

National Adult Literacy Agency

Submission on

- the contribution the further education sector, and in particular adult basic skills provision, might make to meeting the Skills Strategy objectives, taking into account the resource constraints of the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014, and
- the role of further education and adult basic skills provision within the overall further education and training sector.

February 2011

Missing out on the skills of literacy and numeracy is not just a tragedy for the individual: that personal tragedy is also an enormous loss for all of us in Irish society. Research has shown clearly that mastering the skills of literacy and numeracy brings with it many social, economic and health benefits for the individual and society as a whole.

We know too that children who do not learn to read, write and communicate effectively are more likely to leave school early, be unemployed or in low skilled jobs, to have poorer emotional and physical health, to have limited earning power, and to be more likely to be imprisoned.

Department of Education and Skills (DES). 2010



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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The National Adult Literacy Agency

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent organisation that:

- is the voice of adults wishing to improve their literacy skills, and
- is committed to raising adult literacy levels.

Our mission

Our mission is to be the voice of adult literacy in Ireland and, with our partners, influence policy and practice to support people in developing their literacy.

NALA's vision

We want Ireland to be a place where adult literacy is a valued right and where everyone can both develop their literacy and take part more fully in society.

How NALA defines literacy

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communications: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.

The definition of literacy is also changing as the concept of 'literacies' becomes more widely understood. This concept recognises that people use different skills for various real-life situations, for example using a computer, reading workplace instructions or understanding a payslip.

If a person needs to develop confidence and skill in particular aspects of literacy, it does not mean that they have difficulty with all of the basics. Equally, if a person has a qualification, it does not always mean that they have high levels of literacy. Many adults who have not practised their literacy for a number of years lose confidence and skills.

Rationale for our submission

NALA welcomes this request to present our views on:

- the contribution the further education sector, and in particular adult basic skills provision, might make to meeting the Skills Strategy objectives, taking into account the resource constraints of the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014; and
- the role of further education and adult basic skills provision within the overall further education and training sector.

This submission sets out how we believe the DES in conjunction with key stakeholders can improve outcomes for adults with literacy difficulties in Ireland in line with the objectives of the National Skills Strategy (NSS). We developed this submission based on our strategic plan (2010) and consultations with adult literacy students, our members and other key players in adult literacy.

The submission is structured as follows: it sets out the challenges facing the FE sector and in particular basic skill provision in meeting the Skills Strategy objectives, followed by recommendations to enhance its quality and capacity.

Challenges to achieving the NSS objectives

Extent of literacy difficulties

The International Adult Literacy Survey in 1997 highlighted the extent of literacy difficulties among Irish adults. According to the survey, **one in four Irish adults has a significant literacy difficulty**. To date, this remains the most up-to-date information on adult literacy levels in Ireland. Standards among Irish 15-year-olds in school showed a significant decline in literacy and mathematics in the latest OECD (PISA) results.¹ Reading ability of Irish 15-year-olds ranks in 17th place out of 39 countries, compared to 5th place in 2000, while Ireland is below the OECD average in mathematics. These young people will be adults next year.

People with literacy difficulties are more likely to be unemployed and at risk of social exclusion.² Indeed, a recent report published by the Economic and Social Research Institute states that men and women with literacy difficulties are more likely to be long-term unemployed.³ In addition, research published by NALA in 2009⁴ reports that people with literacy difficulties are likely to have lower earnings and lower career aspirations. They are also less likely to become involved in their community, vote or do voluntary work.

¹ What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science, OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, 2009.

² Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, FÁS (2009) *National Skills Bulletin 2009*. Dublin: FÁS.

³ O'Connell, P.J. *et al* (2009) *National Profiling of the Unemployed in Ireland, Research Series Number 10*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.

⁴ National Adult Literacy Agency (2009) *A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training*. Dublin: NALA.

Policy and funding context

The Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science believes that, to address the “unacceptable” adult literacy levels in Ireland, a concerted, planned approach to adult literacy development is “the most urgent requirement”.⁵

National and European policies have been devised to achieve this aim. In Ireland, the National Skills Strategy (2007) promotes a vision of Ireland in 2020 based on a well-educated and highly skilled population. The European Union’s *Council Conclusions on a strategic framework for European co-operation in education and training* (known as ET2020) set a target that “...all learners attain an adequate level of basic skills, especially in reading, mathematics and science”. They state that co-operation on basic skills should be a priority in the first cycle of ET2020’s implementation.

