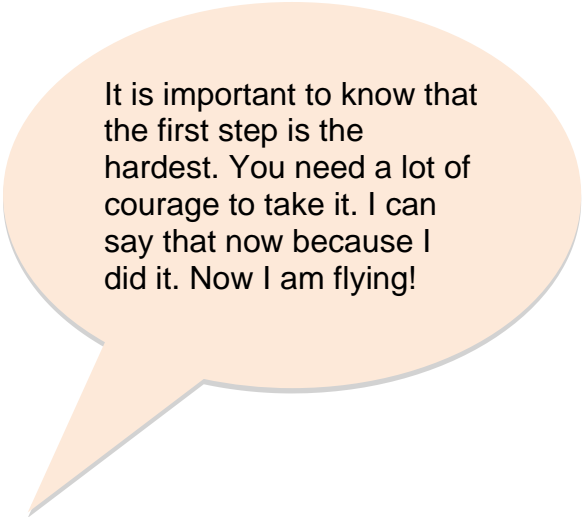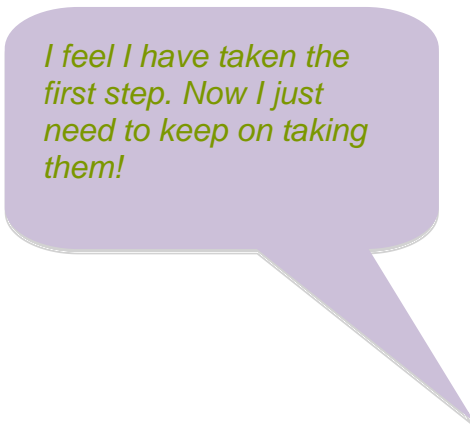# NALA Distance Learning Services

Providing effective stepping-stones for adult literacy learners

April 2010

An evaluative report by NALA consultants:

Ann Hegarty and Maggie Feeley

It is important to know that the first step is the hardest. You need a lot of courage to take it. I can say that now because I did it. Now I am flying!

I feel I have taken the first step. Now I just need to keep on taking them!

1. Acknowledgements

In our data gathering process, the research team recognise the sustained support and interest of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) staff, the Distance Learning Services (DLS) team and DL tutors. We are particularly grateful to Tom O' Mara, Gráinne Fitzpatrick and their colleagues who managed our access to the DL database material and coordinated the initial contacts with telephone research participants and focus groups.

We are literacy practitioners, as well as researchers, and so we appreciate the complexities of forming the relationships of trust that underpin a robust qualitative literacy study. The DL learners, through telephone interviews and focus group participation have honestly and insightfully shared learning experiences with us and it is this rich expertise that will form the backbone of this final report. We acknowledge their generosity in contributing to the evaluation and thereby sustaining and developing the quality of distance literacy provision for future learners.

Ann Hegarty and Maggie Feeley

April 2010

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3. Main messages and recommendations

DL learner profile

For the purpose of this report, Distance Learning (DL) learners are defined as those adults who engaged in learning primarily through the medium of telecommunications in conjunction with home-based DL Tutors. This definition does not include those people who engaged in learning through www.writeon.ie.

In 2009, Distance Learning (DL) learners were aged between 26 - 68 years with the largest number of both men and women aged between 36-54 years. Men outnumbered women (60%:40%) and rural dwellers exceeded those from urban areas (70%:30%). DL appealed to those who worked shifts, who were home-based carers, who had previously tried learning literacy in a group and been dissatisfied and who were unready and unwilling to pursue face-to-face learning options.

The majority of DL learners had left school early and without qualifications. They were motivated to learn for personal development, work-related issues and to help children and grandchildren.

Learner experience of DL

The data show that the majority of those who engaged in DL had a positive experience and their expectations were met or surpassed. Tutors were fulsomely praised and despite the lack of physical presence and visual cues most found it unproblematic to form a good learning relationship.

A small number initially had some lack of clarity about what the DL process entailed or found that the telephone learning process was not for them. Again a small number had unrealistic expectations and tended to drop out of the process early. Anxieties about stigma-related issues prevented some from fully engaging with the process.

Those who were most successful were committed, well organised and had the support of family and friends. They were able to incorporate DL into their lifestyle and to become motivated and autonomous learners.

DL outcomes

DL participants reported progress in all aspects of language and literacy, maths, personal development and self-esteem. Those who used ICTs were enthusiastic about the improvement in their skills and those who completed FETAC accreditation were highly motivated to progress to other forms and levels of learning. Some learners who combined DL with FAS provision were particularly praiseworthy of the benefits of this partnership.

Most striking was the way in which progress in learning literacy was associated with a diminished concern with the literacy stigma. This in turn allowed people to be more relaxed learners with a more positive view of the future, increased options and wider horizons.

DL structures

We found that DLS has evolved robust organisational systems and these have been captured in a number of useful strategic documents and guidelines for learners and tutors. Tutors' conditions of service were responsive to learners needs and they were respected as experienced and professional in their work. A small number of tutors were inconsistent in completing the database that is central to the DL structure and this needs to be resolved.

The Freephone service is the important first point of contact with DL learners and is reported to be helpful and efficient. It would be useful if learners were given a more precise time for a first call from a tutor as the data revealed that an open-ended vacuum produced anxieties for some who were waiting.

While funding for the Distance Learning Service has been made available from DES and DETE on an annual basis, it is difficult to plan for continuity of provision without funding being provided on a multi-annual basis. Currently, the service is unable to operate during the first quarter of every year as funding is not typically funded until the second quarter. This inevitably puts

pressure on the Service to 'catch up' with people who called towards the end of the previous year and represents a potentially missed opportunity to direct adults into second chance education. At the time of writing this report (April) the funding for 2010 provision has yet to be finally confirmed and the waiting list of students grows daily.

Gender issues

Against the trends in other learning, men are more likely than women to choose DL as a means of working on literacy. Men wanted to safeguard their identity and privacy and DL allowed them to do this. Both men and women who worked shifts, part-time and casual or seasonal occupations found the flexibility of DL attractive. This was true also for home-based caregivers in the research sample, the majority of whom were women.

The data suggest that women literacy learners are more relational and men more instrumental. Women were initially more interested in meeting other learners although this openness became more evenly distributed as self-esteem grew and the impact of the literacy stigma diminished.

Location issues

The findings revealed that location is significant in DL for a number of reasons. Those living in isolated rural areas favoured DL as it overrode the inaccessibility of other provision. Poor public transport as well as the financial and time costs of travel made DL an attractive option.

Privacy and anonymity took on added importance in smaller communities and this was true in both urban and rural locations.

Some areas were less suitable for DL because of poor telephone reception and connectivity.

Recommendations

1. **DLS should design and pilot a pre-learning induction programme** that may include the following options as required: Counselling about past traumatic learning experience; a clear outline of all aspects of the DL service; a comprehensive introduction to learning to learn; introduction to using ICT for DL; guidelines on organisational and study skills for DL and the negotiation of an individual learning programme (ILP) rooted in the NALA curriculum guidelines. For some this induction might take place face-to-face in a small group and this group might meet on a six-weekly basis to evaluate progress and decide next steps.

2. Organisational systems should be implemented that ensure **new DL learners have a clear expectation of their start date** with a tutor (or induction programme) so that delays do not become open-ended and cause anxiety.

3. The new DL year provides an opportunity to **clarify contracts with tutors** that include the requirement to update the DL database in an accurate and timely manner. Duration and number of calls should continue to be transparent and learner-led.

4. The benefit of **the successful model of FETAC accreditation on-line should be extended** to others in the youth and adult learning sector who might in turn contribute to resourcing a post for maintaining and developing this service.

5. **NALA should investigate new strategic partnerships with other organisations** for which DL might provide a complementary service that builds learning confidence and encourages literacy progression.

6. NALA should continue to lobby for funding for DLS to be mainstreamed and provided in a manner that allows for strategic planning and implementation on a multi-annual basis.

4. Introduction

For over a decade successive studies have shown the unequal distribution of literacy across the Irish population. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)(Morgan et al, 1997; OEDC, 1997), the national Prison Adult Literacy Survey (PALS)(Morgan and Kett, 2003), international and local school-based studies consistently indicate persistent levels of unmet literacy needs across all age groups in Ireland (PIRLS, 2006; PISA, 2000; 2003; 2006; ERC, 2004; Eivers et al, 2005; NESF, 2009). This quantitative, and parallel qualitative research, points to pervasive educational inequality that is rooted in wider structural injustice and its impacts across generations (Corridan, 2002; Feeley, 2009; Hegarty, 2005; Owens, 2000; Ward, 2002). Unmet literacy needs are a barometer for broader systemic discrimination and ultimately, for literacy to be more universally accessible, it is this underlying inequality that needs to be addressed (Baker et al, 2004; 2009; Feeley 2007; 2009; O'Toole, 2003).

In the face of stubborn social injustices, NALA actively strives to promote greater literacy equality. Nevertheless, 'illiteracy' remains deeply stigmatized and the number of adults with literacy learning needs who participate in some tracked form of literacy learning remains small (just under 9%). This suggests that at a modest estimate, 451,000 Irish adults have still to realise their basic literacy capability[1]. The IALS findings in relation to Ireland did increase state attention and funding to adult literacy and provision grew proportionately. Nevertheless literacy remains relatively poorly funded in comparison to other education sectors and some budgets are still allocated on a year-to-year basis (DES, 2005). Annual rather than multiannual funding creates insecurity, inhibits strategic planning and ultimately has implications for the priority given to the work. Matters of social justice apart, at a time of economic crisis such a response to a substantial national learning deficit raises questions about Ireland's long-term investment in human capital (National Competiveness Council (NCC), 2009).

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[1] Figures drawn from Department of Education and Science returns for 2008

It is widely acknowledged that those with unhappy experiences of school are reluctant to return to education and this means that a range of well-considered adult learning opportunities is needed. For some time now, alongside face-to-face mainstream Vocational Education Committee (VEC) literacy provision, NALA's Distance Learning Service (DLS) has been deployed as an effective and efficient way to attract more adults into learning literacy (NALA, 2009). Distance Literacy aims:

> … To provide high quality free distance learning opportunities targeted at improving literacy without regards to social, economic and cultural backgrounds and taking account of all levels of technical ability. (NALA, 2007a: 6)

Since 2000, innovative steps have been taken using a range of media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and annual evaluation of these approaches has been favourable and progressively developmental (NALA, 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2007b; 2009). NALA has had a telephone support service in place since 2000. However, following successive evaluations, funding changes and technological innovations, the service was overhauled in 2007. This revamped service separated *operator* and *tutor* roles and established home-based tutors as the backbone of a unique free telephone, postal and online tutoring service. For two years now this comprehensive telephone literacy tutor support has become an important aspect of DL and it is on learners' experience of this provision that the present evaluation is focused. The NALA Distance Education Policy (2007-2010) clearly articulates the cumulative achievements and future potential in this approach to adult learning. Other countries are also experimenting with distance learning approaches to adult literacy and there is a great variety of models in use (NALA, 2007a). Evidence clearly suggests that a range of language and literacy practices such as speaking and listening, reading, writing, technology usage and personal development can all be enhanced through DL approaches. It is with a view of charting learners' experience of such innovatory literacy learning practice that this current evaluation is undertaken.

The process and outcome of the evaluation will ensure that the future of DLS in Ireland can be guided by the experience and wishes of learners who have been attracted to DL, as a means of meeting their literacy needs. The research focuses on the learner experience of DL during the year 2009 with specific attention given to gender and geographical factors.

4a. Report outline

This study set out to answer the question: *What recommendations for the future provision of the service are suggested by an evaluation of learners' experience of Distance Learning in 2009?* The research has spanned the period from October 2009 to April 2010 and this report provides a full account of the process of data collection and the context within which that has taken place. In this introductory section we set out the research aims and objectives and we briefly describe the design of the study, the identification of the research sample and the approach taken to data coding and analysis.

Section 5 traces the evolution of NALA DLS based on independent, evidence-based evaluative research carried out on behalf of NALA. This is followed in Section 6 by a short theoretical context piece drawing on the academic literature relating to distance learning. Section 7 is in two parts and presents both the quantitative and detailed qualitative research findings. Finally, Section 8 proposes some evidence-based conclusions and recommendations.

4b. Research aims

NALA has established the specific aims of the 2009 evaluative process as follows:

- ✓ Develop a profile of the DL learners as a means of increasing NALA's knowledge and understanding of the target group;
- ✓ Investigate learners' views and experiences of that engagement from both a gender and geographical perspective;
- ✓ Assess the effectiveness of the DLS in terms of meeting learners'

literacy needs;

✓ Evaluate the impact that engaging with DLS has had on the learners;

✓ Provide evidence-based recommendations for the DLS in order to inform and shape future developments.

4c. Research design and methods

Our approach to this study has been focused on accurately hearing and valuing the voices and experience of a representative sample of learners who have made contact with DLS. We have gathered data from those who continued learning with DL and were satisfied with their learning outcomes and with those who dropped out after three or less sessions. Both groupings offer useful insights for the future design and operation of the service. As well as directly gathering data from learners, others have been consulted for the broader perspective they can bring to the learner experience of DLS. Such *triangulation*[2] is acknowledged as a means of ensuring reliability and 'demonstrating concurrent validity' of qualitative study findings (Cohen et al, 2000: 112; Denzin, 1997).

Our experience of adult literacy work and previous research with literacy learners means we understand the challenges involved in accessing and accurately representing learners' views. We therefore planned to use non-text data-collection tools including telephone and face-to-face interviews and focus groups, where appropriate. Both qualitative and quantitative data has been gathered with a particular focus on gendered and geographical aspects of DLS use.

Our methodological perspective is informed by a commitment to egalitarianism and emancipatory research that is empowering for research participants (Lynch, 1999; Fowler and Mace, 2005; Oliver, 1992). Consequently we have selected participatory, inclusive and respectful

[2] Originally a navigational technique that used a number of markers to accurately pinpoint a destination, in research triangulation indicates the use of a variety of methods and sources to confirm validity and reliability of data.

methods in our gathering (and analysis) of the data and have collaborated with NALA research and distance learning teams in developing the research design. We have drawn on an array of 'literacy aware' research methods and approaches. This has included attention to the pivotal relational aspects of the research and adopting a view of research as praxis (Lather, 1991). Our interaction with learners has been proactive in promoting opportunities for reflection and building learner confidence. We have engaged in reciprocal exchanges with learners during the interview process. Where appropriate we have responded to learners' requests for information about further learning opportunities and compiled a database of those who wish to continue learning with DLS when funding for the incoming year is clarified. We saw our role as not only gathering data but also facilitating the learning needs of participants as they were voiced in the course of the research. This meant that as a direct result of the research conversations a number of people made decisions about further learning that were actioned without delay.

In addition to the primary data, analysis and review of available demographic, documentary and outcome-related evidence has also been undertaken.

The research sample
Between January and October 2009 when this research process began the NALA Freephone service had received a total of 3,100 calls.[3] At the time of beginning this evaluation the total population of Distance Learners – those who had opted for learning with the weekly support of a telephone tutor - was a little in excess of 400 (n=404).

From this group a representative empirical sample of 25% (n=100) was selected for in-depth telephone interview. From this group, in turn, participants in the focus groups were subsequently drawn. As gender and location of learners was a particular focus of the study, the sample was purposively chosen to ensure it proportionally reflected the total DL population in terms of gender and rural or urban location.

