a seasonally adjusted basis, the number of people recorded on the Live Register was 382,800 in July 2014, a decrease of 3,400 from June (the reduction was 2,600 males and 700 females).

In the year up to July 2014, the number of people aged 25 and over on the Live Register fell by 27,009 (down 7.3 percent) while the number of people aged under 25 decreased by 10,452 (a drop of 14.4 percent). The percentage of people aged under-25 on the Live Register was 15.3 percent in July 2014, down from 16.4 percent a year previously. The total number of long-term unemployed²² people in July 2014 was 188,670.

With scarce opportunities for employment and a desire to boost job creation and attract inward investment, the skills levels of the workforce have come sharply into focus. The National Skills Strategy 2020 has targets for raising labour force qualifications over the period 2005 to 2020. The aim is to reduce the percentage of those in the workforce with qualifications at Levels 1-3 (Junior Certificate or below) from 27 percent to 7 percent. By 2013 there were 210,000 fewer people (15 percent) at this level.²³

This drop in the numbers with lower skills reflects those who have graduated to higher skills levels and those who have left the workforce because of age or other unspecified

²⁰ Hegarty, A and Feeley, M (2011) *Connected! Improving literacy and computer skills through online learning*, Dublin: NALA.

²¹ <http://www.cso.ie/statistics>

²² Unemployed for 12 months or more.

²³ EGFNS (2014) *National Skills Bulletin April 2014*, Dublin: SOLAS.

reasons²⁴. However, for reasons of equity and efficiency, there is no room for complacency as the actual numbers of people with unmet literacy needs remains high and above EU averages. Basic skills demands, including demands for some levels of digital literacy, are constantly increasing across the workforce and there is a need to view the business of improving workplace literacy as a national lifelong learning issue.

The links between national levels of basic skills and economic performance have been well made. The EGFSN welcomed Ireland's improved literacy levels as demonstrated in PIAAC but lamented the poor performance in numeracy and IT and urged that measures be introduced to address obvious skills gaps.

Our improving literacy skills are to be warmly welcomed. However, Ireland needs to build on these improvements and further concentrate on our weaker numeracy skills, which are so vital for employability. Ensuring people with the right skills at every level, including basic skills like literacy, digital literacy and numeracy, are available to enterprise, is critical for economic development and job creation. (Una Halligan, EGFSN)

In particular, the EGFSN emphasises the importance of prioritising adults with low levels of education as the level of skills required even for low-paid jobs continues to rise. Employees with poor basic skills are seen as particularly vulnerable to unemployment and likely to struggle in the future with adapting to changing work practices and new technologies. There is also a proven generational impact of unmet literacy needs and joblessness that means that a long-term vision is needed to produce durable solutions.

European policy on learning and work

In 2010, in the wake of the economic crisis across Europe, the EU launched its strategy for boosting jobs and growth. The goal of fostering a 'job-rich recovery'²⁵ became central to EU and national education and training policy. Known as EU2020, and highlighting the case of young people in particular, the strategy placed significant emphasis on education as a means of preparing and upskilling people to make the EU more productive and competitive in the global marketplace. As well as traditional skills, the need for digital know-how is central to the goals of EU2020, which now form the

²⁴ Ibid: 19

²⁵ *Education and Training within Europe 2020 Strategy*: DGVT Meeting in Ireland 21-22 May 2013, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture_page_2

basis for the education, training and related policies of all member states, including Ireland. Calls to make the links between education and the world of work closer have become stronger across EU policy making structures. Mirroring the goals of **Writeon – personal pathways to work**, the statement from the EU Heads of State meeting in Dublin in March 2013 affirmed:

Education and training systems need to perform better, ensuring that young people are equipped with the right skills and linking the worlds of work and education more effectively.²⁶

Incentives to deliver on this policy have been firmly embedded within the EU structures. Individual member states are now required to report annually on their progress and to refine and adjust their 'country specific recommendations' (CSRs) for improved performance. The ultimate incentives are financial. CSRs are directly linked to EU funding, including the European Social Fund (ESF) through which the MOMENTUM initiative is financed.

EU2020 reinforces the specific EU plans for education and training agreed in the *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020)*, which has been in place since 2009. ET2020 focuses on key competencies for the labour market and emphasises the need for improved literacy, numeracy and ICT skills as well as other social, communication and entrepreneurial capabilities.²⁷

Activation programmes

Active labour market policies (ALMPs) have been a feature of government structures for decades but have come into sharper focus since the recession of 2007-8 when economic growth collapsed and unemployment soared across the EU and beyond. While they differ from country to country, activation programmes all involve different combinations of job-search monitoring, benefit conditionality and referral to programmes designed to boost employability skills and readiness for the workplace.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid: 2

²⁷ Commission of the European Communities (CEC) (2010) *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020)*, Brussels: DGEAC.

²⁸ Martin, J.P. (2014) *Activation and active labour market policies in OECD countries: stylized facts and evidence of their effectiveness*, Geary WP2014/09 June 2014

The term 'activation' refers to a shift away from passive, unconditional benefit generosity towards a requirement for unemployed people, especially the long-term unemployed, to become actively involved in seeking work or else lose out on state welfare benefits.