After a decade of economic growth, Ireland now faces a far more difficult economic situation and much changed labour market. 404,200 people in the labour force have a Junior Certificate level qualification or less, of which 6% have primary level or no qualifications.⁶ The majority of these, 314,000 are in the workplace and 90,200 are unemployed men. These difficult circumstances will increase pressure on people who may need greater and more targeted literacy support to take part in society and improve their chances of employment. Those most in need should receive the most State support.

Limited engagement in adult learning

People with literacy and numeracy difficulties are less likely to take part in education and training.⁷ Those with few or no qualifications have also benefitted least from investment in training.⁸ It is essential to fill this gap with targeted and flexible learning opportunities for people who wish to develop their literacy and numeracy.

There are significant gains to individuals, their families and community if they can develop their literacy. For example, for adults taking part in intensive adult literacy tuition, a move from one level on the National Framework of Qualifications to the next leads to increased earnings of almost €4,000 a year.⁹ According to research carried out by the UK’s National Literacy Trust in 2008,¹⁰ those with improved literacy are more likely to own their own home and get involved in local issues.

⁵ Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science (May 2006) *Fourth Report: Adult Literacy in Ireland*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

⁶ CSO website: http://www.cso.ie/qnhs/calendar_quarters_qnhs.htm Table 23, Q. 3, 2010

⁷ Morgan, M. *et al* (1998) *International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) *Tomorrow’s Skills – Towards a National Skills Strategy*. Dublin: Forfás.

⁸ FÁS (2009) *Irish Labour Market Review 2008*. Dublin: FÁS.

⁹ National Adult Literacy Agency (2009) *A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training*. Dublin: NALA.

¹⁰ Dugdale, G. and Clark, C. (2008) *Literacy Changes Lives: An Advocacy Resource*. London: National Literacy Trust.

Limited choices of provision

Despite policy commitments and increased resources in further education in recent years, one third of the adult population in Ireland still has less than a Junior Certificate or equivalent qualification. The Department of Education and Skills provides funding for a range of part-time back-to-education programmes aimed at this group, recording 130,000 participants in 2008. These participants include 45,000 adult literacy students served by VEC adult literacy services. This figure, however, is less than 10% of those with significant literacy difficulties and includes people who are learning English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). On average, most of these students can access only two hours' tuition a week, which equals two weeks' full-time education a year. (See Appendix 1 for further details) There is often insufficient time on task to make sustainable gains and tuition is normally only available Monday to Friday. Other points for consideration include:

- Insufficient accreditation offerings at Levels 1 and 2, for example, according to FETAC, 42% of VECs do not offer this level of accreditation, whilst these levels are not available at all from other statutory providers;
- Providers reluctant to adopt blended learning opportunities such as www.writeon.ie;
- Limited integration of literacy across the curriculum in further education and training; and
- Limited joined up thinking between providers in relation to the literacy needs of clients.

Recommendations

In order to achieve the NSS objectives and enhance the capacity of the further education sector, and in particular adult basic skills provision, NALA put forward the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Policy

The DES should establish and chair an adult literacy implementation group involving key stakeholders, to ensure that national adult literacy policy priorities are implemented and targets monitored and achieved.

Why this is necessary

One of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (2007) targets is to reduce the number of adults with significant literacy difficulties to between 10% and 15% of the adult population by 2016. We will only know how much progress has been made in achieving this target when the results of the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) are published in 2013. However it is our contention that we are not maximising the investment in further education and training to deliver raised adult literacy levels.

In 2007, the National Skills Strategy set a target of upskilling 70,000 people from levels 1 and 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to level 3 and a further 260,000 up to NFQ levels 4 and 5 by 2020.¹¹ The National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement says: “The progress made so far regarding the implementation of the Skills Strategy indicates that the most significant challenge for the period to 2020 is upskilling those at Levels 1-3 to Levels 4 and 5. This challenge will now be given a specific focus ... and ensuring the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills will be key factors in determining the extent to which this challenge is met”.¹²

There is a need to further develop policies to achieve the national targets contained in existing policy statements on adult literacy. Two key policies need to be prioritised:

- a) expanding the current adult literacy service, and
- b) integrating literacy development across adult education and training, using national and international research on best practice.¹³

a) Expanding the current adult literacy service

The adult literacy service should be resourced to deliver more **intensive literacy courses** for people in the labour market, the unemployed and low skilled workers. There is intensive tuition available for people with literacy difficulties known as Intensive Tuition for Adult Basic Education (ITABE) which has a budget of €2 million. The ITABE programme is an 84-hour programme (6 hours a week over 14 weeks) with 2,325 learners participating in 2008. There is currently more demand than supply for this programme. The Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) also provides places for adults at levels 3 and 4 but these are also limited.