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[3] The full breakdown of available statistical data is included at Appendix C

Box 1: Total sample by gender and location

Total population of Distance Learners	(n=404)
Total empirical sample of 25%	(n=100)
Selected male participants 60%	(n=60)
Selected female participants 40%	(n=40)
Selected urban participants 30%	(n=30)
Selected rural participants 70%	(n=70)
Urban female	(n=12)
Urban male	(n=28)
Rural female	(n=18)
Rural male	(n=42)

A conscious relational approach was taken to the whole research process on the understanding that trust and confidence are needed for interviews to reach rich and meaningful data. Initially, NALA DL staff contacted potential participants to ask if they were willing to participate in the research. These preliminary calls also established precisely when it was convenient for calls to be taken. Some respondents were eager to keep their participation in DL private and it was essential that the research team respected this wish in the most practical sense when establishing contact. Attention to the nature of the research relationship produced an overall response rate of 95% (n=95).

A sub-sample of non-participants and early leavers

In the interests of improving the DL service, NALA were keen to gain insights into the experiences of those who did not proceed with their intention of trying DL or who completed only a small number of sessions. With this in mind we

purposively included a subsample drawn from the total population of those who completed three sessions or less (n=68). The subsample of 26% (n=18) was closely representative of the total DL population in terms of gender and location.

The same careful procedure was followed to recruit subsample participants with a response rate of 100% (n=18).

Box 2: Subsample by gender and location

Total population of those completing 3 or <3 sessions (n=68)	
Subsample of 26%	(n=18)
Subsample male participants 66%	(n=12)
Subsample female participants 33%	(n=6)
Subsample urban participants 22%	(n=4)
Subsample rural participants 77%	(n=14)
Urban female	(n=1)
Urban male	(n=3)
Rural female	(n=5)
Rural male	(n=9)

Age of research participants

Participants in the research were aged between 26 and 68 years with a mean age of 46 years. As Boxes 3-5 below demonstrate women in the sample tended to be slightly older than male learners with no significant pattern emerging within or between urban and rural learners.

A more detailed statistical breakdown of the total DL population is available at Appendix A.

Box 3: Age of research sample by gender and location

Age range		Mean age	
Males	26-67years	Males	43 years
Urban males	34-68years	Urban males	47years
Rural males	26-67 years	Rural males	42 years
Females	28-64 years	Females	50years
Urban females	34-61years	Urban females	49years
Rural females	28-64 years	Rural females	51years
Urban learners	34-61 years	Urban learners	48 years
Rural learners	26-67 years	Rural learners	46 years

Box 4: Summary of mean ages by gender

	Urban (m)	Rural (m)	Total (m)
Male	47	42	43
Female	49	51	50

Box 5: Summary of mean ages by location

	Male (m)	Female (m)	Total (m)
Urban	47	49	48
Rural	42	51	46

Data collection

We decided to frame the qualitative and quantitative findings in relation to the DLS within the model of *Processes, Relationships,* and *Outcomes (outlined below)*. This way of initially organising the data signifies a move away from purely result-based measures of effectiveness. The framework specifically acknowledges and values the breadth of skill and commitment invested in the way that innovatory work of this nature is done and the relationships that sustain it. It allows us to map different facets of provision as well as the ultimate performances and destinations.

This evaluative model is particularly appropriate for reviewing new and creative learning projects in that it takes account of the rewarding and challenging, relational and developmental aspects of endeavour that are sometimes ignored when focusing solely on outcomes.

Box 6: The framework for data collection

Distance literacy learning <u>processes</u>

Distance literacy learning <u>relationships</u>

Distance literacy learning <u>outcomes</u>
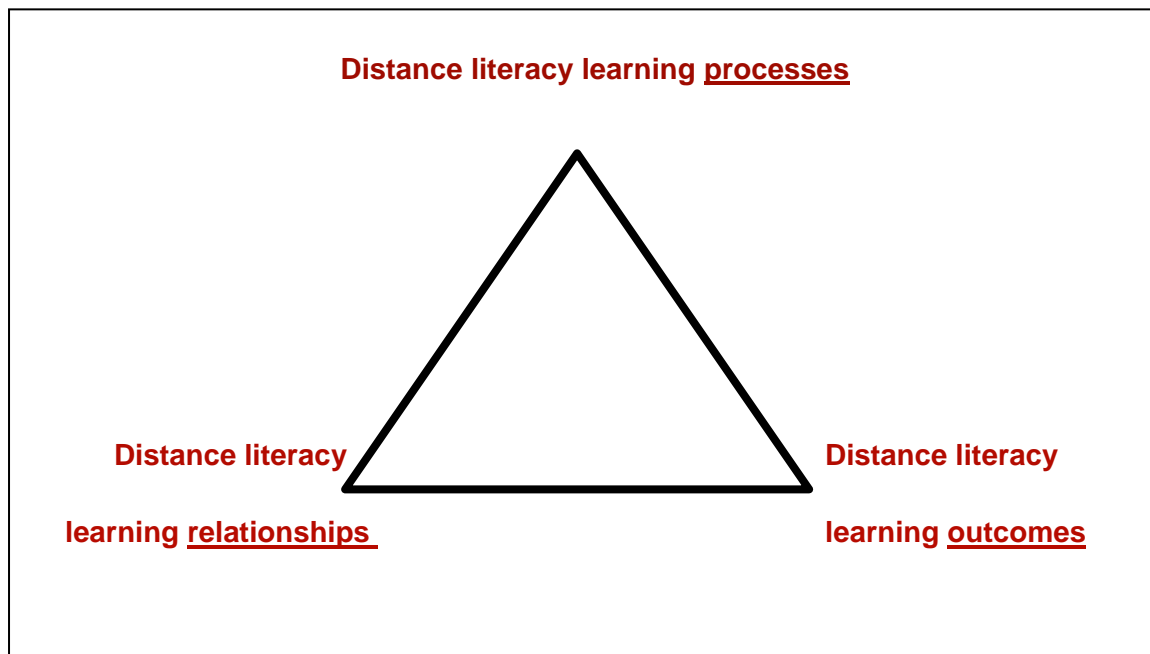
Although portrayed separately here for clarification purposes, in practice the three facets of the framework work in an integrated and interrelated manner. (See Appendix B & C for interview schedules formulated around this model)

- **Processes** *examined how the DLS has been designed, implemented, supported and managed*: how DLS works in practice; how the work has been supported, monitored, developed and evaluated on an ongoing basis.

- **Relationships** *gathered data that* explore the structure and quality of relationships between the various participants, tutors and other stakeholders in the DLS. It examined how learning relationships are built and maintained and how the 'distance' aspect of learning impacts on the affective domain.

- **Outcomes** *reviewed the qualitative and quantitative results of the work for all stakeholders*: completion of the task; achievement of the goals and consequential impacts on individuals.

Between October 2009 and January 2010 a range of fieldwork was undertaken in order to gauge learners' experiences of DL. This included:

- Observation of a DL session and subsequent interview with DL tutor

- In-depth interviews with:
  - DLS coordinator
  - DL tutor coordinator
  - DL tutor support coordinator
  - DL Freephone operator
- Tutor focus group
- Male learners' focus group
- Female learners' focus group
- Plenary session with male and female learners

In-depth, semi-structured telephone interviews took place with the 95 distance learners described above. These research conversations lasted for an average of 40 minutes and in several cases involved follow-up phone calls. The interview schedule is available at Appendix B and the total sample is summarised on a spreadsheet at Appendix D. This details geographic location, gender and other significant administrative and descriptive data.

Our research process was primarily qualitative in that it places learners' voices at the core of the inquiry. Nevertheless we also provide selected quantitative data from the DL database for 2009 (Appendix A) and quantifiable responses from the research interviews are summarised below (Section 7a).

One research participant volunteered a piece of writing about his experiences of DL and this was coded and analysed with the other data. It was agreed to gather data using a range of approaches as outlined above and this initial plan was allowed to evolve as the research process progressed. Additional interviews, observations and focus groups were completed where it emerged that these would enrich the data collection and hence the final insights into learners' experiences of DLS.

By January 2010 all in-depth face-to face interviews with DLS co-ordination, staff and tutors had taken place. A representative sample of 95 DL learners participated in telephone interviews with the researchers and of these 14 agreed to participate in focus groups held on Saturday 23rd January. Of these 14 learners, 6 were women and 8 were men, which mirrors the gender breakdown of the overall DL cohort.

In preparation for the focus groups we made several phone calls to each participant to allay any anxieties they might have about meeting for the first time with other learners. Participants travelled to Dublin from around the country and were enthusiastic about the personal benefits accrued from the experience. Each participant was phoned afterwards to ensure that they were satisfied with their role in the event and everyone received a copy of the notes made on the day. Two focus group participants asked to be given details of a literacy group in their area and this information was also provided.

When all the data was gathered it was coded and analysed using MAXqda2. MAXqda is a computer assisted qualitative data analysis tool (CAQDA) that supports the rigorous storage, coding and retrieval of research data.

4d. Research objectives

In line with the project aims and the research team's ideological stance outlined above our specific methodological research objectives have been to:

- ✓ Establish good relationships with all stakeholders
- ✓ Work collaboratively with the NALA research and distance learning teams
- ✓ Design and pilot research tools for individual and focus group interviews
- ✓ Conduct interviews with NALA DLS manager and staff about their perspectives on the learners' experience of DL
- ✓ Conduct telephone interviews with a goal of developing relationships of trust with learners so that focus group sessions may be fully subscribed
- ✓ Conduct gender-specific focus groups that explore issues raised in telephone interviews in greater depth
- ✓ Complete transcription of interview tapes and data analysis using MAXQDA
- ✓ Present and review draft findings and recommendations with the NALA project managers
- ✓ Make adjustments based on this consultation and present the final report on schedule

Section 5 & 6 below establish the evolution of DLS and give a brief taste of the theoretical backdrop to distance learning before the detailed presentation of the findings in Section 7.

5. The multi-faceted NALA Distance Learning Service (DLS)

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) has a long history of developing and supporting creative and innovative projects to meet the needs of adult literacy learners. NALA's overall aim is to:

> …play a major part in making sure that all adults have the opportunity to develop their literacy and numeracy skills in a just and equal society, where all types of learning are valued. (NALA, 2007c)

It is widely acknowledged that it is not always easy for adults who have unmet literacy needs to take up available learning opportunities. There are practical issues of time, transport and care work that limit access to courses especially for those with work and family pressures and those living in remote areas of the country. There may also be more complex barriers associated with facing back into learning as an adult and the persistent stigma associated with unmet adult literacy needs in contemporary western society (Bailey and Coleman, 1998; Field, 2000; 2002; Goffman, 1963; 1990; NALA, 2007c; Owens, 2000; Hegarty and Feeley, 2009; NALA, 2009c). At the same time, in the recessionary Ireland of 2010 there are an increasing number of recently unemployed adults who need to find attractive and acceptable ways to improve their basic skills so that they can be ready to avail of work opportunities in an economic upturn. For a whole host of reasons – moral, socio-economic, cultural and political - there is an ongoing need to develop a range of literacy learning options to match adult (and youth) preferences and circumstances.

Throughout this decade NALA has had considerable success with providing increased access to literacy and numeracy tuition through distance learning options. The core aspects of the Distance Learning Service (DLS) include:

- ✓ radio and television broadcasts,
- ✓ a Freephone distance learning tutor support team[4],
- ✓ print materials delivered by post to learners' homes and website materials accessed via the internet.

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[4] The Freephone number is 1800 202065

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Motivational broadcasting

The provision of independent literacy learning has its roots in the *Literacy through the Media* project that began in November 1999. This project, funded by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC) marked the beginnings of a nationwide media campaign to respond to the literacy learning requirements and access issues faced by an the estimated 25% of the Irish adult population (OECD, 1997) and 33% of disadvantaged young people (ERC, 2004; DES, 2005; NESF, 2009).

The first phase of the project *Literacy Through the Airwaves* used the medium of local radio programmes in Tipperary and Mayo. This series aimed to develop literacy and basic education through the use of a local radio frequency and supporting print materials. Following the success of the radio programmes a twelve-part television series was developed and aired nationally in Autumn 2000. An editorial board oversaw the project and consisted of representatives of the VEC, the DES, literacy student representatives and RTE. The partnership group was chaired by NALA.

Since 2000 NALA has continued to work with broadcast partners to produce a range of TV programmes *Read Write Now (1-5)*, the *Really Useful Guide to Words and Numbers (1&2)* and latterly the *Written Off* (1&2) series. Both the *Read Write Now* and the *Really Useful Guide to Words and Numbers* series had a learning component that was removed for the Written Off series. Each series has had a strong motivational dimension and highlighted the NALA Freephone number as a means for new learners to access free workbooks and to get advice about literacy learning options. The resulting high number of calls to the service illustrates both the need for literacy support and the level of response generated by the broadcasts.

Telephone contact

The NALA Freephone is staffed permanently by a dedicated member of the DLS team and supplemented by a trained support team at times of peak response to a specific broadcast or advertising campaign. The phone is the conduit for learners' initial contact with the service and is therefore of pivotal

importance. This is the moment when initial anxieties can be allayed, information about learning opportunities explained and contact data captured. Learners decide at this point whether they will opt for face-to-face or distance learning and are sent a pack of promotional and pedagogical materials. Those who opt for DL are informed that a tutor will be allocated to them and will call them in the near future to begin the learning process.

Distance learning is the only form of direct literacy provision delivered by NALA. Other literacy learning opportunities form part of VEC or other adult learning provision. At the moment there is therefore no tracking mechanism linked to NALA DLS for those Freephone callers who choose to learn in 1:1 or group provision under the auspices of the VEC or another provider.

Telephone tutoring

Literacy telephone tutoring is a skilled and precise approach to teaching and learning. Those who choose to learn by phone are matched with a tutor who phones them for a period of approximately half an hour each week. Both tutor and learner require fine organisational and communication skills and tutors need to compensate for the absence of facial prompts and reinforcements. Voice quality and active listening take on added importance when the learning relationship is built and sustained at a distance.

Each learner negotiates an individual learning programme and tutors are encouraged to follow NALA's Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work (2005) in all aspects of their practice. Curriculum content and materials are personalised and individual sessions and 6-week learning blocks are reviewed and evaluated.

Progress on a learner's chosen curriculum is recorded on the DL database initially, week-by-week and at the point of progress or exit. Learners consent to their data being recorded confidentially using a unique ID number and NALA undertakes to use the information only:

> To help us advocate for appropriate responses to the needs and rights of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties and to improve [our] services and work. (Guidelines for distance tutoring, 2009:8)

The pedagogical challenges of supporting aspects of literacy and numeracy learning at a distance are well researched and elaborated in DLS guidelines and practice. Comprehensive layers of support are in place for tutors. Peer support and exchange of good practice take place in an on-line forum, through initial and ongoing training, phone, email and facilitated support meetings.

Correspondence aspects of Distance Learning

All distance literacy learners are sent an initial information pack. This contains, among other things, an awareness DVD, NALA Open Door book and a leaflet with all VEC Adult Literacy Services contact details. Once an initial assessment has taken place, each learner receives a pack of materials from the NALA Resource Room. These core texts are supplemented each week by the personal tutor who will prepare and mail individualised work to the learner's home. Each tutor has a PO Box number to which learners return completed work and the outcome of this exchange is discussed and developed during the learning phone session.

The timing and coordination of this correspondence element of distance learning requires good organisational skills if the momentum of telephone learning sessions is to be smoothly maintained.