Empirical studies referred to by Martin (2014)²⁹ suggest that those countries with the most embedded and rigorous activation policies have weathered the economic crisis better than others, and have had smaller growth in unemployment and an easier transition back to economic stability. Research also indicates that activation policies struggle between the priority they put on immediate 'work first' versus longer-term 'train first' outcomes. There is a danger identified that, to boost statistical outcomes, long-term unemployed people may be shunted into low paid, unsatisfying work rather than being enabled to identify their own goals and realise their ambitions.³⁰

Criticism of Irish activation policies suggests that implementation was weak - although the spending in Ireland on this area was higher than the OECD average when the crisis developed. The structures in relation to all aspects of activation policy are now undergoing significant reform. The national training agency and the national benefits system have been amalgamated into a new 'one-stop-shop' structure called Intreo, managed by the Department of Social Protection (DSP).

Intreo offices act as a single point of contact for all employment services and supports for jobseekers and employers, providing information on benefit entitlements, advice on training options, and assistance in securing employment or employees as required. In this regard, the DSP works closely with SOLAS and ETBs to refer jobseekers for appropriate further education and training (FET). The role of local partnerships and employment services should be recognised also as providing specialised knowledge and relationships that can be harnessed to match the specific needs and interests of employers and jobseekers.

²⁹ [ibid](#)

³⁰ [Ibid.](#)

The proportion of people out of work who were long-term unemployed increased from 30% to 60% between 2007 and 2013. This has placed additional demands on the activation systems and their capacity to cope with such large numbers. The DSP has proposed a new job placement programme, JobPath, which will be delivered by private, non-state providers on an output, performance-related contract basis. JobPath will be aimed at the 'harder-to-help' category of the long-term unemployed as identified by the DSP. These include:

- people who have been on the Live Register for more than 12 months;
- 18-24 year-olds who have been without a job for one year;
- disadvantaged people with the lowest 5 percent PEX assessment scores;³¹ and
- adults over 25 who are about to reach their first year of continuous unemployment.

JobPath contracts were awarded towards the end of 2014, and there is a 6-month set-up period. The programme is expected to be operational towards the middle of 2015. The numbers to be referred by DSP to JobPath have been estimated at 110,000 people each year for a 4-year period.

One factor in the calculation of the PEX score is self-identified literacy and numeracy levels. Those with the lowest 5 percent PEX scores are most challenged to find employment, and JobPath should logically include measures to address these specific skills gaps. Although education and training are not explicitly defined in the JobPath plans, the personal profile above suggests that literacy, numeracy and IT should feature in the individual learning and employment plans of a significant number of those concerned.³²

³¹ PEX is a profiling tool based on an unemployed person's estimated probability of exiting the Live Register. The PEX score is calculated taking into account such factors as: work experience, education, length of time out of work, age, access to transport, and so on. All new claimants are profiled and the plan is to profile all existing claimants in the near future.

³² www.welfare.ie; additional information gathered from a series of projections and responses to Dáil questions: <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail2014012800066>

Under the terms of JobPath, providers may allow people ‘time out’ of their 1-year programme to participate in learning, but this will be viewed as a pause, rather than an integral part of the activation programme. JobPath is intended to supplement and complement the work of DSP/Intreo, LES and jobs clubs. These existing services will deal with those closest to employment while contractors for JobPath will take on the activation of long-term unemployed people with greater challenges in terms of returning to work. It remains to be seen how this will work in practice and the consequences for the recruitment and assessment phase of activation.

JobPath shows influences from the UK Work Programme and from other EU and US initiatives. Some concerns have been expressed that the Irish model may not have the necessary network of providers and that it has not been piloted to test for design and implementation flaws. Furthermore, the programme is based on implementing the threat of cutting benefits if people do not comply effectively in the search for work, but Ireland has shown itself to be reluctant to apply such sanctions.³³

Youth Guarantee

During the worst years of the economic crisis the number of young people in the workforce decreased as a result of a number of factors. Many young people have stayed on longer in education in the hope of increasing their chances of securing work by achieving higher level qualifications. The lower birth rate in the late 1980s and early 1990s had an impact as did the large number of young people who have looked for work outside Ireland. While the youth unemployment rate is falling, predictions suggest that the rate will remain at 21-23 percent until 2016 leaving around 44,000 young adults aged 18 to 25 out of work.³⁴ Those with lower qualifications are proportionately more likely to be without work and to remain so for longer periods of time.

³³ Lowe, S (2014) “JobPath: The proposed Introduction of an Employment Programme in the Republic of Ireland”, London School of Economics and Political Science, mimeo: cited in Martin, J.P. (2014) *Activation and active labour market policies in OECD countries: stylized facts and evidence of their effectiveness*, Geary WP2014/09 June 2014

³⁴ DSP (no date) *Pathways to Work: The implementation of the EU Council Recommendation for a Youth Guarantee, Ireland*. <http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Youth-Guarantee-Implementation-Plan.pdf>

Through a partnership model at national and local level, the DSP will coordinate the Irish 'Youth Guarantee' that promises to:

Ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.³⁵

The initial engagement with an unemployed person of any age determines the activation strategy to be offered. Newly and longer-term unemployed young people with a lower PEX score, indicating a greater distance from work and higher risk of protracted unemployment, will be prioritised in the Irish Youth Guarantee strategy. They will be assessed in their local Intreo office and supported to develop a personal progression plan (PPP). They will be required to sign a Record of Mutual Undertakings agreeing to accept 'reasonable' offers of training, work experience or employment, or lose a portion of their social welfare benefits.

These proposed measures suggest the need for a skilled, sensitive and accurate assessment of basic learning needs and an understanding of the length and complex nature of the learning process. However, in statistically-led measures such as these, there is a tension between the desire to achieve targets and the expense of solving intractable long-term issues such as unmet literacy and numeracy needs.

