

**Submission from the
National Adult Literacy
Agency, Ireland to the EU
Commission High Level
Expert Group on Literacy**

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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 member-based organisation, working on improving adult literacy in Ireland since 1980. We are:

- the voice of adults wishing to improve their literacy skills, and
- 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 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. Some will have left school confident about their numeracy and reading skills but find that changes in their workplace and everyday life make their skills inadequate as the literacy demanded by society is in constant flux. Many adults who have not practised their literacy for a number of years lose confidence and skills.

Introduction

NALA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the High Level Group (HLG) on Literacy. We hope to contribute to the Group's aim of finding ways of improving the literacy performance of young people and adults and to help Member States meet the benchmark to reduce the EU average proportion of low performing 15 year olds to 15% by 2020.

Ireland has seen policy commitments and increased resources in adult literacy in the decade following the Irish results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). As investment was coming from a very low base, there is significant progress required. 388,600 (19%) of people in the labour force in Ireland have less than a level 4 qualification (equivalent to EQF Level 2), of which 6% have primary level or no qualifications.¹ We know that people with literacy difficulties are at greater risk of social exclusion and are among the most disadvantaged in Irish society.

We need to create and implement an ambitious vision for adult literacy in the 21st century. With 77 million adults in the EU with literacy and numeracy needs, we must work together better – European institutions, national governments, state agencies, employers, adult education providers, non-governmental organisations, adults and learners – to provide flexible high quality literacy learning opportunities by removing unnecessary literacy-related barriers. We want adults with literacy needs to no longer experience barriers to social inclusion and equality around health, education, employment, income and active citizenship. We believe that raising literacy levels will be a principal means to achieving equality and social cohesion.

¹ CSO website: http://www.cso.ie/qnhs/calendar_quarters_qnhs.htm Table S9a, Q. 1, 2011

Questions answered

Question 1: From the perspective of your organisation and/or society as a whole, which do you see as the most important issues that are relevant in the area of literacy?

In policy:

1. Implementing government policy

To measure progress in Europe 2020 goals, five headline targets have been agreed for the whole EU. One of the targets is education and the areas identified are:

1. Reducing school dropout rates below 10%; and
2. At least 40% of 30-34 year olds completing third-level education.

These areas focus on the formal sectors of first, second and third level education and further education and training is the forgotten sector once again. NALA believes that adult literacy should be a named EU target which would prioritise the issue on a European level and EU Member States.

Ireland published their first national policy on adult education including adult literacy in 2000.² Whilst acknowledging the success of the policy, it is now outdated and needs updating. Furthermore policy implementation was undermined and weakened by the lack of a published national implementation plan for adult literacy. A National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) report stated that “over the past decade Ireland has been a remarkably innovative and entrepreneurial environment for policy-making. Like many other countries, we have struggled with the challenges of policy implementation – incomplete and patchy, undesirable and unintended consequences of implementation, or outright failure.”³

In 2011 the Department of Education and Skills published a Government national Strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among Children and Young People.⁴ NALA was disappointed that no adult literacy strategy was available to complement this.

² *White paper on adult education* (Department of Education and Science, 2000)

³ NESF (2009), *Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues*.

<http://www.into.ie/ROI/Downloads/NESFFinalReport09.pdf>

⁴ *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life 2011 – 2020*

http://www.education.ie/admin/servlet/blobServlet/lit_num_strat.pdf?language=EN&igstat=true

A recent NALA publication noted that “regarding coherent, cross-field policy action, there is a great deal of rhetoric around “joined-up” policy, but relatively limited cross-silo working, particularly at national level.”⁵

National and European government leadership is required to drive a campaign to raise adult literacy levels. Take the example of the smoking cessation campaign – international and national campaigns have taken many years to change attitudes and habits. Literacy needs a similar campaign – we need to inform and educate society about what is meant by literacy and why it is so important throughout life. From this effort, societal attitudes will change and real and sustained reform can be realised.

Key actions:

The EU should commit to an adult literacy target under the education target. This would help to strengthen and prioritise adult literacy responses in Member States.

Every EU Member State should publish a national literacy strategy, including adults and an implementation plan every 5 years. These should clearly outline actions, outcomes, who is responsibility for delivery and evaluation. There should also be better targeting of resources using national data (and upcoming PIAAC results) to prioritise the resources of those most in need and distant from society and the labour market.