Internet learning

Another aspect of the distance literacy menu is the availability of website learning materials and the use of email to exchange messages and completed items of learning. NALA's interactive website www.writeon.ie allows learners to complete Level 2 minor awards as well as the FETAC Level 2 Certificate in General Learning and provides a wide range of interactive learning exercises, news links, games and a discussion forum for learners and tutors. The site innovatively allows a full range of language and literacy skills and uses to be simultaneously practised whilst storing evidence for a nationally recognised award.

A detailed analysis of online learning is outside the scope of this evaluation however future evaluations might usefully include this aspect of DLS more centrally. Annual usability testing with the adult literacy learners already

ensures the site is constantly monitored and updated to reflect learners' very specific needs. At the same time, blended learning usage has increased in 2010 with 12 centres formally participating in a Blended Learning project and at least another 13 centres known to be using writeon.ie. A closer study of these developments would produce useful insights on how to maximise the potential of this aspect of DL.

This evaluation of DLS 2009 has gathered data from learners in relation to each of the facets of DLS and while focusing on the experience of learners' engagement with a telephone tutor we will also include these wider findings where relevant.

6. A short theoretical context - *Distance learning theory*

Early provision of distance learning (DL) focussed more on the practicalities and mechanisms of how DL might happen than the theories that underpin it. In time, and with the increasing popularity of this form of learning the need arose to forensically examine what happens when teaching is taken outside of the physical environs of the educational institutions and of the social interaction that happens in group learning.

Wedemeyer highlights the democratic nature of DL. He stresses the low cost to the learner, the accessibility for those who are living in geographically remote areas and for those who have poor health. In addition DL is ideal for those who are unable to enter into an educational environment for learning. He points to the individualised nature of DL and argues that the learner should set her/his own learning goals and pace (Wedemeyer, 1974).

Moore (1984) sees the decentralisation of learning as part of the natural progression that evolved from a teacher centred to a learner centred pedagogy. The Universities of America began limited provision of DL as early as 1925. At this time 'honours courses' were delivered through correspondence. This form of education was deemed to be suitable for only the most elite scholars. It was believed that highly developed motivational and study skills were required to undertake study without face-to-face contact with *'learnéd'* teachers. Within forty years over ninety percent of American universities provided DL (Moore, 1984).

The earliest forms of DL in Europe took the form of correspondence courses. With the development of radio and television, learning was often supplemented and sometimes supplanted by pre-designed, fixed programmes where expert teachers presented a variety of learning opportunities to the masses. With advances in technology, web-based learning has rapidly overtaken many of the correspondence type courses. The society that is emerging in the twenty first century is one that is characterised as an information and knowledge based society, a society that is underpinned by this great technological progress. New and rapidly developing technologies

have enormous power and influence on how we live our lives and distance education is greatly influenced by these changes (Castells, 2006).

Moore (1984) highlights the 'distance' aspect of the process of DL. Distance does not only refer to physical space. It also refers to distance in terms of the relational aspect of DL. A distance continuum exists where at one end of the scale (most distant) lies pre-written, prescribed on-line learning programmes, where no interaction with another human being takes place. At the other end of the continuum (least distant) lie programmes where learners negotiate learning programmes and goals with teachers and where there are options to have face-to-face support meetings with teachers and peer learning groups. The physical separation of the learner and teacher in DL has the potential to result in the emergence of a psychological and communications gap. This is termed *transactional distance* by Moore (2007). He suggests that pedagogy to counteract the widening of this distance must focus on dialogue and structure.

Moore (2007) posits that learner autonomy is a core requisite of those who successfully engage in DL. Theoretically, students emerge from mainstream educational experience with the skills to be just such self directed, autonomous and lifelong learners. Success for distance learners with under developed learning skills therefore relies on higher degrees of both dialogue and structure (Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

Holmberg emphasises the importance of the relational aspect of DL to its success for learners. He describes the interaction between the learner and the teacher as a *guided conversation*. This guided conversation is informal in its process and contains within it some elements of knowledge sharing and instruction. He stresses the crucial role of the emotions in learning where a positive and constructive relationship between learner and teacher impacts significantly on the outcomes for learners. The quality of the relationship between the providing organisation and the learner are also important in this process as the values of the organisation are embodied in the approach of the teacher (Holmberg, 1995).

Technology savvy students from higher education institutions have traditionally been the more usual beneficiaries of distance education.

However, in 2001 in Pennsylvania, the Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE) project focussed on developing a state-wide programme of distance learning that is targeted at adult literacy and basic education students. ABLE took a strategic and developmental approach to the roll out of the programme. They recognised that distance education was a radically different form of education for basic education learners and that teachers and education administrators would need both new skills and mindsets if the project were to make a long term and sustainable impact on the literacy needs of adult learners (Askov, 2003).

Early days of the project steadfastly focussed on building good and stable foundations that would sustain the project in the long term. Adult learning agencies were invited to apply for inclusion in the project. The twelve organisations that were chosen were offered high levels of ongoing support and training in both the organisational and pedagogical aspects of distance education. Emphasis was placed on the innovative nature of the project and participating organisations were encouraged to experiment, to take risks, to create new and responsive programmes and to devise new approaches to the recruitment and support of learners. Projects were encouraged to work closely together to share learning as it emerged.

Structured, individual and collective ongoing reflection and evaluation of the projects was encouraged and a focus on the frustrations, failures and successes of the process elicited rich learning which was then integrated into the next stages of the project. The project succeeded in reaching adult learners who had not been involved in other educational programmes. Sixty percent of participants stated they would not have enrolled in traditional face-to-face literacy projects, providing strong evidence that distance education can be used successfully with adult literacy learners. Lessons learned from the ABLE project are summarised below

1. *Project management*

Careful planning, support and time to develop programmes are essential to the success of distance learning projects. Teachers need planned and proactive strategies for the ongoing support and motivation of learners.

2. *Learner recruitment*

In order to facilitate the recruitment of learners to distance learning projects, time and resources are needed to develop lasting inter-agency and community of practice relationships

3. *Induction*

A programme of induction is a critical element of successful DL courses. Learners need initial support in learning strategies to work successfully at a distance. They may need some basic computer skills support and an introduction to learning materials and processes. Face-to-face orientation helped learners and teachers develop more personal relationships.

4. *Programme design*

DL can be adopted and customised to meet the needs of both individuals and the community.

5. *Teacher support*

Teachers and administrators should be supported and encouraged to take creative approaches to DL.

6. *Learner support*

DL is not suitable for all students. Learners who were already employed or had a history of employment, had a basic reading level and had some computer skills had most success on the courses.

Timely constructive feedback by email and phone, frequent communication and considered and supportive emails were all strategies that were successfully employed by teachers.

Askov argues that this pilot project was a successful and promising first step in the development of an innovative approach to attracting new and traditionally hard to engage learners to literacy and basic education distance education (Askov, 2003).

Many of the issues highlighted in the literature review are reflected in the findings from the DLS evaluation that are presented in the sections that follow.

7. Research Findings

7a. Quantitative results from DLS interviews

The Table below (Box 7) summarises some quantifiable data that was gathered in the course of the qualitative interviews. Read alongside the information in relation to the whole DL population (Appendix A) they add substance to the profile of the distance learner that emerges in finer detail in the qualitative findings below.

It is clear that the majority of DL learners (92%) have left school with no or low qualifications with which to tackle the demands of adulthood and therefore are at some personal, social and economic disadvantage in relation to more educated peers. The data also suggest that a sizeable percentage of these people (40%) have already tried to access literacy prior to engaging with DL. Almost half of the sample (49%) were employed and favoured the flexibility of DL while the privacy afforded by the service was important to a significant number (66%). At the same time, a good number of the sample were open to the idea of meeting up with other learners (45%) albeit that some specified their wish that they would be at a similar literacy level to themselves.

The Written Off series was a source of encouragement to those who had watched it (50%) and TV and radio ads were the most frequently mentioned source of information about the Freephone number.

A relatively high number of the sample had Internet access (65%) compared with those who had used the *writeon* website (17%) which suggests future opportunities for encouraging both tutors and learners to investigate online learning options more closely than is currently happening. The majority of those who had used web-based learning were satisfied with the experience.

By far the majority of the sample were happy with their DL tutor (80%) and felt that their learning expectations had been met by the service (72%). Given that 19% of respondents were interviewed because of low or no participation these figures represent a very high level of satisfaction.

Box 7: Quantitative data extracted from research interviews (n=95)

Issue	Rural female	Rural male	Urban female	Urban male	Total/ %
No qualifications Leaving school	20	21	8	8	60%
Primary/junior/group cert	5	13	4	8	32%
Leaving cert+	3	5	0	0	8%
Previously attended Literacy classes	11	14	8	5	40%
Currently employed	13	19	7	8	49%
Internet access	14	29	9	10	65%
Number of learning sessions	192	314	93	135	95% (766)
Expectations met by DL	20	27	10	11	72%
Watched *Written Off* TV series	9	23	6	9	50%
Used the *writeon* website	0	10	4	2	17%
Satisfied with tutor	21	28	11	16	80%
Privacy element of DL is important	18	26	9	10	66%
Would like to meet other learners	11	16	8	8	45%
FETAC completed	3	5	1	1	11%
Issue	Rural female	Rural male	Urban female	Urban male	Total/ %

7 b. Qualitative results

Introduction

This section presents the qualitative research results from the empirical project carried out over four months from October 2009 to the end of January 2010. The previous section (7a) has outlined some numerical information about DL learners and their experience of the service and this is supplemented by data from the DLS database at Appendix A. Now we look in greater depth at the learner profile, experiences and outcomes as they emerged from our coding and analysis of the qualitative data.[5] Remaining close to the experience of learners has been central to the process of data gathering and again those voices form the nucleus of the findings that follow.

Gender, location and the views of those with no or low participation have been a particular focus of the study and these factors are both integrated throughout the findings and summarised separately in the last three findings sections. Seven sections follow:

> 7b1. Learner profile
>
> 7b2. Learner experiences of DL
>
> 7b3. DL outcomes
>
> 7b4. DL structures
>
> 7b5. Gender issues in focus
>
> 7b6. Location issues in focus
>
> 7b7. Areas of concern

7b1. Learner profile

In this section we look behind the quantitative data at what the findings reveal about those who choose distance learning and the motivation and timing of that preference. Thus we will answer the questions:

✓ Who chose DL in 2009?

✓ Why did they choose DL?

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[5] A total of 2,140 segments of data were coded, drawn from the interviews and focus groups as well as one learner's written submission.

Who chose DL?

The 2009 DL learner profile is multifaceted and spans a substantial range in terms of age, prior level of education, employment and family status and gender and urban or rural location. All those interviewed fell between the 26 - 68years age range and apart from a small number of migrant workers for whom English was a second language, all were Irish and had received their primary experience of literacy in Irish schools. Half of the sample were employed and spurred to improve their skills for work as well as personal, relational and family reasons. There were more than twice as many rural learners as those living in urban areas (70% rural and 30% urban) and more men than women learners (60% men and 40% women).

Early school leavers

A very small number in the sample (8%) had completed Leaving Certificate or above and of these several were attending college courses where they required literacy support. Two were seeking help with English as a second language. For these less traditional literacy learners DL was sometimes chosen in the absence of an affordable or accessible alternative.

By far the majority of research participants had left school early without any accredited outcome and were dissatisfied that they had not fulfilled even their basic potential. Many had maintained a spark of self-belief across the years and for a good number (40%), despite unhappy memories, this was not their first attempt to make up lost learning ground. Narratives were full of the negative legacy of earlier schooling, the ghosts of authoritarian and demeaning learning processes. Nonetheless one urban woman epitomised the spirit and determination of learners when said she 'couldn't wait to get started and deal with the demons' that had haunted her since her school days. Another male respondent identified poverty as the cause of his educational disadvantage.

> When I was growing up we were a large family. We went to the Christian Brothers. We were thrown aside because we were poor – like

a piece of filth to them. It was not that I couldn't learn. Things were different back then. The objective was to break you. *Rural man - telephone interview*

The detrimental impact of prior schooling was evident in many participants' accounts of their anxiety about returning to learn and this was at the heart of how learners described *who* they were. This was particularly true for 4 respondents (2 women and 2 men) who identified themselves as survivors of abuse in Irish industrial schools. It was clear in many of the interviews that some people require a sympathetic process of support, advice and counselling before actually beginning the process of learning. This is needed for both pedagogical as well as psychological reasons.

It's not even as if it's all about learning. Sometimes I just want to talk about it all to someone. Talking to a stranger is easier. I want to do it. Don't know if I have the ability to do it; don't know if I have the determination. *Rural man - telephone interview*

A lot of people don't really know how to learn. I have never studied. I needed to learn how to learn before I could start. It has worked really well. *Urban woman - telephone interview*

In general, like many literacy learners, those in the sample combined a lack of self-esteem with a resilient hope and determination to overcome past learning experiences. Evidence suggests that some form of pre-learning module would be of benefit to those who are most anxious and insecure about how to embrace the learner identity. This may in turn give added support to the small percentage that gave up on DL for want of some appropriate form of induction.

Gendered choices

Although calls to the NALA Freephone in 2009 are divided 54% female to 46% male in terms of those who chose the DL option this trend is reversed and male participants are in the majority. In 2009 the DL gender ratio was 60:40 – 60% male to 40% female. It is clear that DL is more attractive to men than other forms of learning where male under-participation has for some time been a cause for concern (Corridan, 2002; Owens, 2000; Aontas, 2009). The reasons behind these gendered selections are explored in more detail throughout the sections below and summarised at 7b5.

Age

We know from the statistical data that DL participants are aged between 26 and 68 years and those at the later end of that spectrum related their age to the selection of DL as a means of learning. Some spoke of it being more daunting to return to study when older and men in particular felt that the prospect of going to a class was prohibitive. Alternatively an older rural woman chose DL because of the inaccessibility of other options while stating that her choice would be 'to meet up with other learners'.

Another rural woman articulated the gendered attitude to learning for other than instrumental reasons.

> It is very good for me at my age – something for my mind – but my husband says 'why are you bothering? It won't get you a job. That is the difference between men and women. My husband is in the same boat as myself and wouldn't dream of doing anything about it. *Rural woman - telephone interview*

Location issues

The majority of DL learners come from rural areas reflecting an Irish population that is still predominantly rural.[6]

> I would like sitting with someone best … having the person there at the same time looking at what I was doing but this is the best way for me at to do it now. I am very isolated here… a big distance to travel and no local transport. I would like to meet up with other learners but lots of classes are in the evening time and the transport is not really available. *Rural woman - telephone interview*

Rural interviewees cited isolation, travel access, time and costs as significant determinants in their decisions about how they learn literacy. Other identity factors such as gender, age and prior learning experience inevitably also defined those from urban and rural areas who formed part of the research sample.

Many cultural and identity factors can be interrelated as for example in one case where location, poverty and possibly gender were all contributory factors in early school leaving for an older woman who had chosen DL.

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[6] The 2006 census suggests that the rural - urban divide in Ireland is made up of 81% rural 19% urban dwellers.

> I left national school at 14 and that wasn't unusual in those days. I lived far away from the secondary school and my parents couldn't afford the bus. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

Care responsibilities

As well as the 50% of the sample who were in paid employment or some form of employment training, yet others identified as carers for children or older family members. This was true of both men and women although in line with gendered social structures, women identified more frequently with a caregiving role.

> I am a young mother at home and DL has worked really well for me. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

> I stopped literacy classes as my father passed away and there was illness in the family. I help with the care work so DL suits me fine. *Urban man – telephone interview*

The demands of caregiving also contributed to why some of the interviewees stopped learning with DL after a small number of sessions.