In 1998, a NALA research study identified the unemployed as being an under-represented group in the VEC Adult Literacy Service.¹⁴ Ten years later, the percentage of unemployed people is still relatively low at 31% or 11,131 participants.¹⁵ As a result of NALA lobbying, the Return to Education programme was developed in 1999 for FAS Community Employment participants. This is an intensive 200 hour programme for the long-term unemployed and has the option of accreditation. The learning takes place for 6 hours a week over a 33-week period. An evaluation of this initiative, which provided the basis for the later ITABE programme noted above, found that

¹¹ Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) *Tomorrow's Skills – Towards a National Skills Strategy*. Dublin: Forfás.

¹² Department of Education and Science (2010) *National Skills Strategy Implementation Statement*. Available at: <http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobservelet/PR10-03-20.doc>

¹³ Casey, H. *et al* (2007) ‘You wouldn’t expect a maths teacher to teach plastering...’: *Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes – the impact on learning and achievement*. London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy. Kis, V. (2010) *Learning for Jobs: OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training - Ireland*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

¹⁴ Bailey, I. and Coleman, U. (1998), *Access and Participation in Adult Literacy Schemes*, Dublin: NALA

¹⁵ *Ibid*

some learners often need to continue on this programme for two or three years.¹⁶ In 2009, 1,620 people participated in this programme.

For adults who are working and have literacy and numeracy needs, the Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF) supports workplace basic education courses in the private sector. The Skills for Work courses take place throughout the country, delivered by the local VEC adult literacy service. In 2009, 1,585 people participated in these programmes.¹⁷

Currently, these are the only intensive options available for adults to improve their basic skills. Therefore, due to lack of funding, the VEC Adult Literacy Service has limited places for intensive and flexible provision to meet the specific needs of adults in the labour force with basic skills difficulties. Recent sectoral reports from the EGFSN highlight the numbers of general operatives with low educational attainment who should have their learning needs met by FAS. Due to resource constraints FAS maintain they cannot take on their responsibilities in this area. This has left a large group of the labour force with basic education needs without sufficient provision. In addition providers are charged with meeting the learning needs of workers and the unemployed, they often assume these people have no literacy needs and do not address literacy development as part of their programme. We suggest integrating literacy as a key solution here – see b) below.

In relation to the **curriculum**, financial capability and health and well-being are two areas that need to be considered within adult literacy programmes as there are increasing complex demands placed on individuals to manage their affairs in these regards. Without structured support, it is difficult for adults with literacy issues to develop their financial and health literacies. Ireland is currently participating in an OECD Financial Literacy survey as well as a European Health Literacy survey with results due out later this year.

There should also be an **expansion of the family literacy programmes**. Literacy standards in primary schools have not changed in 30 years.¹⁸ Two-thirds of pupils in the most disadvantaged schools achieved at or below the 20th percentile on standardised tests (compared to 20% nationally), and performance declined as pupils progressed through the school.¹⁹ Parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on a child's educational outcomes than any

¹⁶ Conboy, P. (2000), Implementation Guidelines for NALA/FÁS/VEC Return to Education Programmes, NALA, Dublin

¹⁷ Department of Education and Science (2010), VEC Adult Literacy Returns 2009, unpublished

¹⁸ Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People: A draft plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools" DES: November 2010.

¹⁹ National Economic and Social Council. (2008). *The Irish Economy in the Early 21st Century*. Dublin: NESCC

other demographic measure.²⁰ However, there is a significant gap between schools and families that remains to be bridged.²¹

Family literacy programmes improve the literacy practices of parents and other family members. This has a very significant knock on effect on school performance of children. This offers potential opportunities to break inter-generational cycles of under-achievement by working with those families who do not, or may not know how, to best support their child's learning.²²

The DEIS programme supports 15 family literacy programmes in 2010 with a budget of €200,000, and the adult literacy budget also supports provision in VEC adult literacy services.