A recent House of Commons review of the Jobcentre Plus (JCP) programme established in the UK in 2001-2003 found that accurate initial assessment and engagement in appropriate learning was of great importance. The review found that the JCP over-stressed the requirements and potential sanctions on claimants to the detriment of completing an accurate, measured assessment of needs. This in turn led to longer than necessary periods of unemployment while fundamental issues remained unaddressed. Such costly short-term thinking was against the spirit of activation and ultimately inefficient in terms of economic and social outcomes. The review recommended 'a more thorough and systematic initial face-to-face assessment of

³⁵ Ibid: 5

claimants' barriers to employment to identify the level of employment support they need...'³⁶

The review of the JCP programme also highlighted the need for advisors and providers to remain flexible and, where necessary, to extend the period of pre-employment training, at whatever level, so that courses could be brought to a successful conclusion for individuals with particular needs.

Activation programmes, literacy and numeracy

The link between unmet literacy and numeracy needs and becoming and remaining unemployed has been well established.³⁷ Nevertheless, this has not necessarily meant that educationally disadvantaged young people and adults are prioritised in accessing labour market activation programmes or that there is active recognition of the value of investment in work-related training for those with literacy and numeracy needs. This failure to prioritise the least educationally advantaged cannot be attributed to shortage of resources but is rather a persistent trend across times of economic boom as well as recession.

Towards the end of a period of substantial economic growth in 2008-2009, the European Working Conditions Observatory reported on the situation in Ireland as of July 2008 in relation to the quality of employment of low-qualified workers, and said:

... low qualified workers tend to be lower paid, lower skilled and receive much less training relative to the rest of the workforce. The Government and its agencies, together with the social partners, have had some policy success in addressing the issues facing low qualified workers, but much remains to be done to upskill workers if Ireland is to meet the stated policy goal of becoming a 'knowledge economy'.³⁸

NALA has consistently advocated that those most in need of investment in their skills, whether employed or unemployed, should receive most State support.³⁹ This is an issue

³⁶ House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2014: 3) *The role of Jobcentre Plus in the reformed welfare system*, London: The Stationery Office Ltd.

³⁷ EGFSN (2007) *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*, Forfas.

³⁸ <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/studies/tn0810036s/ie0810039q.htm>

³⁹ NALA (2011) *Providing leadership in adult literacy – Strategic Plan 2011-2013*, Dublin: NALA.

of efficiency in economic terms as well as one of social justice. Nonetheless, until now the robust policy response and necessary resources have not been forthcoming. The *SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019* suggests that action to avoid 'structural unemployment' is now recognised as an urgent priority:

With regard to skills as an insulator from unemployment, the fact that many of those who have become unemployed in recent years have relatively low formal qualifications has raised the fear that long-term unemployment may become an embedded feature of the labour force of many Western economies (structural unemployment). The high economic and social costs associated with such a scenario have added a sense of urgency to the process of skill upgrading of unemployed persons. (FET Strategy 2014-2019, SOLAS, page 5).⁴⁰

This is not an unrewarding policy approach to take. Research carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and NALA has demonstrated that including those with unmet literacy and numeracy needs in labour market activation programmes, even when they are not specifically focused on basic skills, produces three times the average outcomes for other unemployed people.⁴¹ Those with literacy and numeracy issues are shown to benefit from activation programmes and to be more likely to avoid long-term unemployment when included on such programmes. The report provides evidence of the financial as well as the equity returns of investing in those who are furthest away from employment. Read alongside the arguments for integrating literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in education and training programmes, it is clear that activation programmes that address both basic skills and work-related learning needs provide solutions that match both national and EU priorities for economic recovery.

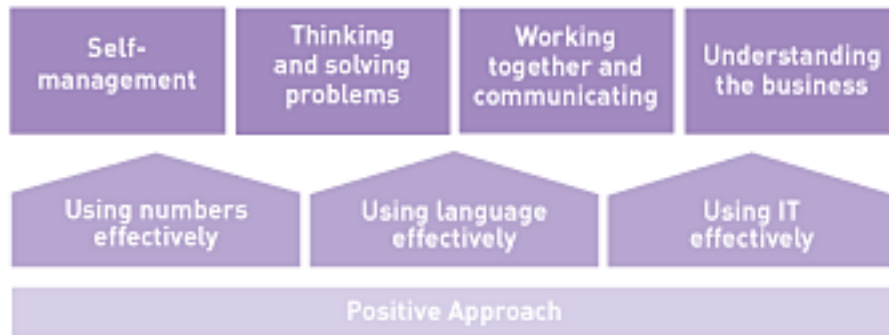
At the same time, there is a need to resist oversimplifying the task of activation for those furthest from employment. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) proposed an interesting, illustrative model for employability that demonstrated the range of functional and other skills needed to enter the workforce. This 'positive approach' alone may be difficult to achieve for participants feeling the pressures of multiple,

⁴⁰ <http://www.solas.ie/docs/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf> page 5

⁴¹ Kelly, E., McGuinness, S., and O'Connell, P. (2012) *Literacy, Numeracy and Activation among the Unemployed*, Dublin: ESRI & NALA.

generational disadvantage. Nevertheless, this is the complex task that tutors on labour market preparatory programmes must tackle and for which they must receive the necessary training.

Figure 1: UKCES Employability Model (2009)⁴²



The point has been made that some of these skills are more nebulous and harder to teach than others. An integrated or 'embedded employability curriculum' is one proposed solution. The suggestion is that basic skills activation programmes integrate opportunities to learn so-called 'soft skills' such as self-management, problem-solving, and personal and interpersonal relationships, with literacy learning. This is both interesting and challenging for tutors.⁴³ At the same time, these are all elements of the www.writeon.ie menu of minor awards and so the website may offer a readymade solution, particularly as part of a blended approach to activation.