> I didn't really get going at all. My wife had just died. The tutor would ring me in the evenings. I was trying to get my daughter looked after so that I could keep going but she would get cross when I took the call. *Rural man – telephone interview*

As well as an identity issue, care was also a significant motivating factor for some in choosing DL and this will be discussed below.

Why did learners choose DL?

The findings illustrate the attractiveness of DL to the population of adult literacy learners who used it. It has undoubtedly opened up possibilities and satisfied lifelong yearnings for an appropriate opportunity to learn literacy. This is especially true for those who felt unable to face down the social stigma attached to adult illiteracy by moving directly into group in their locality. Accessibility, flexibility and anonymity drew people to the DL option and the previous section suggests that there are identity factors (like age, gender, location and caregiving ties) that enhance the appeal of DL for learners. In this section we examine the data for answers to the question – why did research participants choose DL?

Accessibility and flexibility

Those living in isolated areas, those with home ties and shift workers all found the accessibility and flexibility of DL congruent with their lifestyle needs. Sometimes DL was not a first choice but an available option.

> I work as a carer both morning and evening and so I can't go to a class. I would have preferred a person facing me but there is no classes around here in the afternoon and I don't have time to go further away. *Urban woman- telephone interview*

There is a suggestion in the data that men find it easier to access seasonal and part-time work and DL accommodates this need for flexibility in negotiating the learning time from week to week. The data also show that those with home-based care demands, many of whom are women, similarly enjoy the choices afforded by the learner-led nature of DL.

Home-based learning

The possibility of working on literacy 'in the comfort of your own home' was a draw for many and that comfort was physical and material as well as psychological. In a very practical sense not having to move out of the home meant that busy adults had less expense and more time to attend to other demands.

> DL takes less time because you can learn at home. No travel time or expense. *Urban woman – telephone interview*
>
> It did suit me in terms of time. I worked in the comfort of my own home. I didn't have to go outside in bad weather. It would take 30 minutes to get into town. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

The comfort of working at home was also due to the absence of social pressure – not having the unwanted attention of others while having the total attention of a tutor.

> I do it in my own environment – not having to go into a situation where people are watching me. But I do have someone to check my work and I get all her attention. *Rural man – telephone interview*

A tutor endorsed the attraction of home-based learning and added a pedagogical note. She identified this capacity to work in such a comfort zone as creating the circumstances for a more focussed learning environment.

> When learners have the comfort of working from home they can do a lot of work! Being at home; not being judged by anyone; it's just them and a person that cannot see them and they can't see. They don't have to worry about anything – what they are wearing; what they are doing. It's pure learning only. *DLS tutor co-ordinator – in-depth interview*

Tried 1:1 or group before

The same desire for security and *comfort* described above was, in its absence, the reason why previous attempts at learning literacy by research participants had been cut short. The attraction of DL for some (40%) was provoked by unsuccessful attempts at meeting their learning needs through face-to face learning options. Some had tried private tutoring, others 1:1 or small groups organised by the VECs. Sometimes when people had missed a number of face-to-face learning sessions they explained how the pressures involved in facing back into the social situation become such a deterrent that they did not return.

Social, organisational and pedagogical factors also led to these prior learning efforts being unsatisfactory. The fear of being in a group remained overwhelming for some and meant that they could not absorb the learning on offer. They worried about meeting someone who would recognise them or being negatively perceived. A number of people had been placed on a waiting list for VEC provision and had still not been contacted when they discovered the DL alternative. Yet others found their needs were misjudged and that previous learning (either 1:1 or group) was 'not a match for them'. Learners who wanted continuity liked that DL was a 'year-round' service and did not follow the limitations of academic terms.

While some were solely seeking more appropriate learning opportunities, in selecting DL others were most emphatically avoiding being in a group environment.

> Learning by phone was a help because you weren't intimidated. It was so hard to go to college – walk in with your face and body – such a big thing - and then for it not to be right. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

Avoiding the group

Both men and women spoke of their initial reluctance to consider learning in a group situation. While women attributed their reluctance to shyness and an internal sense of unreadiness to meet with others in a learning forum, men tended to cite external factors, behaviours and attitudes.

> I wouldn't go into a group. All people on different levels and I wouldn't like it as I would have to work on their rigmarole before getting what I want. All the different paces wouldn't suit me at all. This seemed like an easy way to do it – have it in my own time. *Rural man– telephone interview*

Measuring one's level of literacy against that of others was an entirely male concern and anxieties about having more or less literacy accomplishment was often cited as a reason for joining or not joining a group. Several men actually mentioned that they would welcome a test to assure them that they were on a par with other people in a group. This was the same for urban and rural men alike.

> I couldn't have been in a group at that stage. I would have felt below others and wouldn't have liked that. *Rural man - telephone interview*

> I would like to join a group if everyone was in the same position. *Urban man - telephone interview*

> I would have a fear that levels would be different in a group. I would be afraid that I would be looked up to or down on. *Urban man - telephone interview*

> I was in a group before but I could see I wasn't the worst. *Urban man - telephone interview*

One woman who had been resident in an industrial school was uncertain about her level of confidence to be in a group and welcomed the chance to have individualised learning first.

> I liked the privacy and the chance to excel on my own. That might not happen in a group. Maybe someone would talk too much. Anyway I might not be able to be fully there in a group. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

The advantages and disadvantages that men saw in groups tended to suggest a focus on the functional and an intolerance of what was seen to be relational and time-wasting.

> In a group the teacher might correct the work but there might also be too much chat. I don't want to know about other people's dogs! *Rural man – telephone interview*

In their wider experience DL tutors had also observed gendered differences in learning styles and attitudes to joining a group. A social and instrumental division was suggested between the female and male learning identity with women tending towards relationality.

> Our service seems more attractive to men. It's the thing about the social aspect of it. Men don't like the chitchat so much. They just want to get down to business, blank everything out and just do the work whereas women like the social aspect after classes. They hang around and the men are gone. *DL tutor support coordinator*

The data suggest that men also value the relational side of learning but feel that they need to appear to be more autonomous than women – whether this is the reality or not. Gendered stereotypes therefore are seen to hold men back unless they are supported across this deeply entrenched gender rubicon.

> It's a macho thing. Men don't want to look bad. We don't want to look weak. We are meant to be strong and to know what we are doing. You can't show a woman that you are not as strong as you are expected to be. For women it is easier to join a group or go to a centre. They are usually more social than men. *Male focus group participant*

DL provided an attractive learning refuge for many male literacy learners and as we will see in the outcomes section, for many it served as a stepping-stone to progression.

Four research participants (three men and one woman) were all simultaneously members of a FAS training group and DL learners. These men had overcome an initial fear of being in a group and in the male focus group for this project were strong advocates for the group process with others who were present. The FAS/DL partnership that emerged was interesting and was the reason why these four people had selected DL in that it was

recommended by their FAS trainer. The personal support accompanied by the group experience was an effective combination for those to whom we spoke.

Stigma

Having unmet literacy needs remains highly stigmatised and many learners found DL enabled them to avoid, or at least find a bridge over the fear and deprecation that accompany literacy prejudice. Consequently, privacy, confidentiality, security and low levels of pressure were attractive features of DL. The data illustrate learners' awareness of the source of their damaged self-esteem and the desire to avoid embarrassment.

> When she first phoned I was very nervous, felt very embarrassed asking for help. I think there are loads of people out there but it is a big stigma. It really hammers you down. *Rural man – telephone interview*

> There is a refuge in invisibility. I feel protected. *Urban woman - telephone interview*

A high percentage of respondents (66%) cited confidentiality as an important factor in their choice of DL.

> I do it at home because there is no stigma. Don't have to do the face-to-face. It is easier for me. It reduces potential embarrassment. Confidentiality is very important for me. *Rural man – telephone interview*

Even within the immediate family circle the impact of the literacy stigma is felt. A woman who was happy with the learning process gave up because of fear of her family discovering her long-guarded secret.

> I had no confidence to continue (after 4 sessions). I have a big family and I am embarrassed when they are around and the call comes. They would be happy for me but I couldn't cope. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

Notes from the tutor and learner focus groups reaffirmed the importance of respecting the desire for anonymity and privacy both in principle and in practice.

> Privacy and anonymity are very important for many learners although once they say to their families they generally get terrific help from those around them and it can even bring them closer – a new understanding and connection. *Tutor focus group*

The issue of controlling who knows/does not know of involvement in DL is a concern for many. In one instance, due to incorrect postage on an envelope, the homework of one rural male participant was opened in the local post office. When it did not arrive the learner had to call to the post office to enquire what had happened and felt that everyone knew of his involvement in DL and consequently of his literacy level. The narrator of this story stressed the importance of confidentiality in DL. *Learner focus group notes*

In choosing DL, men in particular talked a lot about the desire to avoid embarrassment, pressure and the personal consequences of stigma. All of these entailed the potential invasion of their privacy and weakening of their identity both in the public and private domain.

I'm not shy but I don't want to be put on the spot. I don't want to look foolish. *Urban man -telephone interview*

Confidentiality is very important for me. A lot of my family think I am very clever and don't know that I have this issue. It would be a shock for other people. *Rural man - telephone interview*

DL was for some a conscious stepping stone to a more confident learning identity that many learners experienced.

I liked DL because it allowed me to start in private. I am not ready to meet others yet. The confidentiality is very important to me. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

Even initially, many had a sense that DL would allow them the privacy and time to gather sufficient self-esteem and enough literacy skills to be able to override the impact of social stigma and move on confidently with learning.

Confidentiality is important because some people at work slag you. People look at you differently but already I am not so afraid now. I have opened up a bit more and will go further. I may even go to class. *Urban man – telephone interview*

What motivated DL learners?

The data suggest that consciousness of unmet literacy needs and the desire to resolve that situation was never far from the minds of DL learners. Many spoke of having 'always wanted to do something about it' or always knowing 'I had it in me' or again 'it was always there in my mind to do something about

it.' The delay in acting on this desire was attributed to a number of factors. Busy adult lives, the stigma attached to literacy difficulties and a reluctance to return to education conspired to defer action. In some cases the motivating factor was getting information about literacy provision and the Freephone number at a significant life-moment. One man described how having a serious illness had changed his perspective on life and motivated him to tackle his spelling issue. In other cases there was a positive response to repeatedly hearing the Freephone number.

> I meant to do it for a long time. I saw the phone number in the post office and then heard it again on the radio. I hadn't the confidence to call but then I heard it again and picked up the phone before I'd really thought about it. Best call I ever made. *Urban man – telephone interview*

The vast majority of those interviewed had got the Freephone number from radio or television ads. The Written Off TV series in particular was watched by 50% of those interviewed and spurred many to make their first call. They spoke of the inspirational 'real' stories of those in the programme and often identified with a particular character. One man described the show as 'hopeful' in the learning development it illustrated. This in turn allowed people imagine changing their own literacy level.

Learner level

Inevitably the need that people had for literacy in their daily life impacted on their impetus to take action. DL is geared towards the needs of those at or below FETAC Level 2 although the data describe a wide range of levels from those with early reading issues to those who were refining spelling techniques and writing skills. A number of research participants were motivated by a desire to improve their maths. In addition to literacy and numeracy needs, low levels of self-esteem were common to many interviewees.

> I can scribble something down but I can't show it. Your confidence level just drops. I get into sweats. I panic about writing. *Rural man - telephone interview*

Dyslexia was referred to on a number of occasions in the data. Some people feared they might be dyslexic but has never been tested. Others had been tested and were using DL as an interim measure while they waited for support from the Irish Dyslexic Association (IDA). For some having a label (real or assumed) for their situation was helpful while others were relieved when they made enough progress to let the dyslexic identity go.

> I feel I am dyslexic and there is no hope for me. My father was also dyslexic. At school I would study for hours but I just wasn't able to hang onto it. My father really wanted me to learn. He didn't want me to be like him. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

> I was working on spellings and memory stuff – getting it working. I thought I was worse than I was. It made a big difference to me to know that I wasn't dyslexic. I did a test on the computer. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

The findings illustrate the need for DL tutors to have the skill and resources to deal with specific learning difficulties. Tutors have had some training in this area but it may be a useful resource for a team member to have specialism in this area.

Recession

The literacy demands of the workplace were a motivating factor for some. Exposure of literacy gaps through training or the introduction of new procedures encouraged some to begin learning. Inevitably the downturn in the Irish economy has meant that many who were employed in construction and associated areas of work have had to face redundancy. This is true across a number of employment sectors where the move from boom to bust has exposed the vulnerability of those with unmet literacy needs.

> I was not lucky enough to get education. It was always there in the background to do something but I got good money in construction and the need wasn't really there. Now there is no work in building so I need to do this work on my spelling. I am planning to emigrate and my skills will hold me back. *Rural man – telephone interview*

Motivations of care

Unpaid care work also motivated some to begin learning. It was women respondents who more often identified the motivating demands of children and grandchildren although some men also were spurred to action by the desire to be a role model for their children. Women who worked in childminding were encouraged to improve their own skills so they could help the children in their care.

> I am at home with six grandchildren who are asking me questions about maths and long multiplication. We are now learning together, checking out homework and it is all out in the open. There is no hiding it ever. The grandchildren just totally accept me doing it. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

Affective factors were also motivational in relationships where women played an enabling role by phoning on behalf of husbands and partners and supporting them emotionally in their learning process.

> My partner knows. She gives me lots of support but I wouldn't tell anyone else. *Urban man – telephone interview*

The data also reveal that some are motivated by a desire to end their dependence on partners and others in work and to fill the gaps in their own literacy skills and knowledge. They come to a realisation that they can in fact have independent literacy skills and reach out to take that opportunity. Different aspects of relationships were mentioned as significant throughout the various stages of learning from the initial impetus and throughout the learning process and this will be examined in more detail in subsequent sections.

Experience of DL

It is clear from the student interviews that the majority of those who engaged with DL had a positive experience and felt that their expectations had been satisfied or surpassed. Tutors received fulsome praise and even after a relatively small number of sessions, many learners spoke of increased self-esteem, improved literacy skills and enthusiasm for further learning. In this section we look at what the data tell us about learners' experience of DL.

Getting started

By far the most difficult thing for people in the DL process was making the first call. The findings make clear that the skill of the Freephone receptionists quickly puts people at their ease. The pack of materials – DVD and paper-based – is welcomed by most who begin to explore the pack while waiting for a call from their tutor. Where there is an unexpected delay of several weeks before the first call from a tutor some people begin to jump to assumptions. One woman thought her age made her a lower priority than others whereas a man who owned his own business felt he was being judged for demanding resources that might be needed by those less well off than him. A woman survivor of abuse in an industrial school speculated that it might be thought that this might be the cause of her delay. These examples demonstrate the insecurity of callers and the need for possible delays to be well flagged in advance so that assumptions are avoided. That said, most people moved smoothly on to the call from a tutor and embarked positively on the DL journey.

The learning programme

The findings again suggest high anxiety levels in the face of the first call with the tutor when the legacy of past learning is resurrected.

> I was anxious but her voice alleviated everything. Her approach was very friendly and I felt I had known her for years. I had been very apprehensive – cleaning the house – felt I had to prove something. Not getting schooling leaves you like that and I was put back nearly thirty years. Then I couldn't believe how good it felt. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

This experience of relief and of having been consulted about an individual learning programme was much appreciated by callers. They spoke with some surprise of having been 'treated like a human being', not 'feeling judged' and building a relationship of trust and sincerity. A focus group participant highlighted the fact that he 'was never belittled'.