At European level, the Action Plan on Adult Learning needs to be promoted, agreed at EU Ministerial level and monitored in order to impact on adult literacy and numeracy levels.

2. Evidence-based policy and practice

The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) Child Literacy Report⁶ proposed a ‘policy implementation template’ comprising the following items:

1. Strategy plans with agreed outcomes
2. Delivery plans and delivery on the ground (including standards, competition, co-ordination of organisations and procedures and tailored universalism)

⁵ NRDC (2011), A Literature Review of International Adult Literacy Policies. NALA: Dublin

⁶ NESF (2009), Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues

http://files.nesc.ie.s3.amazonaws.com/nesc_archive/nesc_reports/NESF_39_full.pdf

3. Monitoring, evaluation and measurement of inputs, outputs and outcomes
4. Links between outcomes and budget
5. Good accountability and incentive structure
6. Equity in provision
7. Cultural elements (including values, beliefs and tacit assumptions, leadership, attitudes and quality of collaborative relationships)

We also need greater data collection in order to better target resources and monitor progress. In Ireland, like many other Member States, there is a lack of quality and robust research and a strategy to using it to inform practice.

Key actions:

We need:

- to use the policy implementation template;
- better data collection and targeting of resources; and
- quality and robust research and using it to inform practice.

3. **Breaking the educational disadvantage cycle** by improving the basic skills of parents through partnership with local adult education providers, communities and schools.

Key actions:

In line with the European Commission Family Literacy report, we fully endorse that “the meta-analytic evidence therefore strongly supports the argument that all Member States’ child literacy strategies should include a family literacy component, and that policymakers should more actively support the widespread proliferation of family literacy interventions.”⁷

4. **Communicating in plain English**

Plain English is a style of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read it. When you use plain English you increase the chance that everyone will understand your message, which saves time and avoids misunderstandings. It means people can make informed judgements, be more aware of their obligations and exercise their rights.

⁷ Report is available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2011/literacy_en.pdf

The United States passed the Plain Writing Act in 2010, which will require the federal (national) government to write all new publications, forms and other public documents in a “clear, concise, well-organised” manner that follows plain language writing standards. This is something that the EU Commission should consider.⁸

Key actions:

The EU, national governments, state bodies and organisations dealing with the public should communicate in plain English.

In practice:

1. Integrating literacy and numeracy development into all publicly funded education and training

The biggest challenge for integrating literacy in Ireland is how to translate government policy into practice. This requires leadership from national government and from management in provider bodies. It also requires change and reform, involving professional development of key players and time to reflect on their role and attitudes. We need to provide evidence of integrating literacy and support staff as they embrace it.

2. Family literacy

There needs to be a better link between schools and families to break the cycle of educational disadvantage through greater cooperation and coordination. There is a need for reform of how schools do their business – from teaching to their engagement with parents. Family literacy programmes aim to improve the literacy practices of parents and other family members, therefore having a knock on effect on school performance of children. This offers opportunities to break inter-generational cycles of under-achievement.

3. Flexible high quality adult education and training provision

In spite of the expansion of adult literacy learning opportunities, less than 10% of adults with literacy needs are currently accessing literacy tuition in Ireland. Critically, the typical literacy learner receives only 2 hours provision per week. It

⁸ There is already an EU Directive 2004/27/EC that requires all patient information leaflets to be user tested to ensure that the information provided is legible, clear and easy to use.

is essential to respond with targeted and flexible learning opportunities for people who wish to develop their literacy and numeracy.

Key actions:

- (a) Nationally expand the range of quality learning opportunities across a wider range of settings, including the workplace, and by different modes, including distance and blended learning, intensive options and at weekends. This includes offering initial assessment and guidance at entry point, constant review of learning programmes and meaningful progression to further education and training.
- (b) Targeted approaches are needed for vulnerable and hard to reach groups, for example, long-term unemployed, employees with low skills, youth, ethnic minorities.
- (c) Increase the role of digital literacy.