MOMENTUM

MOMENTUM - Focus your talent is part of the Government's Action Plan for Jobs which was launched in 2012. It is administered by SOLAS with the expressed goal of ensuring that 'unemployed persons have access to relevant education and training solutions'.⁴⁴ The project received €20 million from the European Social Fund through the Labour Market Education and Training Fund (LMETF). It identified four employment opportunity areas categorized by theme, and provided free training and employment in these areas

⁴² <http://www.ukces.org.uk/pdf/8080-UKCES-Employability%20ChallengeFinal.pdf>

⁴³ Casey, H and Wilkie, M (2010) *It's all about the attitude*, *Reflect Online* Issue 13, London: NRDC

⁴⁴ Action Plan for Jobs: <http://www.djei.ie/publications/2012APJ.pdf> page 31

to 6,500 people who had been unemployed for 12 months or more. The first three themes provided training in areas where skills shortages had been quantified. These were IT-related work, tourism and transport.

The fourth theme, under which ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** received funding, was dedicated to young people under the age of 25. The objective for this group was less market-led and more the generic identification of individual needs for the purpose of facilitating progression off the Live Register and into employment. Whereas accreditation on the first three themes was offered at Levels 5 and 6 on the National Qualification Framework, certification on the fourth theme ranged from Levels 3 to 6.

MOMENTUM processes harnessed interagency skills in recruitment, careers advice and guidance, and skills training through a range of FET providers contracted through SOLAS. FET providers could recruit course participants directly although all the participants had to be approved by DSP. The DSP also recruited some participants. Local expertise in work placement and employment practice was part of the partnership approach to boosting employment prospects for young people in the partnership's locality.

From a providers' perspective, the MOMENTUM initiative introduced the concept of output-related funding (ORF). This emphasises completion and achievement of targets. Critics of this model of education and training say that unless it includes incentives for engaging hard-to-reach people, it can lead providers to de-select or exclude participants with more stubborn educational challenges. This is because these people are less likely to complete programmes and achieve established, inflexible goals within restrictive time frames. In the context of adults with unmet literacy needs for whom the learning trajectory may be longer, this requires careful consideration if it is not to contribute to even greater literacy inequalities than already exist.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Hamilton, M and Kitt, (2011) '*Changing policy discourses: Constructing literacy inequalities*', *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31, 596–605.

The current version of the MOMENTUM programme is part of Ireland's EU Structural and Investment Funds programme (2014-2020) and no longer offers learning opportunities with certification below Level 5. It is important that those interventions below Level 5 that have been removed from MOMENTUM are replaced with similarly resourced high-quality, preparation for work programmes.

Part 2: A review of Writeon – personal pathways to work

Writeon – personal pathways to work was an initiative funded through the Labour Market Education and Training Fund (LMETF). The LMETF formed part of the Government’s 2012 Action Plan for Jobs where the Department of Education and Skills (DES) committed €20 million to fund a range of education and training interventions for up to 6,500 people who were long-term unemployed. Launched in December 2012, the MOMENTUM initiative was administered by FÁS⁴⁶ and funded by the DES through the LMETF (which in turn was financially supported by the European Social Fund).

This project, **Writeon – personal pathways to work**, specifically aimed to provide activation strategies over 36 weeks to 60 long-term unemployed people under the age of 25 in the Dun Laoghaire Rathdown area of South County Dublin. These young people, who were not in employment, education or training (NEETS), were offered the option of individualised, supported opportunities for accredited learning at QQI⁴⁷ Level 3, job preparation, work experience and progression to further training and employment. The project was promoted on social media and the recruitment of participants stressed the flexible, de-schooled nature of distance learning. Furthermore, the role of the DSP social welfare offices in referring eligible young unemployed people to the project was seen as central. Both NALA and SSP had previously partnered with DSP in similar initiatives with some success.⁴⁸

A multi-agency partnership approach was adopted in order to combine a range of relevant provider skills and expertise. NALA’s considerable expertise in the field of adult literacy was matched with SSP’s local expertise and commitment to employment initiatives with those experiencing high levels of disadvantage and exclusion. Working closely with DSP, the Local Employment Service and local employers, **Writeon – personal pathways to work** aimed to fill a gap in mainstream services by making

⁴⁶ The work of FÁS is now incorporated in the remit of SOLAS

⁴⁷ In 2012, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) www.qqi.ie was established as a new integrated agency replacing FETAC, HETAC, NQAI and other accrediting bodies in Ireland

⁴⁸ The Labour Market Activation Fund (LMAF) project in 2010-2011 was a precursor of the current LMETF where NALA recruited 592 people for Level 3 online learning. SSP and SSLES have long experience of working sensitively and successfully with unemployed people and on a range of programmes.

intensive learning and work-related supports available that would ease each individual's path into employment and provide ongoing supports for them in employment. The partnership was consciously exploring the feasibility of a holistic activation model aimed at those with unmet literacy and numeracy needs that might be incorporated into future policy and be replicated in other areas.

The specific objectives of the project⁴⁹ were to provide customised:

- learning and employability needs assessment;
- individual learning plans;
- supported programmes with a choice of three Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 3 Major awards;
- job preparation skills, work experience and progression plans; and
- employment opportunities and ongoing support in those jobs.

The project plan envisaged that each participant would have access to consistent advice and guidance from a jobs coach and a distance learning tutor and that supports would be matched to each participant's assessed and evolving needs.