> I am 61 and was worried that it was a bit late for me. I was apprehensive but then that turned to excitement and I was watching for the post to come with the pack. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

> Felt really great after the first call, the manner in which she spoke to me, felt like a human being. *Rural man – telephone interview*

The ethos of care in DL and of a respectful adult learning process was evident throughout the data and recognised by participants.

> She asked what I would like to do and we made a plan together. I felt I had made a start even after one call and that I would get on well with the tutor. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

For some the pace of proceeding to a learning programme was a little rapid and they were not yet ready to relax into the process.

> The tutor was trying to find what level I was at. I needed confidence building. I had feelings of panic. I needed time to build a relationship with her. It is easier to talk to someone you don't know. You don't have to walk into a classroom. It is a way of breaking you in. *Rural man - telephone interview*

In a very small number of cases the data describe an unsuccessful discussion about learning levels or the measure of progress. It is clear from participant narratives that tutors made regular effort to get learners to evaluate the learning process honestly and in most cases research participants felt at ease giving truthful feedback. In a few small cases we found that people found this honesty too hard and they stopped taking calls rather than appear critical or dissatisfied. On reflection, one man remarked 'if I could have said to her I might have kept it up longer.' Reluctance to 'hurt the tutor's feelings' by pointing out any areas of misunderstanding, even when directly asked led to premature leaving and regret. Establishing and reinforcing this baseline of clear feedback is a vital part of the induction process.

> I got too embarrassed to tell her I couldn't grasp it so I stopped. It wasn't her fault. I couldn't get a handle on it. *Male learner, less than 3 sessions –telephone interview*

The DL ethos is strongly learner led and guided by NALA's recognition that literacy is socially situated. This is evident in the data about the content of individual learning programmes.

> Many learners think they are going to have to do things like they did at school. You know a comprehension exercise or something like that. Then the tutor says to them 'I want you to go and top up your mobile and write about it and we'll talk about it next week. The work has to be

useful. It has to be about their lives; it's about skills for each person's life. *DL tutor support coordinator*

The interviews and focus groups illustrated that a vast range of language and literacy and numeracy content was covered both using paper – based and ICT media. Research participants demonstrated that as well as their chosen curriculum focus, in a more generic way they had learned how to learn.

> A lot of people don't really know how to learn. I have never studied. I needed to learn how to learn before I could start. It has worked really well. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

> I used to think that I couldn't retain learning but now I have a way of doing it. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

> I know more about how to go about learning. I am seeing myself progress every week. *Rural man - telephone interview*

> I am happy reading now. If not – I have a strategy. *Rural man - telephone interview*

> I have learned to slow down with reading. I am really looking at the words now – using different tactics. *Rural woman -telephone interview*

> I realised I was good at maths because I have a good ear and I learned it by song. *Urban woman -telephone interview*

> At the end it didn't really matter that I can't spell some words. It gave me an interest in learning.

These testimonies from the data describe individuals who have adopted the mantle of more autonomous lifelong learner and have acquired the knowledge and skills about learning to become so. During 2009 NALA has published its curriculum guideline document that set out the underpinning principles of the literacy and numeracy curriculum. It will be interesting to see how this can be incorporated into future DL practice.

The calls

At the heart of the DL process are 'the calls' – the weekly telephone learning session arranged between learners and tutor. A fundamental difficulty was the uneven quality of telephone and Internet connectivity across the country and poor reception was a factor in the decision of some to stop using DL after three or less sessions. Others went to great lengths to find reception.

> Lack of good reliable broadband connection and mobile phone reception is very frustrating for many. Several learners work from their cars or back gardens. *DL tutor focus group notes*

Once connection is established, learning calls are reported to last between 10 minutes and an hour. Some respondents felt that the telephone process was relaxed and unhurried while a small number would have liked additional time and additional calls. DL policy as stated by the tutor coordinator was that 'students should never feel under pressure from a tutor' and the vast majority of learners confirmed this positive, relaxed experience of calls. Inevitably, a small number of reports in the data included learners feeling rushed or tutors missing calls because of 'family illness' or forgetting to cancel a call that coincided with staff training.

> She was busy so the calls only lasted about ten minutes. I didn't like to say, as she was very busy. I thought she was probably very tired. I worked on my own after the calls and most evenings. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

DL managers are rightly attentive to maintaining the boundaries around professionalism. One manager noted:

> Students must never feel under pressure from a tutor. If learners cannot take a call or do it as agreed then tutors must never be cross or annoyed with the student. They just have to rearrange the session to suit the student and that is very important to the service even though it may be annoying for the tutor. They may have planned their day around the work but they cannot let the student know they are annoyed. It has to be totally relaxed. *DL Tutor coordinator interview*

Inevitably there were some who found the 'faceless' nature of the DL process difficult to sustain and some early leavers had made the decision to change to face-to-face provision. Some of these issues that caused uncertainty and insecurity might be managed through a clear induction process and information sharing about the parameters of calls.

> Over the phone was not brilliant for me. If I was with someone it would be better for me. Speaking on the phone – I was waiting for the call to end. I was not clear how much time was available for each call and that left me on edge. *Rural man – telephone interview*

Another learner reflected the majority when he described how the weekly phone call was exactly the motivation that was needed to support his learning.

> I made progress - really, really stuck at it. Found it a great support. On your own is too hard. I would have given up if I wasn't getting the phone call. *Rural man – telephone interview*

As in mainstream literacy when a disaffected learner votes with their feet and stops attending, so in DL those who want to drop out have the choice of not answering a call. In the subsample of 'early leavers', those who had completed three or less sessions reported how they had 'just not answered' a number of calls until the calls stopped. NALA DL has a policy of making three attempts at contacting those who miss calls and following this up with a letter. This again might be clarified in induction to avoid confusion or the assertion that the calls had inexplicably stopped.

Most DL learners adapted with ease to telephone learning and were full of praise for the attitude, skills and warmth of their tutor. They spoke of looking forward to the calls and the importance of feeling really listened to about their learning needs. Listening skills need to be highly refined for DL to be successful and it was clear that the vast majority of tutors were attentive to this aspect of the learning calls. In the absence of visual clues *voice* too takes on added importance and there were a large number of comments during interviews about learners' reading of the tutor's quality and tone of voice.

> The tutor's voice was very encouraging so I felt she was actually in the room with me. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

> She had a brilliant way of explaining to me. She had a voice that was lovely. *Rural man – telephone interview*

> Tutors need to be flexible, patient, resourceful and they have to have a lot of empathy for the learners. There is no body language to go on to check if things are going well – only the tone of voice, which can be pretty tricky. They really have to have a heightened sense of empathy. *Tutor support coordinator - interview*

Interviewees also talked of tutor's skill at reading their voice and picking up if 'there was something wrong' either in terms of learning or in their wider personal life. Those who sustained the course in DL became adept at managing their own learning process and many relished the solitary nature of

DL and the absence of 'someone breathing down your neck'. Some spoke of the difficulty of getting stuck in an aspect of their learning and having to wait for the next call to resolve the issue. They seemed unaware that this was much the same for those in face-to-face learning situations who have to wait to bring problems to their next class.

We were impressed at the amount of autonomous learning that distance learners did. Many worked on a daily basis for in excess of an hour and, although only impressionist in this study, it seemed that distance and separation encouraged many to assume responsibility for their own study in a way that might occur less frequently in face-to-face learning. This was all part of being organised.

Being organised

A small number of the subsample of 'early leavers' spoke of the time not being right for them to commit to the learning process or a realisation that a greater deal of time and effort was required than they had initially expected.

> It is definitely not a quick fix. The journey of getting from where you are to where you want to get to is so long. It's such a commitment. *Male learner, less than 3 sessions*

Certainly setting time aside both for the call and individual learning emerged as key to a successful experience of DL. Women learners spoke more positively about time management and factoring study time into busy lives and sustaining that commitment. Men, unless they were retired, referred more often to a struggle with time and with commitment.

> I worked on literacy every day. It was no trouble to me. I worked it into my life. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

> I worked for an hour with the tutor and then an hour and a half a week on my own. I am not fond of doing it but it has to be done. I try to put it off – pushing it around a bit. *Rural man – telephone interview*

> In the beginning I was very enthusiastic – fell off a bit over time then doing the homework the night before the call. *Rural man – telephone interview*

It is clear from the data that both tutors and learners need fine organisational skills for DL to be successful. There is evidence in the data that some

participants were better able to manage their materials and the DL learning process than others. One woman had established an office for her work and copied materials that she sent to the tutor so that they each had a copy to discuss on the phone. At the other end of the spectrum, one learner spoke of the practical challenge of holding the phone and at the same time managing the relevant materials. Acquiring appropriate organisational skills is a crucial topic for the induction process.

Both men and women talked of the need to work study time into their life, to have a space to work and a way of organising papers and synchronising post so that work was returned in time for the next session. Those who used the Internet inevitably found many of these pressures lessened. Given that 65% of the sample had Internet access there is obviously scope for developing this ICT-based approach to DL and thereby reducing organisational pressures on learners and tutors.

Tutors too need very specific skills as outlined here:

> Tutors need to be fast and quick about putting into place what the student needs. You need to be quicker on the phone than face-to-face. You need a 'just do it' attitude. You don't get clues from facial reactions and so you need to be responsive to messages in the voice. You need to be sure that you don't mix students up and remember who is who and what it is you are working on. You need to keep very detailed records. You need to know what you last worked on and what you sent them last week. It takes a lot of organising. *DLS tutor coordinator interview.*

Organisation, time and sustained commitment were key factors to a successful experience of DL. Again these are issues that can be addressed in tutor training and learner induction programmes as a means of improving service quality and student retention and increasing levels of well-being all round.

Learning relationships

The data about the DL learning process are woven through with relational elements and the capacity of tutors and learners to build the bonds of trust that facilitate autonomous learning. Supporting literacy at a range of levels is a complex and skilled task and there are additional challenges in facilitating

literacy learning at a distance. There is no doubt that some learners found the absence of visual clues difficult in the learning relationship and over time some adapted better than others. As mentioned above, voice took on added importance in understanding and clarifying communication in DL.

Those from the subsample of 'early leavers' who had not stopped because of life issues were people for whom the physical remoteness of the tutor was a real impediment. One woman for whom life 'took a bit of a drop' appreciated the way that her tutor had left the door open for her to come back to learning in future.

> I gave up. I said to her and she was disappointed. We got on well. She tried very hard to keep me going and gave me lots of information for me to reconnect. My life took a bit of a drop at the time. It really affected me. She was a tonic. She gave me great guidelines – tools really- and I have continued on myself. I want to do it for myself. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

The support of family members was another pivotal relational factor. Those whose learning was encouraged and sustained by family and friends were more likely to have successful outcomes and to enjoy the process. Those whose family did not know of their involvement in DL and who carried that secret alone were more anxious and more likely to drop out of learning. Coping with the stigma attached to unmet literacy needs is perhaps the biggest issue for all literacy learners and the literacy movement in general. The data below about outcomes demonstrate that for DL learners the impact of the stigma rapidly diminishes with the positive experience of making progress in literacy learning.

Research respondents were asked if they felt they would benefit from meeting up with other learners and 45% answered affirmatively. This was clearly a matter of self-esteem and indicative of a degree of progress and self-affirmation. Some learners recognised the solidarity in being in a group and sharing skills and learning. The focus groups that were part of this research provided a first opportunity (an action research project) for some DL learners to meet and discuss their experiences of DL. Feedback was very positive and a number of participants made decisions about joining a group based on the day.

I have a sense now that there are a lot of people out there with the same issues. It's been a great day. I have more courage and feel that I am not alone. You get confidence from this. It's good to hear other people's experience. *Learner focus group notes*

If resources allow, providing opportunities for students to meet together may be an option worth considering in the future.

DL learner outcomes

Box 8: Some DL learner outcomes

I have noticed that now I am reading road signs and credits on films. *Urban woman*

I wrote a letter to NALA requesting information. It was the first time I had written a letter on my own. I am reading the newspapers now and keeping a diary. It's the best thing. It keeps the practice up. I have made great improvements. *Urban man*

I have done FETAC Level 2 and a further catering course at work. Now I need to do Level 5 with work and I feel ready to have a go. *Rural woman*

I wanted to help my grand children but then I realised I was doing something for myself. I am doing this for me. *Urban woman*

I can't believe the progress I've made in 9 weeks. It's the first time I've written an email. *Urban Man*

My children say that I am much better at helping them with their homework. *Urban woman*

When we got a takeaway at the weekend I used to get my husband to do it all. Now I do it myself. *Urban woman*

I don't have to get help from my sister any more. I was never independent before. *Rural man*

I go into a shop now and I am able to work out costs and correct change. I have gone into the bank and filled out cheques – no fluster – no sweat. I am able to do it – writing the numbers for myself. The children I mind say I am getting much better at helping them with their homework. *Urban woman*

DL has helped me to make connections about what my life is about. I am learning so much not only about spellings and reading and writing. It is all about my life. *Learner focus group notes*

I have read my first book now – Patricia Scanlon. I can actually see reading as entertainment now. I am overjoyed. *Rural woman – telephone interview*

I have really progressed. Doing FETAC helped a lot; doing it in my own time on the computer really worked well for me. I am in college now doing Level 5 and now my wife and I can sit and do our work together. It is not embarrassing for me to have her help me now because I do not feel that I am so far behind her. She is at university. *Learner focus group notes*

> I now realise my writing is as good as anyone else's. It is an unbelievable service. I am managing my own banking and working out quotations for bathrooms as if it was second nature to do it really! I am planning lots more education. *Rural man – telephone interview*

The findings contain a catalogue of examples of positive outcomes from the DL process. Participants (72%) improved their literacy skills in line with and beyond their expectations. This in turn had impacted on self-esteem and confidence in the workplace. In particular those who had completed FETAC accreditation were motivated to move on to further qualifications. There is substantial evidence in the data that DL provides a bridge to progression for many learners and raises both personal and vocational aspirations and capacities. The data also reveal a ripple effect where other adult family members, friends, children and grandchildren are positively influenced in terms of their own basic skills. In the box above we let the voices of interviewees speak for themselves.

New sense of identity

In addition to the practical examples of achievement in literacy, work and family life, research participants spoke of a growth in confidence and self-assurance that enabled a more positive sense of identity. Often this was expressed as a new sense of relaxation when asked to carry out a literacy task. Many referred to the pressure, 'the load' that had been lifted from them and a self-assurance that allowed them to cope calmly even when they were uncertain about something.

> Forms still make me nervous especially if I have to go quickly. Now I say, "Bear with me. I have to look at this carefully." *Urban woman – telephone interview*

> I have more peace. I'm not so afraid. It's opened me up more. *Urban man - telephone interview*

> I am more confident and more sociable. *Urban woman - telephone interview*

A significant expression of this new identity was the way in which the literacy stigma became less significant for them as they made progress and their sense of optimism grew accordingly. This was true for both men and women.

I would never have gone to a class. Now I'm quite looking forward to it. I feel able to do it now. It's not embarrassing. Now I tell everyone. If there is a stigma then that's their problem. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

Confidentiality was a big thing but not so much now as I feel fit to do it if given the chance. *Rural man – telephone interview*

It has become a smaller issue for me. In fact I tell people now. I am an advertiser for returning to learning. *Urban woman – focus group*

At the moment I would have no problem being in a group. Before I thought I'd be looked down on in a group. The confidence is the thing I really got. My girl would say I wouldn't talk much but she says I am talking now. Now I am interested in seeing how far I am coming on; seeing what others are doing; measuring myself. *Rural man - telephone interview*

The findings are replete with plans that DL learners have made for the future. There is a sense of increased choices and enlarged horizons. Many wish to continue with further DL sessions while others feel ready to move onwards and upwards with learning and life. As a staff member said – *we are just helping people to take the next step so they can move on*.