As well as improving adult competencies, family literacy results in

- improved school achievement,
- greater cognitive ability,
- greater problem-solving skills,
- increased school enjoyment, and
- increased attendance and fewer behavioural issues.²³

b) Integrating literacy development across adult education and training

Integrating literacy means designing and delivering education and training programmes in a way that also develops literacy and numeracy at the same time. It is effective for adults who may not be confident in literacy generally, or in the specific literacy demands of a particular programme. This will produce the “double duty dollar” effect,²⁴ where for example, the state pays for vocational training, but gets a second return – improved literacy and numeracy levels. Adopting an integrated approach is cost neutral, but it does involve the prioritisation of continuous professional development and training budgets.

An integrated approach has been adopted across the FÁS Community Training Centres but not extended to any other FÁS funded training activity. FAS do not have an organization wide policy on adult literacy and expect participants to have sufficient levels of literacy to participate in their programmes. A similar situation is in evidence in other statutory education and training

²⁰ Feinstein and Symons, 1999

²¹ The NESF report on Child Literacy (2008) identified “there is a gulf between school and community which needs to be bridged”. The ESRI report “[Behind the Scenes? A Study of Parental Involvement in Post-Primary Education](#)” (2011) found that 1 in 6 parents found teachers and schools unapproachable.

²² Hegarty, A., and Feeley, M., 2010. *Taking Care of Family Literacy Work: an enquiry with parents about their experience of nurturing language and literacy in the home*, Dublin, National Adult Literacy Agency. National Adult Literacy Agency, 2011. *Family Literacy in Action: an overview of family learning programmes*, Dublin, National Adult Literacy Agency.

²³ Melhuish, E., Sylva, K., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B., 2001.

²⁴ Sticht, T. (2007) *Integrating Literacy Works!* Presentation at NALA-NUI Maynooth Seminar.

agencies working at Level 3 and above. This is based on an assumption that literacy skills are delivered and gained in school, in particular primary school. This view is outdated and is best explained through an analogy with ICT. As ICT changes, so too does literacy and yet nobody expects we will learn all our ICT knowledge in one learning period. Instead ICT learning will be required throughout life and will be a normal part of adult learning, whether stand alone or integrated into a programme. The same approach must apply for literacy as it is clear we need to develop it throughout our life.

The National Skills Strategy calls for the integration of literacy and numeracy across all publicly funded education and training, but progress in achieving this policy statement has been weak and requires a national plan, led by the DES and involving all the stakeholders. International evidence highlights the effectiveness of an integrated or embedded literacy strategy²⁵.

Integrating literacy will

- raise the capacity of providers (for example, VECs, FAS, Skillnets) to deal with literacy issues across all programmes and levels, therefore delivering programmes more inclusively and effectively,
- remove unnecessary literacy barriers to access, persistence, and achievement,
- increase the numbers of adults participating in and succeeding on further education and training programmes,
- enable greater numbers of adults to raise their literacy levels, and
- better achieve national targets (NSS, NAPS Inc, NRP).

A literature review carried out this year by the UK National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) found very little evidence of effective partnership and co-ordination of public services in adult literacy, stating “Regarding coherent, cross-field policy action, observers in many countries will note a great deal of rhetoric around “joined-up” policy, but relatively limited cross-silo working, particularly at national level”.²⁶

Expanding the adult literacy service and integrating literacy development across adult education and training, through a DES chaired implementation group of key stakeholders, provides the best chance to make a real difference to adults with literacy needs and our country’s adult literacy levels.

Recommendation 2: Practice

The DES should seek the development of better literacy and numeracy learning opportunities and outcomes across the further education and training sector through the adoption by providers of:

²⁵ NRDC, 2006

²⁶ NALA (2011) *A literature review of international adult literacy policy*, Dublin: NALA. Publication forthcoming.

- an integrated learning approach; and
- other effective methods such as distance and blended learning.

Why this is necessary

New approaches are required to enable adult literacy students to overcome barriers to accessing, taking part and achieving success in adult and further education and training. Research carried out by the Basic Skills Agency shows that students who received literacy support while engaged in further education were three times less likely to drop out of their course.²⁷ This is how we must deliver high quality, learner centred provision.

Together with other stakeholders, the DES is well placed to oversee the adoption of new practices. NALA's joint work with the IVEA on integrating literacy, in particular, is an example of collaboration. A combined research project in a VEC further education college²⁸ is another example of successful partnership. NALA has also worked nationally with FÁS Community Training Centres to create an integrated strategy for literacy and numeracy development.²⁹ There is however no further education and training organization wide adoption of an integrated approach to literacy development and this will not happen without clear direction and monitoring by the DES.