As a local initiative it was hoped to garner the support of local agencies and employers as well as national learning and employment expertise. A partnership approach to delivery, management, review and development of the model was planned with regular and robust data collection, reporting and reflection. As the lead partner, NALA had a proven track record of expertise in management and accountability for innovative projects.

⁴⁹ [LMETF 2012 Project proposal page 7](#)

Table 1 – Writeon – personal pathways to work: Targets and outcomes

Target area	Proposed outcome	Actual achievement	Outcomes recognised by MOMENTUM
Recruitment and completion	60 participants	66 participants (110%)	60 participants (100%)
Certification at Level 3	45 participants (75%)	46 participants (77%)	46 participants (77%)
Progression to FET	30 participants (50%)	23 participants (38%)	20 participants (33%)
Work placements	54 participants (90%)	44 participants (73%)	40 participants (67%)
Employment	30 Participants (50%)	10 participants (17%)	5 participants (8%)

The project in practice – recruitment and assessment

Recruitment for the project was successful in terms of numeric targets but problematic in terms of accuracy in precisely identifying the intended client group in educational terms. Initially, the referral of prospective participants was slower than planned with one area sending through very few participants. This was eventually resolved by extending the project catchment area beyond the area boundaries originally envisaged. Additionally, the initial sifting by the DSP of those for interview was less accurately matched to the intended participant profile than it might have been.

There was both an educational and employment element to the desired candidates. In terms of long-term unemployment, the participants were well recruited. Although the cohort was relatively young, aged between 18 and 25, the average duration of unemployment was already 3.6 years. All had been jobless for at least 1 year and a small number for as many as 6 or 7 years. The majority (53) had been out of work for between 2 and 5 years. Most participants had little or no work experience and the combination of these factors indicated a substantial need for training that dealt with

preparation for work. This was confirmed in a reading of the project reviews and evaluations and discussions with providers.

At the recruitment stage, the educational dimension of the project was less clearly dealt with and this undoubtedly made aspects of programme delivery more problematic. Learning targets were set at QQI Level 3 but 32 of those recruited already had achieved Leaving Certificate or Leaving Cert Applied which are at QQI Level 5 and Level 4 respectively.

Despite this, some participants saw immense value in brushing up and filling gaps in their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, and accrediting them through digital and distance learning. This allowed them to improve their IT skills and demonstrate or develop independent learning ability. Others were more defensive, unmotivated and unclear as to why they should participate in learning at a level below that which they had already achieved. In fact, the Junior and Leaving Certificate qualifications are closer to the General Learning awards on www.writeon.ie. Those who completed the Employability and IT awards found useful ways to extend their skills and acquired valuable work-related qualifications.

Referring adults to the most appropriate learning provision is a skilled and important task. Those who are responsible for this early stage of the activation process need to be aware of complex literacy, numeracy and IT issues. NALA has considerable expertise in providing literacy awareness training in a range of settings and all frontline DSP staff and their managers should have access to this training.

The www.writeon.ie website has an accurate and efficient online Skills Checker and an individual assessment tool at the beginning of each learning category. In a supportive environment, these online tools might offer a resolution to the challenge of accurate initial assessment, learning plan preparation and motivation. Experience in both the project and the wider literacy field suggests that for many unconfident learners this is best done in a blended learning situation where literacy expertise is available.

The lead-in time for recruitment, assessment and the associated administrative demands led partners to suggest that greater efficiency would be achieved with a more

generous set-up period. Some suggested a short orientation or induction programme that would allow a long-term unemployed adult to understand the multiple challenges of preparing for the world of work. During such a pre-activation programme, www.writeon.ie could be introduced and the learner could become familiar with the opportunities it presents for learning independently, with telephone tutor support or in a group with other learners and a face-to-face tutor.

The project in practice – number of learners

Almost all stakeholder evaluations suggest that 60 participants with a wide range of learning and employability issues were too demanding for the allotted number of staff and the time available. Partners supplemented the team with additional resources from within their own organisations in order to achieve targets and satisfy the needs of participants. However, in a mainstreamed programme this would not be viable. The point was also repeatedly made that allocating the same monetary allowance for activation of unemployed people, irrespective of the investment needed to achieve employability, was unrealistic and unfair to providers faced with clients who had complicated and deep-rooted barriers to employment.

While many recruits welcomed the opportunity to receive individualised support with learning and the job search programme, others were difficult to engage and sustain on the programme. Ultimately, activation programmes use the threat or reality of reduced benefits to ensure compliance but this may not always be a just response. There is a need for greater recognition of the level of disengagement that some families have experienced over generations and the lack of familiarity they have with all aspects of the culture of earning and work. A longer period of induction is needed for some to develop an understanding of their worth and talents and to become motivated to pursue a path of learning and personal development as an initial step towards employment.

Although Level 2 awards were not recognised by MOMENTUM in the outcomes of this project, 14 participants achieved 76 Level 2 awards using www.writeon.ie. This included 6 major awards and suggests that those most distant from the world of learning and

work would benefit from learning opportunities presented through an online platform. A 2-year intensive activation programme for the longer-term unemployed adult with substantial learning needs was seen as a more realistic timeframe in which to overcome the substantial barriers to learning and work that some experience.

The ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** 36-week programme proved challenging for those with greatest needs for whom Level 3 was too ambitious a starting point. Initially, a blended approach to Level 2 on www.writeon.ie may offer a platform for this process combined with group work on the range of personal and interpersonal aspects of learning and employability. Learners could then progress to Level 3 when they are ready. Because of the complexities of gauging an adult learner's needs, a staged approach to delivery, in 12-week blocks for example, would allow recruitment and progression on an ongoing basis. This would allow for diverse needs to be accommodated and would support those who need to increase their self-esteem at a more measured pace.