7b4. DL structures
The provision of all NALA distance learning services, including the Freephone and telephone tutoring on which we focus here, is underpinned by structures that are well delineated (NALA, 2009b), reviewed and evaluated (NALA, 2009a). The ethos, procedures and policies of DLS are contained in the well-considered *NALA Distance Education Policy 2007-2010, Guidelines for distance tutoring* and a *Student charter* that is shared with learners by their telephone tutor. This latter document might usefully be developed in a range of accessible forms and shared with other NALA learners.

Many aspects of DL structures have emerged in our discussion of the data: the motivational nature of the TV series; the use of the *writeon* website; the Freephone service; the impressions of the initial phone call; the time delay between the initial call and beginning learning; the initial assessment process and the systems of monitoring, recording and evaluating progress. The manner of funding DL on an annual basis has also surfaced in the data, as have opportunities for working in partnership with others in adult learning. In

this section we look at what the data suggest about current and future DL structures.

DL staffing

Besides the overall coordinator of DLS and fulltime Freephone administrator there are two part-time staff members who focus directly on supporting the ten experienced DL tutors. The *Tutor Coordinator* attends to organisational and administrative aspects of tutoring while the *Tutor Support Coordinator* advises on pedagogical aspects of the tutors' role. The latter post includes a high level of tutor support at one hour of contact time per tutor per week. Focus group participants suggested that having a caring and skilled tutor was the most important element of a successful DL service and DL supports reflect an awareness of this concern. Although tutors are working from their own homes they are connected and sustained through weekly online (Skype) links and frequent meeting and training opportunities.

Learning is delivered in 6-week blocks after which progress is reviewed and students have choices to continue with DL, to move on to other learning or to stop if their needs have been satisfied. Aside from the pedagogical aspects of the role, since April 2009 DL has established a new database that is dependent, to some extent, on tutors returning administrative data to a central, online point. Unevenness in compliance with this task was mentioned as inconvenient by non-teaching staff charged with maintaining the statistical profile of DL. We suggest that a monthly update of data that accompanies a salary claim might provide incentive and structure in this regard.

Time management, administrative data collection and record keeping are important elements of the core pedagogical work of DL. 'Communication gaps' are directly pertinent to the quality of the whole learning process and the capacity to be accountable. Records of individual initial assessments, student's learning programmes and progress need to be maintained on a shared database not only so that there is accountability in the system but also so that an unforeseen change of personnel does not cause undue disruption to learners.

At the moment, 'tutors and learners are matched by who is available at the time'. This appears to work well and learners are generally very happy with the tutor they are allocated. Inevitably all tutors need to be flexible and eclectic in their skills but there is some evidence that dyslexia is a recurring issue and it may be useful to have a staff member who specialises in this area (or maybe in ICT or maths). Interviews with DL staff showed that in the next year DL may investigate the deployment of volunteer tutors. If this happens, the need for training and support will broaden to include this extended staff team. In 2009 tutors had training in dyslexia, the database system - Share-point, FETAC, spelling and a number of other issues arising from tutors' expressed needs. It is suggested that prior to service all tutors have training in the ethos, values and work of NALA as well as being supported to implement all DL systems.

The Freephone

The Freephone is the gateway to the literacy service for a large number of callers (4000+ in 2009) and those who operate it are selected for their good telephone manner, their administrative skills and their empathy and understanding of literacy issues. This was evident to the research team in the manner in which Freephone staff competently and efficiently facilitated access to the research sample.

It was clear from the findings that the connection made in this first telephone conversation is pivotal in determining the next stages of a literacy learner's journey. Contact details are recorded, options for learning are explained and a pack of more detailed information is posted to the learner's home. Prospective students make a selection on the spot about the type of learning that appeals to them and the majority were happy and relieved to do so.

> I couldn't give the Freephone enough praise – great communication – I never felt intimidated. *Rural man - telephone interview*

At the same time, there was some concern voiced by both teaching and administrative staff about the extent to which those learners who are very anxious can actually absorb the information. Two people we interviewed in the subsample of 'early leavers' had gathered from the initial call that someone

would call to their house. The more lengthy induction process proposed for 2010 will help ensure such misunderstandings are kept to a minimum.

After the initial call, there was a great variation in the amount of time that people had waited for the subsequent call from a tutor. We understand that these calls are not spread evenly across the year but can come in large blocks in response to a TV broadcast. In April 2009, because of the *Written Off* series, there were 924 calls compared with 139 in the preceding month and this can lead to bottlenecks in the system. Nevertheless the waiting time for the research sample ranged from three days to a number of weeks, a number of months and in one case a year. One man in the subsample claimed never to have been called by a tutor although this was definitely an exception. Delays were upsetting for different reasons. When they were unexpected they led to anxiety and in the most extreme cases to people assuming that they were being rejected on the grounds of ageism, economic circumstances or some other sensitive factor.

> When I called at first I felt a bit forgotten about as I was on a waiting list. I thought because I had told them about it [industrial school] that they wouldn't pay any attention to me. Maybe an extended phone call would have helped as I began to feel I had tried once and might not ever pick it up again. I cried about it so I phoned NALA. They apologised and said they would get in touch and it happened in two weeks. *Urban woman – telephone interview*

It is important that people are given a waiting time so that such speculation and angst is avoided. The option for some of face-to-face, small group induction might speed the process at peak times or the deployment of volunteers to keep in touch with those who are waiting might also help. It is the vacuum that causes problems and some means needs to be found to bridge these inevitable and often unavoidable gaps.

Funding

DL has demonstrated its capacity to attract adults into literacy learning. In particular it provides a lure for men, those in rural areas and those not yet ready to join a more public form of learning. Despite this track record, DL is dependent on an annual funding stream that creates insecurity and is an impediment to strategic planning and programme implementation. The short-

term, annual nature of DL funding left a number of learners in this research disappointed. For those who had finally found a way of learning that suited them it was difficult to have that provision suspended, albeit temporarily, before their goals had been achieved.

> The tutor was encouraging me to join a 1:1 or maybe a group but I am not sure at this point. I feel there is nowhere for me. I feel I am too busy and it is too far. I am really interested in carrying on in this way [DL]. I feel so disappointed. *Rural man – telephone interview*

> I definitely wouldn't go to a class. It's too late to tell people now. I feel I have been left high and dry. *Male learner, less than 3 sessions*

> I can't do it alone. I am afraid of regression. I need back up. *Urban Man - telephone interview*

> It was great for me. I am really disappointed it is finishing. I am not feeling hopeful. It was just what I needed. I have come from being illiterate. I have progressed. There is nowhere else like it for me. It was just right for me really. *Rural man – telephone interview*

Those who had tried alternative learning possibilities found that resources were also an issue there.

> I will have to try and work on by myself. There is a group in [my area] but they are not able to take anyone new at the moment. *Urban man-telephone interview*

The empirical aspect of this research coincided with the break in DL service pending the announcement of funding for 2010. Coupled with the general economic uncertainty many learners were extremely anxious about the future of their favoured method of learning literacy This is at a time of recession when it seems eminently logical and forward-thinking that general adult learning and adult literacy in particular should be prioritised and resourced.

The DL model and a partnership approach

We were impressed during the research process by the experience of DL for learners who were also engaged in employment related training.

> Learning this way has given me extra support for the other course I am involved in. It's hard in the summer when my course finishes but you can stay on working with your DL tutor, which is great. *Learner focus group notes*

A number of research participants had come to DL through a FÁS course and the combination of these two types of provision was described very positively. Some learners enthusiastically described the combined benefits of a face-to-face group and virtual independent learning. This blended approach may be a model worth further exploration between DL and other appropriate groups.

At the moment the DL website offers the possibility to apply online for accreditation in 9 minor awards and one major award at FETAC Level 2. You can also do this with the tutors over the phone.

> It's an online accreditation system so there is no portfolio. There are 9 minor awards at Level 2 with 47 learning outcomes and they are all covered by the interactive website… Groups are using the website in their classrooms. We do all the admin for it, the verification, the authentication and the centres are saved all that admin and work. *DL coordinator – interview notes*

Although there is no pressure on DL learners to take up the accreditation option those that do so are encouraged and motivated by their tangible progress. This system is also a valuable contribution to the extended adult learning sector and might usefully be more extensively used with a whole range of youth and adult learning groups. Similarly the model should be repeated at other levels (e.g. 3 & 4) if resources are available. As well as those on employment courses, some of those in the PLC sector who have left school without qualifications would gain confidence and encouragement from the completion of preceding FETAC awards in preparation for a return to learning at Level 5. Such partnerships would recognise the widespread interest and needs of learners across sectors to have support with language and literacy.

7b5. Gender

There is evidence in the data that men and women experience unmet literacy needs differently and may be attracted to DL for different reasons. There is much literature about the competitive and instrumental nature of the male learner identity and evidence of this in the data suggests that men and women experience the process of DL differently.

Similarly women's default role as carers for their family impacts on the time they allow for their own needs and some women interviewed indicated that this was an issue.

Below we summarise (and generalise) the gender issues that have arisen throughout the findings sections above. These statements need to be read and understood against the finer detail in the findings sections.

Box 9 – Gender issues at a glance

Against the trends in other adult learning, men are more likely than women to choose DL as a form of literacy learning.

Women suggested relational motives for choosing DL more often than did men. Women worked as caregivers and so had limited time or freedom and often they wanted to learn for the benefit of children or grandchildren. Women were more likely to contact the Freephone on behalf of a male relative or to be in an enabling or supporting role.

Women were more likely than men to want to meet other learners or to join a group.

Men wanted to safeguard their identity and protect their privacy and DL enabled them to do so.

There is a gendered response to the literacy stigma that affects men more deeply than women.

Women had more realistic expectations of the time and effort involved in literacy learning than did men. Men became more frustrated with the pace of progress than did women.

Men struggled with study time management and commitment. Women were more organised about learning.

Men were concerned about how they would measure up against others literacy levels and this created an incentive for the individualism of DL. As skills and confidence grew, this concern diminished.

Women were relational and men instrumental in their learning styles.

Some women found it hard to find privacy or time to themselves even in their own home.

7b6. Location

Location emerges from the data as significant for a number of reasons. DL is attractive to those who cannot access VEC provision as well as for those who do not want to do so. The restricted availability of public transport and the time and costs of travel to and from classes makes DL a more attractive option. This is true also of the desire for privacy in closely knit rural and urban communities. Avoiding 'twitching curtain' syndrome was mentioned by one man as a factor in favour of DL and this, in turn, is closely related to the issue of stigma.

Location also emerged as significant in terms of mobile phone reception and broadband access. Our sample was reflective of the urban/rural division in the DL population and connectivity issues varied from area to area.

Box 10 – Location issues at a glance

DL met the needs of those living in isolated areas where travel to and from classes was prohibitive.

DL saved the time and financial costs of travel to and from VEC provision.

The combination of shift work and limited local provision made DL attractive in both urban and rural settings.

The desire for privacy and anonymity took on added significance in closely-knit communities and this made DL an attractive option.

> Connectivity and mobile telephone reception varied from area to area around the country.

7b7. Areas of concern

Those who had 3 or fewer sessions did so for a range of reasons both personal and service-related: family circumstances; time pressures and communication difficulties (phone reception; lost phone; missed contact). Some decided that telephone learning was not for them and moved on to face-to-face provision. A number of areas of concern arose.

Box 11 – Areas of concern at a glance

> Some people were unable to move on to successful adult learning because they need counselling, advice and support in relation to previous school experiences.
>
> The nature of the DL process was not clearly understood by everyone at the outset.
>
> The delay in receiving the first call from a tutor was not always within a pre-established waiting time and this caused anxiety, assumptions and frustration.
>
> The policy in relation to missed calls was not clearly explained to learners and this lead to confusion and claims that calls just stopped.
>
> Some DL participants had unreal expectations about the time commitment and pace of learning and so became disheartened.
>
> Those with poor organisational skills were unable to balance the demands of life and DL and more likely to give up. Without an explicit learning to learn module new DL learners lack the support to become autonomous learners.
>
> A small number of learners felt that their learning programme was not at the right level. They did not feel able to respond honestly when they were asked if they were satisfied with their learning programme.
>
> There was a great variation in the length of DL calls and some learners felt rushed and uneasy about this uncertainty.
>
> There were a very small number of reported boundary breaches between personal and professional concerns.

There is reported inconsistency in tutors' timely updating of the DL database. Requests for data and information are not always met with an accurate and swift response.

Poor connectivity and phone reception was the cause of some 'early leaving'.

Some learners would like the opportunity to occasionally meet with other learners.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

The evaluation of DL 2009 has focussed on the learner experience of DL. We have moved beyond a purely quantitative measure of satisfaction to explore the detail of the DL process through interviews and focus groups with learners. Inevitably DL does not suit everyone and more relational learners may miss the company and solidarity of a peer group. Others may not be ready to become organised and autonomous learners and need help and support to do so. Nevertheless the vast majority of DL learners in 2009 were satisfied with the DL provision. They appreciated the individualised, private, flexible and accessible nature of DL. Tutors and Freephone staff were praised for their skills and helpfulness and many learners had exceeded their learning expectations and progressed to other forms of literacy or vocational learning.

DLS is a blend of telephone, correspondence, Internet and web-based literacy learning opportunities. Learners are motivated by carefully conceived media broadcasts and an ongoing publicity and an awareness-raising campaign in print and on radio and television. The pieces of the jigsaw are various and many aspects of the work are innovative and without any culturally relevant blueprint. In this challenging context DLS has invented a cutting edge literacy model that attracts and satisfies a range of learners who might not otherwise access literacy provision. These include men, home-based caregivers, shift-workers and those in isolated areas ill served by public transport.

FETAC accreditation has been streamlined by DLS and an effective partnership with a FAS project has emerged in the course of this study. We

envisage that many other creative applications of the DL model will emerge that can address the literacy needs of other specific target groups.

Annual funding is a limitation to the implementation and development of DL. It delays both an innovative learning model and the individual DL participants from reaching their deserved potential. NALA has evolved a sturdy responsive structure in the provision of DL. Co-ordination and teaching staff have invaluable experience in a new and effective method of literacy development that attracts and prepares learners for moving on to other study or vocational areas. DLS puts in place a set of stepping-stones that allow those with unmet literacy needs to become confident, autonomous learners with raised hopes for their learning future.

Based on the research findings we make a small number of realistic recommendations for how the service might be further attuned to the needs of DL users.

Box 12 - Recommendations

1. **DLS should design and pilot a pre-learning induction programme** that may include the following options as required: Counselling about past traumatic learning experience; a clear outline of all aspects of the DL service; a comprehensive introduction to learning to learn; introduction to using ICT for DL; guidelines on organisational study skills for DL and the negotiation of an individual learning programme (ILP) rooted in the NALA curriculum guidelines. For some this induction might take place face-to-face in a small group and this group might meet on a six-weekly basis to evaluate progress and decide next steps.

2. Organisational systems should be implemented that ensure **new DL learners have a clear expectation of their start date** with a tutor (or induction programme) so that delays do not become open-ended and cause anxiety.

