

NALA Student Days

Annual report 2019

A snapshot of views and experiences of adult literacy and numeracy students

SOLAS

An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
Further Education and Training Authority



National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh



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**Ireland's European Structural and
Investment Funds Programmes
2014-2020**

Co-funded by the Irish Government
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About this report

This report provides a snapshot of views and experiences of adult literacy and numeracy students. The information was gathered at the National Adult Literacy Agency's (NALA) annual Student Days in 2019.

The aim of this report is to share up-to-date insights on student issues, so that we can respond appropriately to the needs of learners and continually improve the quality of our work.

This report is for anyone interested or involved in the provision of adult literacy and numeracy services, and or adult education in general.

NALA's Student Days are funded by SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority of Ireland.

Adult Literacy is co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014 - 2020.

Background and context

NALA research¹ shows that adult literacy learning is most successful when students are actively involved in the process. Students should be enabled to explore the methods and materials which help them to learn most effectively and to take an active part in planning the learning programme.

Since 1980, NALA has ensured the views and experiences of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties guide and inform our work. We also want to pass the student views to other stakeholders. We do this work through:

- Hearing from student members on our Board;
- Having a Student Subcommittee with students from around the country that feeds into our Board and encourages student advocates;
- Providing a Student Development Fund to bring students together locally and to create an opportunity for student views to be gathered;
- Organising annual Student Days, and
- Ensuring student advocacy is a key element in our strategic plans.

More recently, Ireland's **Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014 – 2019**² commits to listen to and consult with learners in further education and training. Specifically, 'Strategic Objective 3.1 'Respond to the needs of learners,' states:

Systematically benchmark learner's views and satisfaction with their FET programme on an on-going basis through the establishment of a Learner Forum and appropriate Learner Surveys.

NALA uses its **annual Student Days** to gather and share learner's views and satisfaction with their FET programmes, and contribute to this strategic objective.

¹ Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work, National Adult Literacy Agency, Dublin, 2015

² Department of Education and Skills and SOLAS, Dublin, 2013

2019 Student Days

In 2019, NALA held two Student Days – one in Dublin in March, and one in the Limerick in April. Both days were well attended, with 180 students traveling to the events. Most students were from Education and Training Boards and were attending literacy, numeracy and or ESOL classes.

The Student Days provided a relaxed and fun opportunity for students from different education centres to come together and meet other students. Each day had a similar format, starting with interesting student and guest speakers, followed by workshops where students could learn something new. At intervals students were asked to share their views and experiences of learning, and facilitators compiled this feedback which we have summarised on the next page.

Interesting speakers and workshops

Three student speakers described their experience of school: (i) being left behind at schoolwork and wounded by the lack of care, (ii) physical work on the family farm taking priority and (iii) being institutionalised for having epilepsy. They spoke about the huge benefit of going back to education as adults. They praised staff in adult literacy centres. One student had used the Distance Learning Service as well as classes in the ETB.³ The student speakers were very well received by attendees as they often echoed their own personal experiences and created a safe space to discuss these issues.

Guest speakers were the Chief Executives of ETBs – Paddy Lavelle, Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB and George O’Callaghan, Limerick and Clare ETB. They recognised the courageous steps adult literacy students took going back to education, from having had bad experiences before. They thanked ETB staff and acknowledged the contribution Learner Representatives were making to the ETB Boards. They directed students towards the Adult Guidance Service for advice on next steps.

³ See “Literacy Matters - Summer 2019” NALA, for extracts of the student speeches.

Librarians Margaret Bentley from South Dublin and Patricia Cusack from Moyross in Limerick talked about libraries being public spaces. They referenced student feedback from NALA that showed 46% of adult literacy students had used the library in the past year.⁴ They gave examples of fun activities taking place in libraries.

The workshops were centred on 'Expand your learning,' and included learning literacy over the phone or by using the WriteOn.ie website, and NALA's Distance Learning Service. The workshops also looked at useful apps and keeping safe online, how plain English can help you, and tips about other learning opportunities. Again, these workshops provided a safe space for students to learn new skills and knowledge, ask questions and share their experiences.

