

Literacy-friendly Further Education and Training

An exploration of the potential for a whole organisation approach
to integrating language and literacy in further education and
training in Ireland

Main Messages

from a report on empirical research completed on behalf of the
National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) by

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Foreword

In January 2009, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) commissioned research on integrating literacy support and development into further education vocational courses at Level 5. We are very grateful to Michael King, Principal of Liberties College, and to the College's staff and students for their invaluable cooperation in this research. We would also like to thank Jacinta Stewart, Chief Executive Officer of City of Dublin VEC, for her cooperation.

The learning from this project will inform NALA's policy development and the various strands of our work to help increase the range of 'literacy-friendly' learning opportunities available to adults. NALA is pleased to publish the final research report from the project, to make the learning more widely available to policymakers, providers and practitioners in further education and training.

We would like to thank Dr Liz McSkeane for her initial exploratory research on our behalf, which helped lay the basis for this project.

Finally, we are grateful to Maggie Feeley and Ann Hegarty for their professionalism and enthusiasm in carrying out this research, and the Liberties College members of the Project Planning and Review Group for their support to the researchers.

The full report is available to download from the NALA website www.nala.ie

Inez Bailey

Director, NALA

December 2009

Acknowledgements

From the research team: Ann Hegarty and Maggie Feeley

We would like to acknowledge the openness and support that we have encountered throughout the work of this research project both from the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and Liberties College of Further Education (FE). The NALA Integrating Literacy Coordinator and the College Project Coordinator have been responsive and efficient in meeting requests for information and in organising interviews and meetings. We fully recognise and appreciate how much this has freed us to focus on the business of data collection and analysis.

The principal, staff and students of the college welcomed us as frequent visitors and despite their own pressures of work and examinations made time to meet with us and share their experience and reflections about language and literacy issues. We have been impressed by the interest and dedication of all staff and their genuine quest for ways to improve the learning experience for all students.

The contribution of the Planning and Review Group (PaRG) has been constructive and welcome. The group's combined skills have steadily steered the course of the work and we appreciate their time and commitment.

A number of individuals and institutions agreed to provide additional interviews and to host visits and these were informative and enriching of the research process. Many thanks to Ann Marie Barr: Belfast Metropolitan College; Professor Mary Hamilton: Lancaster Literacy Research Centre; Fionnaigh Connaughton: Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC); Jacinta Stewart: City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC) and Andrina Wafer: Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

Dr Liz McSkeane carried out the initial phase of the project in April – May 2008 and we are aware that she established a sound basis upon which we have been able to build. Her initial report has been an invaluable reference point and we are grateful for her contribution to the project.

Thanks also to Jerome Finnegan for accurate and timely transcription of tapes and useful comments.

Our objective has been to carry out a methodical and realistic exploration of the potential for a whole organisation approach to language and literacy support and development at FETAC Level 5. We wanted to produce an honest and useful report that offers both immediate and longer-term guidance about making FE more literacy-friendly. Our research conversations have been full of insight for us and we hope that our distillation of that learning is of use to others who share our passion for literacy equality.

AH &MF

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Main messages

This report introduces both theoretical and empirical evidence to support the adoption of a whole organisation approach to integrating literacy support and development across the further education and training sector.

The research that gave rise to this report was conducted by the National Adult Literacy Agency in partnership with Liberties College of Further Education in Dublin, and focused mainly on language and literacy issues in the context of courses at Level 5 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

Why is integrating literacy an issue in further education? Lifelong learning is now an accepted facet of our rapidly changing modern societies and a reality of the globalised economy. Consequently, further education colleges attract young people leaving school and older adults who want to gain vocational qualifications or move on to higher education. In turn, higher levels and fields of education introduce new concepts, language and different writing conventions and these present learning challenges for everyone in adult education. Changes occur at such a pace that we are never finished learning language and literacy. At the same time, research has shown that not everyone leaves compulsory schooling with even their basic language and literacy needs satisfied. This means that it is important to ensure that both basic and new literacy needs are addressed as part of all further education (FE) courses.

Research reviewed for this project shows clearly that where subject teachers are skilled at integrating literacy and where literacy specialists offer additional support then previously unmet literacy needs should not exclude someone from an FE course. Colleges have a complex task in the course recruitment phase, in determining whether students have all the skills needed for a particular course, and literacy is just part of the picture. In order to be fair, selection needs to be based on an in-depth analysis of all

course needs and prospective students allowed to be part of the process of informed decision making.

When literacy becomes a recognised and an integrated feature of the curriculum on FE courses, empirical studies point unequivocally to improved retention rates and higher achievement outcomes. Research worldwide also shows that adults learn literacy most effectively in contexts that are personally meaningful and motivating: for those who are motivated to do a particular further education and training course, those conditions are well-met.

This report situates an empirical study carried out in an Irish FE college in the context of international literature about integrated literacy. A set of guidelines for integrating literacy in a further education and training context emerged from both the literature review and the local study.

Key messages from this research project are set out below:

In order to appropriately carry out its role, the Further Education (FE) sector should be recognised and resourced as a significant first step in an inclusive third level education. The role of FE should include facilitating excellence in language and literacy for all adult learners.

- ✓ In keeping with their broader ethos, organisations should have a clear understanding and definition of literacy if they are to make appropriate provision for FE learners. Language and literacy are already embedded in all aspects of FE and central to the quality of learning provision.
- ✓ Language and literacy is a significant issue for adults in further education and training across many countries. Adopting an integrated approach to language and literacy development has been shown to provide an effective means of simultaneously dealing with literacy, vocational and other learning needs. A whole organisation approach to language and literacy has been most effectively introduced in places where robust national policy and resources are available.

- ✓ There are equity, efficiency and pedagogical arguments for adopting a totally integrated approach to literacy support and development. Adopting an integrated approach has been shown to improve retention and achievement thereby augmenting individual, community and national skills and social and economic wellbeing.
- ✓ FE college strategic plans should include systems and procedures to make the whole organisation literacy-friendly. A cross-college language and literacy group convened by a senior staff member should champion this task. Literacy should be a priority on all agendas.
- ✓ FE staff require appropriate professional development to support them in facilitating language and literacy in their courses. This should be a sectoral development based on the current NUI Maynooth Integrating Literacy course.
- ✓ Literacy specialists should be central to the FE college integrated approach to language and literacy. They will provide a range of support to students and staff and advise in the planning and development of the whole college literacy strategy. Specialist literacy support should be the hub of learning for students and staff and a collective repository for language and literacy resources.
- ✓ College departments and subject specialists should have a clear analysis of the language and literacy elements and practices in their courses and modes of delivery. In this way they can facilitate learning with greater clarity and precision.
- ✓ Colleges should work to give language and literacy a fresh and positive profile with learners. Progress that follows on from a fully integrated approach should be tracked, celebrated and modelled for other education sectors.