3. The new DL year provides an opportunity to **clarify contracts with tutors** that include the requirement to update the DL database in an accurate and

timely manner. Duration and number of calls should continue to be transparent and learner-led.

4. The benefit of **the successful model of FETAC accreditation on-line should be extended** to others in the youth and adult learning sector who might in turn contribute to resourcing a post for maintaining and developing this service.

5. **NALA should investigate new strategic partnerships with other organisations** for which DL might provide a complementary service that builds learning confidence and encourages literacy progression.

6. NALA should continue to lobby for funding for DLS to be mainstreamed and provided in a manner that allows for strategic planning and implementation on a multi-annual basis.

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10.   Appendices

Appendix A – Available Freephone data

From January 2009 to date there have been **3,100** callers to the Freephone

Of these **3,100** calls

- 404 were for NALA Distance Learning Service
- 585 requested information on their local VEC Adult Literacy Service
- 1776 requested information packs
- 577 were general queries including DL queries re tutors, queries re spellings, request materials, check whether materials had been sent out etc.

Breakdown of these calls:

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug
No of callers	591	144	139	924	570	229	176	327
DLS	28	4	2	133	99	27	17	94
Refer to VEC	291	51	36	52	35	15	27	82
Other	32	30	42	152	143	68	73	37
Info pack	352	105	100	506	316	94	61	242

Overall Profile of callers

Gender

1358 female

1141 male

601 unknown (no name entered in database e.g. if it was a general query) Before the current team was put in place in April, gender was not recorded. There is no way to find out this information now.

How did you hear about the Freephone service? List options and numbers

(Total 3100)

Unknown	1635	An Post TV Ads	45
Family member	9	Friend	84
Learning Centre	9	NALA	36
NALA materials	9	Newspapers/print	22
Other (mainly Google/internet	94	Other organisations	16
Print Media	12	Radio Ads	387
TV ads	542	VEC ALS	22
Written Off?	166	Written Off? TV Promos	12

Region	Male	Female	Total
Leinster	828	1008	1836
Ulster	82	66	148
Munster	331	387	718
Connaught	137	154	291

Total	1378	1615	2993

County	Male	Female	Total
Donegal	44	33	77
Cavan	18	19	37
Monaghan	14	11	25
Louth	34	43	77
Meath	60	58	118
Westmeath	30	26	56
Longford	19	13	32
Offaly	19	13	32
Kildare	64	80	144
Laois	19	30	49
Wicklow	37	40	77
Carlow	14	17	31
Kilkenny	12	28	40
Wexford	51	52	103
Tipperary	46	63	109
Waterford	34	22	56
Cork	134	172	306
Kerry	39	44	83
Limerick	45	64	109
Clare	25	31	56
Galway	70	82	152
Roscommon	9	12	21

Mayo	28	36	64
Sligo	28	18	46
Leitrim	6	10	16

Dublin City and County	Male	Female	Total
Dublin 1	16	15	31
Dublin 2	8	11	19
Dublin 3	14	15	29
Dublin 4	14	12	26
Dublin 5	17	26	43
Dublin 6	24	29	53
Dublin 7	21	28	49
Dublin 8	19	29	48
Dublin 9	14	17	31
Dublin 10	12	9	21
Dublin 11	20	19	39
Dublin 12	20	27	47
Dublin 13	8	13	21
Dublin 14	2	17	19
Dublin 15	24	33	57
Dublin 16	10	24	34
Dublin 17	4	6	10
Dublin 18	7	13	20
Dublin 20	6	4	10
Dublin 22	37	39	76
Dublin 24	35	43	78

Co Dublin	*108*	*175*	*283*

Profile of Distance Learners: callers who engaged in NALA's DLS

From the 3100 we've had 404 interested in Distance Learning.

Gender

Male	246
Female	158

Breakdown per county

County	Numbers	Percentage	County	Numbers	Percentage
Co. Carlow	6	1.49%	Co. Mayo	7	1.73%

Co. Cavan	7	1.73%	Co. Meath	36	8.91%
Co. Clare	9	2.23%	Co. Monaghan	5	1.24%
City of Cork	5	1.24%	Co. Offaly	7	1.73%
Co. Cork	42	10.40%	Co. Roscommon	4	0.99%
Co. Donegal	12	2.97%	Co. Sligo	4	0.99%
City of Dublin	100	24.75%	Tipperary	15	3.71%
City of Galway	2	0.50%	City of Waterford	2	0.50%
Co. Galway	15	3.71%	Co. Waterford	6	1.49%
Co. Kerry	13	3.22%	Co. Westmeath	9	2.23%
Co. Kildare	20	4.95%	Co. Wexford	12	2.97%
Co. Kilkenny	4	0.99%	Co. Wicklow	10	2.48%
Co. Laois	2	0.50%	Armagh	0	0.0%
Co. Leitrim	3	0.74%	Derry	0	0.0%
City of Limerick	5	1.24%	Down	1	0.25%
Co. Limerick	10	2.48%	Tyrone	0	0.0%
Co. Longford	4	0.99%	Unknown	0	0.0%
Co Dublin	27	6.68			

Number of Learners	Number of Sessions
21	1
28	2
19	3
18	4

22	5
10	6
15	7
8	8
4	9
5	10
3	11
6	12
1	13
5	14
4	15
3	16
1	17
3	18
2	19
2	20
3	21
1	22
1	24
1	26

Gender, age, location

Of the 88 Males between 18 – 35

Carlow	2	Cork	10
Donegal	4	Co Dublin	2

Galway	4	Kerry	9
Kildare	9	Kilkenny	2
Laois	2	Leitrim	2
Louth	1	Mayo	2
Meath	3	Monaghan	2
Offaly	3	Waterford	3
Westmeath	3	Wexford	2
Dublin City	23		

Of the 114 Males between 36 – 54

Carlow	3	Cork	14
Cavan	3	Clare	6
Donegal	5	Co Dublin	6
Galway	3	Kerry	8
Kildare	3	Kilkenny	0%
Limerick	3	Longford	2
Laois	3	Leitrim	2
Louth	0	Mayo	2
Meath	10	Monaghan	2
Offaly	2	Waterford	2
Tipperary	11	Wexford	2
Dublin City	22		

Of the 36 Males 55+

Co Down	1	Co Waterford	4
Co Kildare	4	Co Westmeath	4
Co Meath	5	Dublin City	10

Co Cork	5	Co Donegal	3

Of the 42 females aged between 18 – 35

Cavan	4	Cork	7
Kildare	6	Meath	2
Sligo	2	Tipperary	5
Wicklow	4	Dublin City	6
Galway City	3	Limerick City	3

Of the 82 females aged between 36 – 54

Cavan	2	Cork	9
Co Dublin	12	Co Galway	6
Co Kildare	2	Co Laois	2
Co Leitrim	2	Co Limerick	2
Co Meath	9	Co Offaly	2
Co Roscommon	4	Co Wexford	5
Dublin City	21	Limerick City	4

Of the 42 females aged 55+

Carlow	2	Co Cork	5
Co Dublin	2	Co Galway	2
Co Kildare	2	Co Kilkenny	2

Co Meath	2	Co Wexford	8
Co Wicklow	2	Dublin City	13
Limerick City	2		

Category	Male	Female	Total
Employed	120	77	**197**
Unemployed	86	71	**157**
Retired	13	8	**21**
Other (state)	12	17	**29**
Total	**231**	**173**	**404**
Aged to 17	0	0	**0**
Aged 18-35	88	42	**130**
Aged 36-54	114	82	**196**
Aged 55 or over	36	42	**78**
Total	**238**	**166**	**404**
Pre- referral education level			
No formal qualifications	14	14	**28**
Primary	119	91	**210**
Junior Cert	62	35	**97**
Leaving Cert	41	28	**69**
Total	**236**	**168**	**404**

Learning goals of learners in free text but rough summary

Learning Goals	
Spelling	50
Reading/Writing/Spelling	86
Reading	10
Gain qualifications/accreditation	6
Maths	16
Computers	10
Writing	21
Improve overall skills	22

Family Status	
Married/partner	59
Single	30
1 child	15
2 children	28
3 children	6
4 children	3
10 children	3
Separated	3
Unknown	238

Appendix B - Generic learner interview schedule

NALA DLS Evaluation Phone interview schedule

1. Introduction

Brief explanation - what the evaluation is about and overview of what the questions will be about.

Consent – **Y**   **N**

Any questions you would like to ask me?

2. Background information

1. Gender

2. Location

3. Age

4. What age were you when you left school?

5. What formal education qualifications have you completed?

6. Do you have any other qualifications?   **Y**   **N**

7. Have you attended literacy classes before?   **Y**   **N**

   a. How was that?

   b. Why stop?

8. Are you working at the moment?   **Y**   **N**

9. What work are you involved in?

10. Do you have Internet access?   **Y**   **N**

11. Do you have broadband access?   **Y**   **N**

12. How long have you been involved in DL?

3. Processes

Awareness / decision stage

1. How did you first hear about the NALA DLS?

2. What attracted you to the service?

   a. Why now?

Getting started

3. What was it like phoning the Freephone number the first time?

    a. What information did you get at that point?

    b. Was it useful?   **Y**   **N**

    c. Do you have any ideas about how that information could be made even more useful / clearer?

    d. Looking back on it now is there any other information that would have been useful to have at that time?

4. First DL Telephone call

5. How soon after your talk with the Freephone operator did your tutor contact you?

6. Can you remember your first conversation with your tutor?

7. How were you feeling before the call?

8. What happened during the call?

9. What did you talk about?

10. How were you feeling after the call?

11. How do you agree on when she will call you?

12. When do you take your learning telephone call?

13. How long does it last usually?

14. How easy is it for you to find the time to take the calls?

15. Have you ever needed to change the time of the call?　　　Y　　　N

16. Was it easy to organise?　　　Y　　　N

Agreeing curriculum

17. Can you tell me what sort of work you are doing together?

18. How did you decide on what you would work on?

19. Are you happy with the different areas you are working on?　Y　　　N

20. Do you feel you could say to her that you were unhappy with some of the work you are doing?　　Y　　　N

Materials/ Internet/ TV show

21. What **materials** do you use for your literacy work?

22. What do you think of them?

23. Any ideas for improving them?

24. Have you used the literacy **writeon.ie** sites at all?　　Y　　　N

(If yes)

What was that like?

Is there something particularly good about the sites?

Any suggestions for improvements?

(If no)

Would you be interested in using it?

25. Did you watch the Written Off **TV** series?　　　Y　　　N

26. What did you think of that?

27. Was there anything you particularly liked about it?

28. Was there anything you disliked about it?

29. Anything you would change?

Literacy work

30. About how much time a week do you spend on your literacy work?

31. How easy is it for you to find time to do your study?

32. When do you do your homework?

33. Does the pace of learning suit you?   **Y   N**

34. Changes?

Independent learning

35. What are the advantages of learning literacy on your own?

36. What are the disadvantages?

37. Do you ever feel that it would be useful to meet up with other literacy learners?   **Y   N**

38. Advantages?

39. Disadvantages?

Motivation

40. Have you ever felt like quitting?   **Y   N**

    a.   What made you change your mind?

Confidentiality

41. How important is confidentiality to you?

a. Why is that?

4. Relationships

Tutor

42. How would you describe your relationship with your tutor?

43. What does she do that helps you work with her?

44. How does your tutor communicate with you?

45. Do you get a chance to give her feedback on how the tutoring is going for you?

46. Have you any ideas that might improve the working relationship with your tutor?

Other

47. Do your family / friends know you are involved in this work?   **Y   N**

48. (**If yes**) What support do you get from them?

(**If no**) Why do they not know?

49. How have your personal relationships been affected by your work with the DLS?

50. How have your work relationships been affected by your work with the DLS?

5. Outcomes

51. How would you describe your **reading** at the beginning of the work with your tutor?

52. Can you name any improvements?

53. What has helped? / Hindered?

54. How would you describe your **listening and speaking skills** at the beginning of the work with your tutor?

55. Can you name any improvements?

56. What has helped? / Hindered?

57. How would you describe your **writing** at the beginning of the work with your tutor?

58. Can you name any improvements?

59. What has helped? / Hindered?

60. How would you describe your **maths/ numeracy** skills at the beginning of the work with your tutor?

61. Can you name any improvements?

62. What has helped? / Hindered?

63. What other areas have you worked on with your tutor?

64. Can you name any improvements?

65. Are you doing FETAC accreditation work?   **Y   N**

66. What made you decide to do that?

67. Are there any other benefits from being involved in the work with your tutor?

68. Remembering back to that first phone call and your plan to work on your literacy would you say that the DLS met your expectations?

69. Have you made any changes to your life as a result of the work you have done with your tutor?   **Y   N**

70. Are you planning any changes in the future?   **Y   N**

71. What do you think you will do next to further strengthen your literacy skills?

Nearly finished now!!!

Have you any other ideas about how the service could be improved?

Focus group participation

We are hoping to meet with a small group of learners involved in DLS on the 23rd January to discuss this some more – it will be in…… at …..and there will be a nice lunch on the day and any travel expenses will be covered. Would you be interested in coming along?

Do you have any samples of materials that you worked on with your tutor -- before and after examples? Would you be willing to bring them along to the day? Or post them to me at NALA?

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. Truly appreciate it.

END

Appendix C – Interview schedule with database manager

Draft interview schedule for Grainne re DLS database

The research project is gathering data to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of NALA's Distance Learning Service, 2009. Where possible we want to **gather administrative data** that reveal any trends in relation to DLS choice, processes, use

and outcomes. Where recorded, qualitative data to support the figures also needs to be gathered from the database.

We propose to frame the qualitative and quantitative findings in relation to the DLS within the model of *Processes, Relationships,* and *Outcomes (outlined below)*. This way of presenting the findings signifies a move away from purely result-based measures of effectiveness. The framework specifically acknowledges and values the breadth of skill and commitment invested in the way that work is done and the relationships that sustain it. It allows us to map different facets of the journey as well as the ultimate performances and destinations.

This evaluative model is particularly appropriate for reviewing new and creative learning projects in that it takes account of the rewarding and challenging, relational and developmental aspects of endeavour that are sometimes ignored when focusing solely on outcomes.