4. Relevant and appropriate measures of success

The recent NIACE Report of the Inquiry into Adult Literacy in England stated that ‘Recording and measuring success is far more than gaining a qualification, but any approaches must be reliable, valid and comparable.’⁹ This is important as we need to create ways of measuring and recording success which are ‘non bureaucratic but responsive to what learners have achieved.’

5. Evaluation

There is a lack of evidence based statistical data on adult literacy in Ireland. All learning programmes and initiatives should be evaluated. This helps to assess whether the programme was a success and what changes need to be made.

In society:

1. Shared understanding of what is meant by adult literacy in the 21st century

We need to inform, debate and educate European society about what is literacy and why it is important to develop literacy throughout life. We need to challenge current perceptions and break down the stigma of low literacy levels. We need to raise awareness of:

- how literacy is changing constantly in today’s world, for example, digital literacy;

⁹ NIACE (2011), Work, Society and Lifelong Literacy – Report of the inquiry into adult literacy in England
http://shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/i/i/literacy_inquiry_-_full_report-web.pdf

- that literacy is not something that you get once in school and you have it forever – you must practise these skills or you lose them – deskilling;
- that our own literacy levels change depending on the context that you are in, for example, dealing with a lawyer and legal terminology;
- that you can be good in one area, for example reading, but weak in another, for example writing – people have ‘spiky’ profiles.

Through informing European society that literacy is complex and has many facets, we can change societal attitudes to normalize adult literacy issues and break down the stigma for people who feel embarrassed about their literacy and numeracy needs. If European society places greater value on literacy and numeracy skills then real and sustained reform can be achieved.

Key stakeholders – European institutions, national governments, state agencies, employers, adult education providers, non-governmental organisations, adults and learners – all have a role in this.

2. Literacy is linked to equality

Literacy is not solely about intelligence, literacy is about opportunity – and having equal access to opportunity is key. There is a widening gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ and compounding this is those who need the most assistance are the least likely to be assisted (Matthew effect).¹⁰ We know that people with literacy and numeracy needs are treated less equally in society with less access to services and opportunities. In particular this occurs in labour market activation programmes.

As a society, we need to accept our responsibility in this area – be it that the schooling system failed some people, that the public services did not communicate in plain English or government did not adequately respond to the issue. We need to redress the imbalances that occurred through wider socio-economic poverty and educational disadvantage. Through increasing societal responsibility, we can in parallel increase individual responsibility and encourage and motivate adults to return to learning to improve their literacy.

¹⁰ Kerckhoff, A. and Glennie, E. (1999), The Matthew Effect in American Education. *Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization* 12: 35-66

We know more equal societies have better outcomes across all sections of society. Raising adult literacy levels will create a more equal and fair society with greater active citizenship, participation and social inclusion.

3. Using the upcoming PIAAC results to highlight the issue to society

The upcoming PIAAC results due out in 2013 need to be used these to raise awareness of the issue and keep pressure on national and European governments to address it.

Question 2: How can current policies, programmes and practices in the area of literacy be improved?

The overarching need, both at EU and national level, is for:

- a clear vision;
- greater ambition;
- strong leadership and driver with commitment; and
- research and evaluation.

Role of EU Commission

The EU Commission has an important role to play in a number of areas, including:

- bringing together the influencers, for example, OECD, UNESCO, national governments;
- driving the issue – leading a campaign to highlight and promote understanding of adult literacy at a European level. There should be an EU year of literacy – it should have a themed focus, look at cross-cutting issues; and
- providing opportunities for national governments to roll out their commitments through reporting on progress.

Sharing EU best practice

The EU needs to look at how best to share and transfer good EU practice around Member States. This could be done through the European Basic Skills Network (ESBN) - <http://www.basicskills.eu/> - current secretariat is VOX, Norway.

Role of television, radio and the web

Since 2000, NALA has developed:

- eleven highly successful TV series;
- two radio series;
- three learning websites;
- associated print materials;
- freephone support line; and
- telephone and online tutor support.

Ireland's national postal service finances adult literacy awareness TV and radio advertisements during the year. This has been a highly successful way of raising awareness and motivating adults to ring our freephone line to discuss learning options. During each annual TV series, NALA has assisted between 5,000 to 10,000 independent learners to engage with face-to-face and distance learning.