The project in practice – employment

Southside Partnership and SSP LES brought vast experience of working with long-term unemployed people to the project partnership. They were flexible and responsive to the needs of those recruited to the project. They also provided additional small group and face-to-face supports. Those who needed literacy tuition and educational guidance were encouraged to take up those options in friendly, relaxed, local learning hubs. All participants had access to one-to-one job coaching, CV and interview preparation. Specialised job clubs were offered on a range of topics and many learners were motivated to participate. Local links developed through TÚS, community employment schemes and jobs clubs gave a level of understanding of the client group and locality that was essential.

By far the most challenging aspects of ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** were those related to work placement and employment opportunities. In the wider climate of recession, the project's employment mentor and other partnership members invested massively for small return in locating openings for work experience and employment.

More highly qualified people were competing with long-term unemployed project participants for scarce work openings and this placed the project participants at a disadvantage.

The period of work placement also coincided with the summer vacation when many employers had already committed to provide holiday work for students. Many employers were unresponsive to requests for support with work placements and some failed to deliver on commitments. The project partners with expertise in the area of employment preparation found that there were gaps in their directory of supportive employers. This situation has since been strengthened and the employment climate is improving but for ***Writeon – personal pathways to work***, conditions could not have been more difficult.

Even though they were not recognised by MOMENTUM programme procedures, NALA and the LES found that internships and supported job schemes such as JobsBridge were very appropriate outcomes for the long-term unemployed with no or low qualifications, or limited work experience.

Another issue not recognised by MOMENTUM procedures was the significant impact that the quality of their relationships with the LES had on participants. These relationships helped to restore participants' confidence and reduce their negative perceptions of those in authority. This is a crucial step in employability and the LES role was pivotal in this regard. The SSP LES has a model of mentoring in activation programmes that has shown quantifiable results in high completion rates (80-100%), accreditation achievement and attitudes to work experience.

The experience of the programme suggests that a group-work approach might be needed with some targeting within the group of those with more specific needs. Such group work is a sensitive task and as is the case throughout this area of work, there is a need for highly-skilled and professional personnel. Partnership members again suggested an intensive induction stage for those most unready for work. Here, participants would be able to get to grips with what becoming more employable entailed.

The project revealed that some long-term unemployed people were unfamiliar with a work culture and the routine and rigour that it demanded. For those with a generational legacy of unemployment and disadvantage, a period of adaptation is needed to become accustomed to all the elements of finding and committing to fulfilling employment.

At Level 3, www.writeon.ie offers the opportunity to explore some aspects of employability through online awards such as Career Preparation, Health and Safety Awareness, Personal Effectiveness, Personal and Interpersonal Skills, and Self Advocacy. As part of a blended group approach to activation, these and other online options might allow for diverse paces of work preparation to coexist within a group while at the same time integrating opportunities for digital learning and accreditation.

More time and support was needed for those who had little awareness of how to meet employers' most basic expectations in terms of appearance, punctuality, reliability and general demeanour. Those who lack experience of the culture of work need intensive preparation that takes full account of the complex and extensive nature of their disadvantage. Importantly, they need to receive that support from those, such as SSP LES, who respect them and recognise the structural nature of their inequality, and who have the time and skill to make a difference.

The project in practice – distance learning and accreditation

The original vision for the *Writeon – personal pathways to work* project was one where literacy, numeracy and IT skills' needs would be largely met using NALA's online learning and accreditation facility, www.writeon.ie, at Level 3. The outcome of the recruitment and selection process meant that some learners had skills gaps and needs at Level 2 while others were already qualified at Levels 4 and 5. Those with expertise in distance literacy learning suggested that staff supporting literacy development should be involved earlier in the selection process to ensure that learners are better matched to the programmes on offer. Alternatively, learners' diverse skills profiles need to be recognised in the identification of training programmes at a fixed level.

Learning online does not suit everyone and many choose to attend face-to-face tuition through the ETB Adult Literacy Service. Those who choose a distance learning option

have usually made that selection from a full range of options offered to them when they initially made contact with NALA⁵⁰. This is something they have done voluntarily because they are motivated to engage in adult learning for personal, family and work-related reasons.

Activation programmes involve an element of obligation and ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** introduced a new learner group to NALA: those who had not freely selected distance learning and some of whom were unmotivated and uncertain about what distance learning involved in terms of commitment and process. Initially, telephone tutors had difficulty contacting some of those who registered online. For this group, the option of blended learning, face-to-face with a literacy tutor, proved more popular than a purely distance learning approach. It was suggested that clearer information at the outset and an introduction to distance learning during an induction programme might allow people to make more informed choices about their preferred mode of learning.

Despite this, the project learning and accreditation targets were surpassed and there was a very high level of satisfaction with www.writeon.ie as a core ingredient in this activation project. The team reported that people were encouraged and boosted by their achievements and, for many, online learning introduced a whole new world of independent learning.

Those with skills above Level 3 used the website to refresh their skills, to fill gaps in their skills and knowledge, and to become familiar with online learning as a new accomplishment. Others who had unaccredited skills used the awards as a means of gaining recognition for previous learning. This is possible through completing the initial assessment with a minimum score of 90%, completing other evidence requirements for the award in question and gaining 100% in the summative or final assessment. Clearly, the RPL aspect of www.writeon.ie offers a means of gaining accreditation for previously unmarked skills that fits in with the activation process.⁵¹

⁵⁰ The NALA freephone number is 1800 20 20 65

⁵¹ EGFSN (2011:6) *Developing RPL*, Dublin: EGFSN.