Evaluation

Evaluations of each day showed that students got a lot out of the events and enjoyed hearing from and meeting other students. They complimented the opening student speakers for their frankness. They were delighted to be able to share their experiences of learning and the difference it has meant to their lives. They said the workshops were excellent with great information and they were going away with lots of knowledge. Some ESOL students at the Limerick student day said they had been in Ireland for six months and had never met people like this before.

⁴ See NALA Student Development Fund Annual report 2018 [here](#).

Feedback from students

Feedback was gathered from students throughout the Student Days at workshops, questions and answers sessions, evaluation forms and student facilitators. It can be broadly themed into these four areas:

1. Access and participation

Students saw how the Distance Learning Service might be particularly useful when their centres were closed over the summer. If someone had difficulty understanding something in class, they could get support on that particular thing, with a tutor over the phone.

Students at the plain English workshops said they found social welfare forms, census forms, pension documents and ETB forms hard to read. They were interested in how NALA edits documents and which organisations we work with. In the workshop students did an exercise in plain English. They were pleased NALA is working to help make society more accessible. Students giving feedback on what would improve literacy in the next 10 years said more needed to be done on plain English.⁵

Again in 2019, tutors and Adult Literacy Organisers, were credited with giving students the support, confidence and encouragement that made returning to learning a great, positive experience, as well as helping to instil a new love for education.

2. Teaching and learning

Many students had not heard of the NALA's Distance Learning Service. Where students were using the service, they spoke very positively about it. Some students used the monthly Distance Learner worksheet. This is sent to NALA members through our e-zine and is available to download online. Students spoke highly of its content and said they look forward to it every month. There was a suggestion that all previous worksheets be made into a resource book.

⁵ 2018 Fund report [here](#) - students said more plain English work needed for health and financial information.

Most students owned a smartphone. Many used social apps or applications (WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook) to send and receive images, and other attachments. They also used game apps (Solitaire) and lifestyle apps (Tinder, Horoscope). Interestingly none used utility, banking, educational or travel apps. Many of these apps had been downloaded by a friend or 'young' relative. Students had a heightened awareness of the need to be vigilant when using smart devices and while online. However, many lacked the knowledge and confidence to download or engage in using apps as a learning tool. Students were not very aware of the need to have secure passwords. They used the 'same one' for everything as they had difficulty remembering these and were reluctant to change passwords.

Some students were aware of having to register a bank card with the relevant app store to buy apps. Few were aware of the charges. All had concerns about extra charges and many were misinformed and had anecdotal stories of fraud. Most were 'confused' and 'afraid' about how downloading and using apps affected their data. Students had little understanding of what a secure network is. They were not aware that most public Wi-Fi networks are not secure. Echoing other feedback⁶ students were interested in apps for improving their literacy and numeracy skills. They also understood that online activity was part of "everyday life" and they "wanted and "needed" to be competent in the online world. Feedback from workshops suggested there is a demand for and that learners would attend classes on "How to use apps and stay safe online". NALA has a series of recommendations about content for such classes from these workshops.⁷

3. Progression

Students said that fear of the unknown, lack of confidence, computer skills and lack of information can stop them from moving on and trying something new. Being comfortable in a centre for some people also made it difficult to move on. Language, times of classes and transport can also be issues. What interested people was hearing about other courses – in ETBs, partnership companies or offered by other

⁶ [Students said](#) technology should be incorporated more into teaching and learning – so students can use everyday technology and availing of technology to build literacy and numeracy skills.

⁷ Email mmurray@nala.ie for recommendations.

organisations. In addition, “Ted Talks” and other websites such as www.writeon.ie and www.vocabulary.com could be useful for learning. It helped to hear about available funding, for part and full-time courses, and for themselves or for other family members. Students were keen to know the routes for progression and that there is the guidance service to help.⁸

4. Other feedback

The following issues were raised by individual students: the need to speak in mental health organisations and with people who have poor English, to help people understand forms. Use television more to raise awareness and one student was looking for higher level English for immigrants where English is not their first language.

Next steps – proposed actions arising from feedback

In order to meet the FET Strategic Objective 3.1 ‘Respond to the needs of learners,’ it is important that all stakeholders act on the feedback received from learners.

For the purpose of this report stakeholders will include:

- NALA;
- SOLAS;
- ETBI;
- the National Centre for Guidance in Education;
- Learner Representatives in Education and Training Boards; and
- AONTAS.