NALA sees flexible and blended learning options as important parts of the opportunities available to people who wish to move up through the National Framework of Qualifications from levels 1, 2 or 3. We have developed a distance learning service and wish to further explore digital technologies to expand learning opportunities. It is critical that a process be put in place to share developments in this area and encourage the adoption of these methods across the further education and training sector, especially where there is poor take up due to concern over ownership of learners.

Distance and blended learning can deliver tangible, measurable results targeted at those most in need, that is, people with less than level 4 qualifications. UNESCO and the EU have been advocating the integration of distance learning into wider national educational policies for the last 20 years. The Department of Education and Skills has supported NALA to develop distance learning systems and resources for adult literacy and Ireland is now a world leader in distance learning in this area. These resources are free to use by any person with literacy difficulties, as well as those wishing to gain qualifications for their existing knowledge. They are free to all adult education and training providers, who can use them to support their learners, particularly those in adult literacy and other part time programmes, but also learners in the workplace and those seeking employment.

²⁷ Cited in Kis, V. (2010) *Learning for Jobs: OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training - Ireland*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

²⁸ Hegarty, A. and Feeley, M. (2009) *Literacy-friendly further education and training*. Dublin: NALA.

²⁹ Mc Skeane, E. (2009) *Living Literacy – a whole organisation approach to integrating literacy in vocational training*. Dublin: NALA.

Building distance and blended learning approaches into current adult education provision can increase the flexibility of provision, by

- multiplying learning time for existing learners and accelerating progress;
- providing free blended learning opportunities for people on programmes;
- providing free self directed learning opportunities for people who are not in learning programmes;
- increasing achievement and qualification rates; and
- providing a system for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

Recommendation 3: Access

The DES continues to support NALA and its partners make it easier for people with literacy difficulties to:

- take up literacy and numeracy learning opportunities; and
- use other services aimed at the public.

Why this is necessary

One of our main concerns is to encourage adults with literacy difficulties to take up learning opportunities. To fulfil this, we will continue to raise awareness of the literacy issue and the options available through national advertising, in partnership with An Post and others, and through other media work.

Another main concern is to influence and support organisations to be more accessible to people with literacy difficulties. By using plain English and other appropriate approaches, organisations can reach more people – in particular those with literacy difficulties – and enable them to fulfil their potential, access entitlements and better use services. Without these approaches, organisations may be losing current and potential customers due to complicated communications and procedures. These not only lead to misunderstandings, mistakes and complaints but also create an unnecessary disadvantage for people with literacy difficulties.

Research conducted internationally demonstrates the business case for using plain English. For example, local governments and private companies have seen significantly reduced costs and improved staff morale and efficiency as a result of rewriting even just one key letter,³⁰ set of instructions³¹ or application form.³² In Ireland, there is growing awareness of and interest in using plain English, particularly among the public sector. To date, NALA has worked with four Government departments, more than a dozen State bodies and a number of local authorities to

³⁰ Plain Language Action and Information Network (2010) 'Plain language: the bottom line'. Available from: www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/bottomline.cfm

³¹ Grotzky, R. (2004) Plain language: its effect on organizational performance. Clarity No. 51 (May 2004), pp. 17-18.

³² Word Centre (2008) 'The business case'. Available from: <http://www.wordcentre.co.uk/page57.htm>

improve their written communications. NALA calls on the DES to adopt a plain English approach and encourage its adoption across the bodies it funds. This could be achieved through the roll out of a style guide and a small amount of aligned training. Using plain English would help with the current confusion over who does what within FET as well as enhance the profile of the sector.

Conclusion

Ireland now faces a far more difficult economic situation and much changed labour market. These circumstances will increase pressure on people who may need greater and more targeted literacy support to take part in society and improve their chances of employment. Progress will have to be achieved within two parameters:

- those most in need should receive the most State support, and
- the value of public investment needs to be maximised.

NALA has outlined what it believes needs to happen to proactively address the critical national challenge of raising adult literacy and numeracy levels in Ireland. Our submission involves new thinking rather than new funding. It contains three overarching recommendations, in particular on integration and the use of distance and blended learning that will lead to more adults raising their adult literacy levels and contributes to the agenda of the National Recovery Plan by using existing resources more efficiently. It does require however strategic leadership from the DES and genuine partnership working between all stakeholders.

NALA would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission in further detail with the relevant officials in the Department. We believe that together we can better overcome the challenges facing adults with literacy needs in Ireland and assist them reach their full potential, in line with the objectives of the National Skills Strategy.

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Appendix 1

Adult Literacy Provision in Ireland