DES (2013) *Review of Adult Literacy and Community Education Schemes (ALCES) funded Adult Literacy Provision*, Dublin: DES.

The Level 3 menu on www.writeon.ie has 14 awards that can be completed singly or combined to achieve 60 credits. This will give one of three major awards including one in Employability Skills. Table 2 below shows the numbers completing each award and the percentage that used the RPL route to accredit their skills.

In all, **Writeon - Personal pathways to work** recruited 43 young men (72%) and 17 young women (28%). Of these, 46 people completed 190 Level 3 awards. This included 11 major awards achieved by 8 men and 3 women. Learners used both distance and blended approaches to learning. A higher proportion of men than women preferred distance learning options. This affirms previous NALA research findings and shows the potential for distance learning to engage those reluctant to join in group learning.⁵²

Table 2. Writeon – personal pathways to work. Number of awards by area of learning

Awards	Achieved	Achieved by RPL	% of awards by RPL
Maths	14	3	21%
Application of Numbers	2	2	100%
Functional Maths	3	0	0%
Managing Personal Finances	7	4	57%
Communications	23	17	74%
Personal and Interpersonal Skills	21	13	62%
Personal Effectiveness	31	9	29%
Self Advocacy	16	12	75%
Event Participation	13	8	62%
Computer Literacy	21	14	67%
Digital Media	11	4	36%
Internet Skills	11	4	36%
Career Preparation	10	7	70%
Health and Safety Awareness	7	5	71%
Total	190	102	Average 54%

The data gathered about the use of www.writeon.ie and the accreditation process suggest that numeracy might have been a barrier for some in completing major awards

⁵² Hegarty, A and M. Feeley (2010) *NALA Distance Learning Services: Providing effective steppingstones for adult literacy learners*, Dublin: NALA.

where maths is a core requirement. This merits a greater focus on numeracy tuition and supports for maths in www.writeon.ie in future activation strategies. This project suggested that difficulty with maths may be a stumbling block to accreditation for those with strong skills in other areas. This and the evidence from PIAAC suggest a need to give additional attention to resourcing numeracy learning in the adult population.

Writeon – personal pathways to work successfully introduced learners to the concept and practice of lifelong learning and, in particular, to the area of digital literacy that is core to ET2020. An integrated online approach to employability, supporting ‘functional’ basic skills, soft skills and the positive approach needed to succeed are each evident in the opportunities presented by www.writeon.ie. Already, the model developed in ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** has been successfully replicated by SSP LES with a specially recruited women’s group. The partnership is now delivering a second Women into Lifelong Learning (WILL) activation programme incorporating www.writeon.ie into a blended learning approach.

Partnership

The ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** project was an example of good practice in multi-agency cooperation. This partnership approach was a significant factor in the success of the project and should not be overlooked. NALA and the SSP and LES established collaborative steering and advisory groups, pooled resources and skills, and worked with determination to deliver on the goals of the project. When difficulties arose, the partnership showed stamina and creativity in resolving them proactively and demonstrated that interagency approaches are an effective model for responding to local challenges.

All those who shared their experiences of working closely with long-term unemployed people emphasised the need for others to recognise the time, skill and other resources needed to repair long-term damage to self-esteem and overcome educational disadvantage. There is no doubt that www.writeon.ie had an important contribution to make to this process and may play an increased role in future such endeavours.

Conclusions

The ***Writeon – personal pathways to work*** project was challenging in that it confronted some of the most intractable issues in the labour market activation environment. Those who become long-term unemployed and who have unmet literacy needs are at risk of remaining jobless for protracted periods of time. This is demoralising for individuals and communities and wasteful for the economy that is deprived of their skills and labour. While the root problems lie in unequal social structures that activation programmes alone cannot redress, this project has produced learning and recommendations that can help improve the current provision and make it more effective and user-friendly. The findings suggest that other programmes where people have literacy, numeracy and ICT needs would also benefit from using www.writeon.ie in a blended learning environment. This may include the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), the Local Training Initiatives (LTIs) and LES employability partnerships at Level 3 where progression to Level 4 could be incorporated.

The NALA online learning facility – www.writeon.ie – has a pivotal role to play throughout the activation process and particularly when used as part of a blended learning activation programme. The website supports:

- accurate assessment of reading and other skills;
- engagement of previously reluctant adult learners;
- digital learning and accreditation of skills;
- literacy and numeracy learning and accreditation at Levels 2 and 3;
- employability preparation and accreditation of core skills for work; and
- automated accreditation and record keeping systems.

NALA makes this unique service freely available, trains personnel and assumes responsibility for maintenance and development of the website. Individual learners, ETBs, LES and others retain control and ownership of how the system is used in the learning process and reap the many benefits and outcomes. A partnership approach to activation, based around the diverse dimensions of www.writeon.ie, merits closer scrutiny as a means to achieving individual, national and EU learning and work preparation goals.