Once we receive a response from all stakeholders, NALA will let students know the actions and outcomes at its 2020 Student Days.

⁸ For earlier feedback NALA gathered on progression, see page 18 of the [2016 Report on the Student Development Fund](#).

Feedback	NALA action	Stakeholder action
Access and participation		
Students really appreciate the fact the services are adult-orientated. For many, the respect shown to them was different from their experience of school.	NALA will continue to highlight this, to stakeholders - including funders of services, staff in ETBs, tutors and the general public.	
The need for plain English to be used as standard.	<p>NALA will continue to campaign so plain English is used for all information going to the public.</p> <p>We will continue to lobby for plain English legislation to be enacted.</p>	
Teaching and learning		
Many students were not aware of the NALA Distance Learning Service	<p>NALA will work with partners and continue to promote the Distance Learning Service highlighting that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can use it to complement their class work 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can use it over the summer when centres are closed • It might be useful for specific areas a student is getting stuck on <p>NALA will see if we can publish in a resource book previously released Distance Learner Worksheets.</p>	
There is a demand for workshops on the following technology related areas: getting the most from your phone, using apps and staying safe online.	NALA will share information with stakeholders about what we covered at NALA student days (2017, 2018 and 2019) through an article in our magazine.	
Progression		
Students need information and encouragement to help them progress with learning.	NALA will highlight to stakeholders the success of this workshop – information about learning opportunities available in their ETBs, through other organisations (libraries,	

	partnership companies) and online.	
There continues to be Lack of awareness of Adult Guidance Service.	NALA will continue to highlight to stakeholders that the Adult Guidance Service needs to be promoted to adults who have literacy difficulties.	

Acknowledgements

NALA wishes to thank all the students who attended the 2019 Student Days. We would also like to thank the organisers, tutors and students who encouraged and helped students to go to the Student Days.

We would especially like to thank students who spoke on the day, guest speakers, workshop facilitators and our Student Subcommittee.

Appendix 1: List of ETBs that took part in Student Days in 2019

ETB area	Centre	Dublin student day	Limerick student day
13 ETBs	38 centres	101 students	80 students
City of Dublin	Klear	12	1
	Coolock / Darndale	13	
	Cabra	3	
	Crumlin	3	
	Ballyfermot	3	
	Liberties	1	
	Ringsend	1	
	SIPTU centre	1	
	Dublin other	1	
	Dublin and Dun Laoghaire	Loughlinstown	11
Dundrum		6	
An Cosán		1	
Blanchardstown		1	
Ballymun		1	
Waterford and Wexford	Gorey	16	
	New Ross	1	
Tipperary	Clonmel	2	
	Roscrea		1
	Nenagh	1	16
	Thurles		1
Cork	Altrusa	1	15
	Mahon		5
	Fermoy		3
	Cobh		1
Laois and Offaly	Tullamore	1	1
Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim	Sligo	1	
Cavan and Monaghan	Cavan	2	
Kildare and Wicklow	Bray	3	
	Newbridge CTC	2	
Kilkenny and Carlow	Wordaid, Kilkenny	2	2
	Carlow	2	
Donegal	Bunrana	1	

Limerick and Clare	Ennis		2
	Limerick City		6
	Shannon		2
	Limerick, Kilmallock Rd.		1
Kerry	Kenmare		12
	Killarney		3
Others	Distance Learners	3	1
	Headway Limerick		4
	Don't know	5	3
ETBs	38 centres	101 students	80 students

Appendix 2 – Details on the workshops at the student days in 2019

Workshop name	Description of workshop
Learn literacy over the phone or by using WriteOn.ie	This workshop will let you know how you can use NALA's Distance Learning Service. With this Service you can improve your literacy skills over the phone with a tutor or you can use WriteOn.ie to extend your learning.
Find out about useful apps and how to keep safe online	This workshop will show you apps people are using to help build their literacy and numeracy skills. You will talk to other students about apps and learn tips about how to keep safe online.
How plain English can help you	This workshop will tell you what plain English is and you will hear about NALA's work in this area. You will also pick up tips for using plain English that will help you with your learning.
Tips about other learning opportunities	This workshop will tell you about how your local library, community projects, courses for parents in schools and other free online options (like TED talks) can help you extend your learning.

Contact information:

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