NALA's Distance Learning Service (DLS) aims to motivate adults to seek out existing education and training opportunities, as well as providing flexible learning opportunities to those people who have not chosen to engage with formal literacy services. In the last few years we developed an interactive learning website – www.writeon.ie – where adults can improve their literacy skills in their home, workplace or community and offering accredited learning at FETAC Levels 2 and 3 (EQF level 3 and 4). The learner does an initial assessment which if they complete successfully, they then move to formative assessment and can get an award – this is a recognised prior learning (RPL) system.

NALA's work both in using television to raise awareness and the web to deliver learning programmes has been highly successful. Data from the recent evaluations of NALA's DLS show that the majority of adults availing of this service were men.¹¹ Having unmet literacy needs remains highly stigmatised and many of the men reported that the 'privacy, confidentiality, security, and not having to fear 'going public' were attractive features of distance learning.

¹¹ NALA (2011) Connected: Improving literacy and computer skills through online learning. <http://bit.ly/nrTUhh>

Question 3

a): Are there any gaps in the identified main social economic trends in Europe over the next 20 to 50 years and which are the implications for literacy?

There is a clear divide between how literacy is being addressed in terms of societal needs compared to the needs of the economy, with the economic agenda often being prioritised. This erosion of literacy for societal development and cohesion is short-sighted and may lead to further societal issues into the future.

Critical thinking skills are essential in today's world. Not only do we have easier access to information these days, particularly through the internet, but you often have to assess if the information in front of you is correct or not. These skills must be taught as part of all learning programmes.

b): There is a lot of knowledge about the importance of literacy and what needs to be done on e.g. reading motivation. Why do you feel literacy has not been seen as an issue of importance for the functioning of society?

1. Lack of understanding of complexities of adult literacy

Literacy is often seen as a finite set of skills that you attain in school and keep forever. As literacy is like a muscle, if you don't use the skills, many people 'deskill' or lose those skills. Another common perception is that if you have literacy difficulties, you must be weak in all basic skills. This is not so. For example, if we accept that you could be a good gardener but a bad musician then the same goes for literacy – you can be a good reader but a bad writer. Levels of literacy required in the 21st Century differ to those required in the 1990s. Literacy is not static but changing.

2. Adult literacy is stuck in adult education framework

We know that adult literacy is a lot more than that but often policy makers and education providers don't see that.

3. Policy makers feel that prevention (that is schools) is more important than cure (adult literacy), especially when applying a cost benefit analysis.

4. Lack of clear vision and ambition to drive real change

In order to see real and meaningful reform there needs to be a driver for change – this should come from key stakeholders such as the EU, national government and education and training providers.

5. Lack of adult literacy policy implementation

Where adult literacy was identified by government as a priority, that did not always translate into practice. Even with those at the lowest skill level being prioritized, this did not result in increased resources being allocated.

6. Lack of robust national statistical data and analysis of it.

There is a lack of evidence based statistical data on adult literacy in Ireland. Ireland has not participated in an international survey since 1995 and therefore we have to rely on other statistics from our Central Statistics Office (CSO). The CSO provides us with numbers of people in the labour market (in employment and unemployed) with levels of qualification. This does not give us a clear picture of adults with literacy needs and therefore can be difficult to prioritise the issue.

Question 4: What do you see as your role in meeting these challenges?

NALA will work in a national context to be one of the drivers for change. We facilitate the identification of the other drivers and support them in their work.

NALA's Strategic Plan has three objectives, each with related actions that will be central to raising adult literacy levels in Ireland over the next three years. These are:

- **Objective 1: Policy**
Work to ensure that national adult literacy policy priorities are implemented.
- **Objective 2: Practice**
Develop better literacy and numeracy learning opportunities through:
 - an integrated learning approach, and
 - other effective methods such as distance and blended learning.
- **Objective 3: Access**
Make it easier for people with literacy difficulties to:

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

Our role in meeting the upcoming challenges in adult literacy will be to:

- reframe the message;
- raise awareness and highlight issue;
- use our expertise to facilitate and support effective methods and development;
- be a voice for adult literacy learners; and
- be a leading national expert on adult literacy.

Conclusion

The EU and Member States now face 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 challenge in improving adult literacy and numeracy. We believe we need a clear vision, greater ambition, strong strategic leadership and genuine partnership working between all stakeholders.

NALA, September 2011