List of abbreviations and acronyms

ALMP	Active Labour Market Policies
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CSR	Country Specific Recommendations
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DSP	Department of Social Protection
EGFSN	Expert Group on Future Skills Needs
ESF	European Social Fund
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ET2020	Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training
ETB	Education and Training Boards
EU	European Union
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IT	Information Technology
JCP	Jobcentre Plus
LES	Local Employment Services
LMETF	Labour Market Education and Training Fund
LTI	Local Training Initiatives
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NEETS	Not in Employment, Education or Training

OECD	Organisation for Economic and Co-Operation Development
ORF	Output-Related Funding
PEX	Probability of Exiting the Live Register
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PPP	Personal Progression Plan
PS-TRE	Problem-Solving in Technology-Rich Environments
QQI	Quality Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SSP LES	Southside Partnership Local Employment Services
SSP	Southside Partnership
UKCES	United Kingdom Commission for Employability and Skills
WILL	Women into Lifelong Learning

Glossary of terms

Term	Meaning
Accreditation	Accreditation is the formal recognition of what a student has learned. In Ireland, accreditation is usually linked to the National Framework of Qualifications
Activation	Refers to the public sector's work with jobseekers to help to support them get back into employment
Adult Literacy Service	A learning service run by the Education and Training Boards where you can talk to someone about a literacy or numeracy issue, be assessed and join a literacy or numeracy course or group. There are 16 Education and Training Boards in Ireland
Blended learning	This refers to a mixing of different teaching and learning modes or techniques. For example, a blended learning approach can combine face-to-face tuition with computer-based learning
Back To Education Initiative (BTEI)	This initiative provides part-time further education courses for anyone who has left full-time education. The initiative prioritises those with a Junior Certificate or someone with no qualifications
Community Training Centres (CTCs)	CTCs are organisations in communities that look after the training and employment needs of early school leavers, especially those aged between 16 and 21
Continuous Professional Development (CPD)	This is the way employees maintain or improve the knowledge, skills and personal qualities they need in their professional lives
Distance learning	Distance Learning occurs when learners and tutors are separated by space and / or time. For example, a student can follow an online course from their home while their tutor is in another location. NALA has a distance learning service (www.writeon.ie)
Employability	Refers to a person's readiness for work
Employability programmes	Refer to training or educational courses and supports designed to improve a person's readiness for employment and work
Employability skills	Refer to the range of skills you need to get a job. They include literacy, numeracy, ICT and personal development competences
Initial Assessment	The process for identifying learner needs, strengths, goals and barriers, finding a starting point for tuition, and for

	developing learning programmes
Intreo	Intreo is a public service. Intreo offices provide information for employment and income supports. You can get help if you are looking for a job, information on vacancies and income support all in the one place
Local Training Initiatives	These are initiatives that provide full-time work experience and training. They are run by local development companies, local employment services and community groups
Multi-agency partnership	This is where different organisations agree to share skills and expertise to achieve agreed objectives
Multi-level group	Refers to learners in a group with different needs, strengths and levels
Numeracy	A skill that involves the competent use of everyday mathematical skills and the confidence to manage the mathematical demands of real-life situations
Personal Progression Plan	A plan agreed by the Department of Social Protection and a jobseeker to prepare the jobseeker to find employment
Recognition of prior learning (RPL)	A process used to evaluate skills and knowledge acquired outside the classroom to recognise competence against a given standard or award
Skills Checker	This refers to a tool on www.writeon.ie developed by NALA. By answering a series of questions about their skills, learners can get feedback that identifies specific strengths and weaknesses and can inform learning plans
Stakeholder	A person or group with an interest (a stake) in the actions or policies of an organisation. A stakeholder may affect the actions or policies or be affected by them
Summative Assessment	Summative assessment is done at the end of a period of teaching and learning. It looks at how well learning objectives have been achieved. It also confirms whether learners' work meets standards for certification
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme	The Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) provides a range of courses to meet the education and training needs of unemployed people over 21 years of age
www.writeon.ie	An interactive learning website developed by NALA that provides assessment, learning programmes and supports, including the option of certification at Levels 2 and 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications

Appendix 1: People consulted

People consulted in the review of **Writeon – personal pathways to work** and the preparation of guidelines for using www.writeon.ie in activation programmes

John Stewart – NALA National Adult Literacy Coordinator

Fiona Burke – Manager, Southside Partnership (SSP) Local Employment Service

Cormac Shaw – CEO, Southside Partnership

Helen Ryan – NALA Policy Officer

Tommy McLoughlin – NALA IT Officer

Bridget Brownen – NALA Distance Learning Tutor

Joan Butler – NALA Distance Learning Tutor Coordinator

Tom O'Mara – NALA Distance Learning Coordinator

Blathnaid Ni Chinneide – NALA Integrating Literacy Coordinator

Inez Bailey – NALA Director

Five participants on the **Writeon – personal pathways to work** project

Appendix 2 - Semi-structured interview questionnaire

Review of Writeon - Personal Pathways to Employment

1. In what capacity were you involved in the organisation/delivery/participation in basic skills in the context of this activation programme?
2. What were your general impressions of the project?
3. What worked well in terms of integrating literacy/numeracy/IT into an activation initiative? What emerged as essential elements of such a programme?
4. What did not work?
5. What was missing?
6. As a result of your experiences what would you see as essential learning/advice/guidelines for staff in labour market activation processes/programmes?
 - ✓ Recruitment
 - ✓ Assessment
 - ✓ Introduction to www.writeon.ie
 - ✓ Delivery and support
 - ✓ Review and progression

7. How important was the partnership between NALA, SSP and other stakeholders?
What needs to be carried forward in this regard?

8. Are there any issues around incentives/benefit conditionality for participants in activation programmes involving literacy support?

9. What training requirements emerged for those concerned with introducing literacy/numeracy/IT to participants?

10. Any other comments?

Published by the National Adult Literacy Agency

Sandford Lodge

Sandford Close

Ranelagh

Dublin 6

00 (353) 1 412 7900

www.nala.ie

ISBN: 978-1-907171-22-2