Box 1: *The evaluative framework*

Distance literacy learning <u>processes</u>

Distance literacy

learning <u>relationships</u>

Distance literacy

learning <u>outcomes</u>
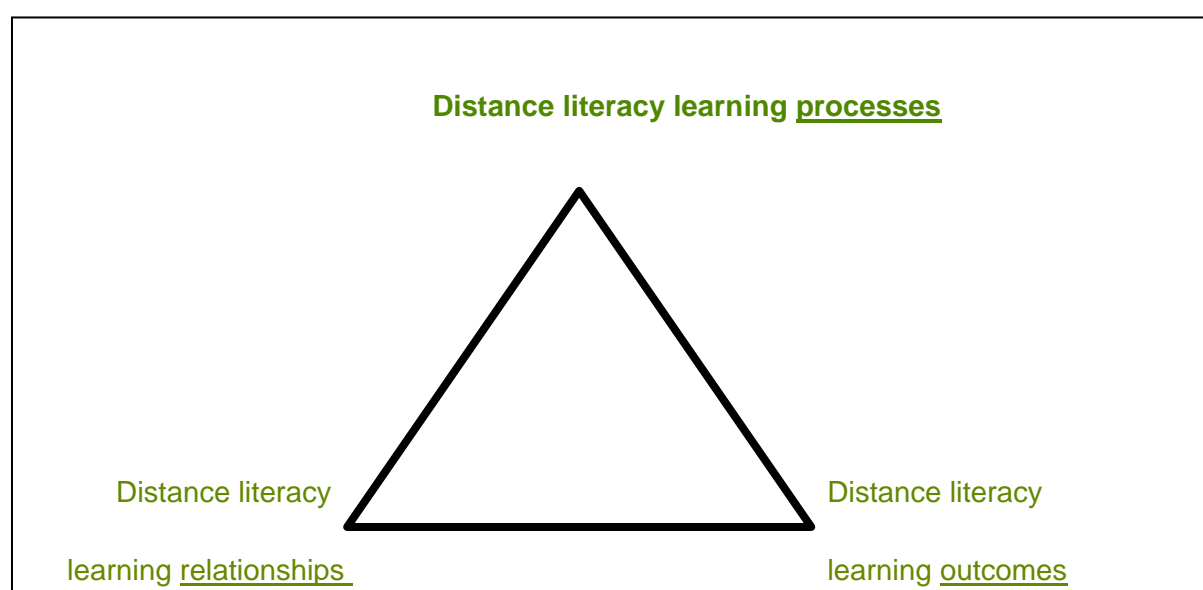
- **Processes** *will examine how the DLS has been designed, implemented, supported and managed*: how **DLS** works in practice; how the work has been supported, monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis.
- **Relationships** *will gather data that* explore the structure and quality of

relationships between the various participants, tutors and other stakeholders in the DLS. It will examine how learning relationships are built and maintained and how the 'distance' aspect of learning impacts on the affective domain.

- **Outcomes** *will review the qualitative and quantitative results of the work for all stakeholders*: completion of the task; achievement of the goals and consequential impacts on individuals including a specific focus on gender and geographical groups.

Distance learning literacy processes

Initial access of the Freephone Helpline

Total calls for 2009

Breakdown of total calls (gender; age; location by county; urban/rural; ethnicity; employment; family status/parents;)

Breakdown of DLS data (as above)

Proportion of callers who select DLS (as above)

What data is available in relation to the motivation for calls?

What data is available in relation to the motivation for returning to learn?

Quantitative data re stated goals?

What data is gathered re educational history?

Comparison between motivation/ goals of VEC and other learners?

Any significant/quantifiable changes this year?

Making the choice of DLS

What information is given to guide the selection of learning method?

Is there a script?

What data exists re change of learning method?

What comments are gathered re change of learning method?

What figures/patterns are available in relation to length of engagement with DLS?

How does the rate of retention for DLS compare with other aspects of the service?

Any significant/quantifiable changes this year?

Engagement

Breakdown of total hours DLS tuition

Number of phone tutor hours

Average hours per person

Unit cost per person

Unit cost compared to other aspects of the service

What data is gathered in relation to areas of study/learning?

Any significant/quantifiable changes this year?

Materials and support

What data have been gathered re satisfaction with packs of materials?

What data have been gathered re access to website materials?

What data have been gathered re satisfaction with website materials?

What data have been gathered re satisfaction with tutor support?

What data have been gathered re satisfaction with the DLS learning process?

Any significant/quantifiable changes this year?

Distance learning literacy relationships

Not applicable for database interview

Distance learning literacy outcomes

What data exist in relation to achieved goals?

What data exist in relation to reviewed/reset goals?

How many opted for FETAC accredited course? (Data breakdown by gender, age etc)

How many achieved FETAC accreditation? (Data breakdown by age, gender etc)

Any significant/quantifiable changes this year?

Retention

Retention rate?

Data in relation to those not retained; why do learners stop using DLS?

Is there a complaints/review process? Data gathered from this?

Any significant/quantifiable changes this year?

Progression

Are exit data gathered? What do they record?

What trends emerge in terms of reasons for stopping use of DLS?

What are the main progression routes? (Data breakdown by gender etc..)

Any significant/quantifiable changes this year?

Appendix D - Sample spread sheet

Total sample	100				
Male	60	urban male	18	rural male	42
female	40	urban female	12	rural female	28

subsample	early leavers	3 sessions or less			
Male	12	urban male	9	rural male	3
Female	6	urban female	1	rural female	5

Caller ID no.	location	gender	age	sessions	outcome	needs	positives	negatives	ICTs	other
1447	Kildare	male	50	2	personal goal	spelling/work	privacy/1:1	no funds	yes	would like to continue
498	Cork	male	46	3	stopped	flexibility	low cost	level too easy	yes	wants leaving cert
590	Cork	male	34	2	lost phone	flexibility	privacy	finding time	yes	would like to continue
2011	Longford	male	42	3	stopped	flexibility	learning	childcare	yes	would like to continue
2560	Cork	male	39	3	stopped	anonymity	faceless	level too easy	yes	huge lack of confidence
3102	Navan	male	52	0	no contact	beginner			yes /can't use	own business
1342	Kerry	male	34	3	tutor left	girlfriend phoned		didn't suit me	yes	would prefer 1:1 mobile to mobile poor connection
3301	Kildare	male	46	0	no funds	dyslexic	confidentiality	hopes dashed	yes	need to talk about issues
1219	Laois	male	36	1	no contact	flexibility	home-based	disappointed	yes	self-employed
371	Galway	male	37	1	in VEC group	wife called			yes	
1054	Cavan	male	38	0	in VEC group	adv. Spelling			yes	assessed as too advanced for DLS
1027	Athlone	male	48	2	calls stopped	flexibility	home-based	finding level	no	still looking for means to meet needs
23	Dublin 11	female	60	0	none				no	expected home tuition/ irish Trave;;er
3047	Wexford	female	60	3	stopped	help g/children	enjoyed process		no	family illness and care responsibilities prevented further commitment
1057	Galway	female	51	2	stopped	beginner	individualism	time pressure	yes /can't use	thought someone would call/ would like computer class
2146	Galway	female	60	3	contact hard	confidence	tutor warmth	time pressure	no	lack of confidence
2027	Meath	female	53	2	contact hard	help g/children	tutor warmth	time pressure	yes	may be dyslexic/would like face to face learning
2217	Galway	female	49	2	stopped	spelling	respected	time pressure	yes	family illness and care responsibilities prevented further commitment

Core sample										
	Urban women									
1627	Dublin 6	female	54	15	satisfied	ICT/confidence	tutor warmth	initial delay	yes	would like to continue if funds available
1793	Dublin 22	female	57	5	progress to l/c	ICT/ comm.	privacy	own shame	yes	lacking in self-esteem
1295	Dublin 15	female	54	7	fizzled out	independence	relaxed	frustrating	no	believes may l be dyslexic/ memory issues
1040	Dublin 16	female	34	10	moved on	confidence	tutor skill	self-doubt	yes	self and 2 family members going to VEC class
986	Dublin	female	39	4	satisfied	ESOL	tutor skill	self-esteem	yes	great confidence boost/met needs
2102	Dublin 8	female	49	8	satisfied	privacy	not institution	initial delay	no	survivor of industrial school
1280	Dublin 17	female	58	11	surpassed exp	flexibility	tutor skill	miss contact	yes	would like afternoon class/not available
1818	Dublin 22	female	52	6	surpassed exp	class over	tutor skill	miss contact	yes	would like to continue learning
1749	Dublin	female	61	8	satisfied	flexibility	learned to lear	miss contact	yes	great confidence boost/met needs
1040	Dublin	female	34	12	surpassed exp	privacy	maths better	initial delay	yes	motivated to do vocational course
2085	Dublin	female	34	7	surpassed exp	lit for work	tutor skill	initial delay	yes	motivated to do vocational course
	Urban men									
1218	Kilkenny	male	47	7	v dissatisfied	basic literacy		skype quality	no	demotivated by poor experience with DLS
1430	Dublin 24	male	60	11	progress to VEC	C Privacy	tutor warmth	none	no	survivor of inst abuse/huge gain in confidence
1733	Dublin 7	male	36-54	12						unavailable for interview
554	Dublin 4	male	55+	5						unavailable for interview
1251	Dublin 22	male	51	5	more confident	spelling	self belief	miss contact	yes	stopped early for family reasons/will go to 1:1 now
1590	Dublin 15	male	55	4	stopped	work related	home-based	time issues	yes	phone learning didn't work/would prefer face to face
2488	Dublin 13	male	37	4	stopped	spelling	home-based	time/family	no	depressed/may join group/has joined library
2188	Bray	male	59	9	surpassed exp	privacy	personalised	initial delay	yes	may join class now/lobbying for DLS funds
820	Dublin 24	male	56	5	disappointed	help g/children	tutor warmth	level too high	no	stopped answering phone/will try 1:1
1018	Dublin 12	male	43	5	In VEC group	flexibility	tutor warmth	miss contact	yes	moved on to 1:1 in VEC
1672	Bray	male	39	7	satisfied	flexibility	mobility	miss contact	yes	stopped for family care reasons/would like to resume
1014	Cork	male	36	12	FETAC level 5	flexibility	tutor skill	miss contact	yes	ESOL learner
489	Dublin 1	male	68	16	surpassed exp	spelling	home-based	no funds	no	would like to resume learning with DLS
2306	Dublin 11	male	44	11	satisfied	written work	tutor skill	miss contact	yes	disappointed by funding break
1945	Dublin	male	43	15	satisfied	for children	tutor warmth	miss contact	yes	working alone now as no tuition available
	Rural women									
2451	Roscommon	female	40	11	satisfied	for children	home-based	no funds	yes	would like to continue if funds available
2787	Meath	female	53	5	surpassed exp	maths	privacy	get stuck	yes	would like to continue if funds available
3055	Limerick	female	42	9	surpassed exp	reading	listened to	finding time	no	would like to continue if funds available
1588	Sligo	female	28	8	will continue	flexibility	home-based	care pressures	no	would like to continue learning
1763	Cork	female	18-35	19						not available for interview
1345	Galway	female	62	15	satisfied	access issue	home-based	miss contact	no	would like to continue learnir in group
1463	Roscommon	female	51	11	satisfied	for children	personalised	get stuck	no	would like to continue learnir in group
2346	Cork	female	49	15	satisfied	for work	individualised	none	no	Leaving Irelan will continue lit work elsewhere
26	Leinster	female	50	6	frustrated	dyslexic	home-based	poor reception	no	Now working with Dyslexia Assoc.
1355	Cork	female	50	15	v satisfied	for work	personalised	none	yes	now wants to complete FETAC 5 for work
2785	Wexford	female	57	5	satisfied	for g/children	private start	face to face	yes/ can't use	Would like more but hesitant about face to face
1962	Cork	female	49	5	stopped	longterm goal	home-based	uncommited	yes	life took a dip' and hard to continue
1365	Limerick	female	46	8	satisfied	self and son	private start	miss contact	no	would like to continue learnir in group
2607	Cork	female	51	6	satisfied	longterm goal	home-based	initial delay	no	would like to resume learning with DLS
1006	Carlow	female	59	4	tutor stopped	personal goal	home-based	abrupt stop	yes	would like to resume learning with DLS
1797	Cork	female	55	5	tutor stopped	for confidence	privacy	miss contact	yes	worked in car/would like to learn locally now
2140	Kerry	female	37	8	surpassed exp	for self/child	individualised	childcare	yes	1:1 arranged and assertiveness
3099	Limerick	female	47	2	satisfied	spelling	individualised	miss contact	yes	would like to continue learning
3047	Wexford	female	61	8	v satisfied	for g/children	home-based	miss contact	no	experienced abuses at school
3112	Kildare	female	33	3	satisfied	new mother	home-based	miss contact	yes	would like to resume learning with DLS
1159	Cork	female	54	4	stopped	for work	flexibility	none	yes	husband ill/would like to resume now
2790	Meath	female	62	4	satisfied	for confidence	privacy/1:1	none	yes	would like to resume learning with DLS
1282	Limerick	female	64	4	stopped	Beginner	tutor warmth	confusing	yes/ can't use	would like to learn in group of other beginners
	Rural men									
2726	Cork	male	45	10	satisfied	basic skills	personalised	calls too short	yes	would like to resume learning with DLS
2861	Wexford	male	34	5	independence	basic skills	home-based	miss contact	no	would like to continue if funds available
1021	Galway	male	42	12	satisfied	for work/chn	tutor skill	initial delay	no	would like to continue learning
1652	Monaghan	male	47	21	surpassed exp	personal goal	flexibility	none	no	care responsibilities prevent attaending classes
475	Killarney	male	26	8	satisfied	for college	privacy	a bit awkward	yes	now in college doing computer degree
1227	Monaghan	male	37	18	satisfied	to get work	privacy/1:1	get stuck/dela	yes	has progressed to classes and well settled
1334	Wicklow	male	37	15	surpassed exp	son/work	confidentiality	self-motivatior	yes	stopped for family care reasons/would like to resume
1679	Cork	male	30	12	satisfied	driving license	confidentiality	no funds	yes	very disappointed in Funding break/doing very well
2336	Limerick	male	41	18	surpassed exp	self/children	good start	level too low	yes	want lots more education
292	Cork	male	53	6	surpassed exp	personal goal	confidentiality	miss company	no	would like to continue if funds available
1080	Cork	male	33	4	disappointed	individualised	not heard		yes	may try to go on alone
1212	Kildare	male	36	12	satisfied	for work/chn	own pace	none	yes	would like to continue if funds available
1653	Cork	male	63	21	surpassed exp	personal goal	individualised	frustration	yes	strong advocate for DLS
3123	Kenmare	male	42	4	disappointed	personal/work	confidentiality	tutor let down	yes	would like to try again in new year
1291	Waterford	male	56	10	satisfied	work related	privacy/1:1	none	yes	would like to continue learning
1004	Wexford	male	46	9	ok/stopped	own business	privacy	time/family	no	would like to try again in new year
1016	Tipperary	male	42	8	satisfied	spelling	flexibility	time issues	yes	has commitment issues at the moment
1346	Offaly	male	67	7	satisfied	personal goal	privacy/1:1	none	yes	wants to write a book
2743	Meath	male	33	9	satisfied	FAS course	flexibility	none	yes	wants own business
3105	Clare	male	36	6	gave up	Beginner	privacy/1:1	level too high	no	would like to try again in new year
2742	Meath	male	48	6	surpassed exp	FAS course	individualised	none	yes	doing level 4 FETAC next
1737	Cork	male	59	6	satisfied	Beginner	personalised	skype quality	yes	would like to continue learning
1690	Cavan	male	51	6	tutor stopped	Beginner	individualised	miss contact	yes	process worked/tutor became unavailable
2229	Cavan	male	41	6	stopped	spelling	individualised	time issues	yes	stopped because of lack of time and motivation
1003	Waterford	male	38	4	got job	flexibility	faceless	level too easy	yes	DLS tiring after work
1492	Cork	male	29	14	satisfied	for work	privacy/1:1	frustrating	yes	would like to continue if funds available
1037	Laois	male	40	6	disappointed	personal goal	privacy/1:1	slow progress	yes	would like intensive, daily tuition
1013	Offaly	male	32	6	disappointed	spelling	ok start	level/time	yes	felt there was no progress/ would try again face to face
1870	Kerry	male	35-54	11						not available for interview
1056	Carlow	male	18-35	4						not available for interview
486	Limerick	male	34	8	satisfied	spelling	focussed/1:1	none	yes	using websites/would like more if funds restored
3106	Tipperary	male	46	4	satisfied	for children	privacy/1:1	initial delay	yes	will keep on alone/would never join class
1329	Tipperary	male	51	5	surpassed exp	personal goal	privacy/1:1	faceless	no	would like to continue if funds available