



NALA

Submission to the
FET Strategy Consultation
May 2019

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National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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Introduction

NALA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the second FET strategy. Our submission will follow the 6 pillars frame outlined in the invitation to submit on www.solas.ie where possible. Our response is divided between our 'thoughts' and 'actions' as per the template SOLAS provided. From the outset, it is important to outline and explain the principles from which we work and our submission should be understood. Furthermore we would like to see these principles reflected in the new FET strategy.

According to the European Pillar of Social Rights, 'everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market'. It is useful to draw the link to adult literacy from this contemporary statement of rights, which is a right and a requirement to access other human rights. For those without sufficient literacy and numeracy in our society, taking part in work and lifelong learning opportunities is severely restricted. Literacy should be understood as necessary to all domains of people's lives.

Our definition of literacy

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communications: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals, families 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 there are different literacies associated with different areas of life.

The ways we use literacy, for example, in technology, at home, in a learning environment, as part of a social or sports club, or in our community life, vary enormously. If a person needs to develop confidence and skills, 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 they find that changes in their workplace and everyday life

make their skills inadequate as the literacy demanded by society is in constant flux. Some adults who have not used their literacy for a number of years lose confidence and skills.

The philosophy underpinning our work

Adult literacy work is based on a philosophy of adult education which is concerned with personal development and social action. Adult literacy learning is an active and expressive process. Students have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how, where and when they wish to learn.

Adult literacy work respects different beliefs, cultures and ways of being. An ethical code of trust and confidentiality underpins all aspects of the work. Students' knowledge and skills are vital for the effective organisation of adult literacy work. Students should have the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of provision. Adults learn best when the decision to return to learning is their own and the environment is supportive, relaxed and friendly. These values are drawn from the Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Practice (2012)¹ and should be reflected in the new FET strategy.

"Literacy, as a gateway to participation in society, is a fundamental right and must be a priority for all who are concerned with human rights and equality. Recognising it as a right carries with it an obligation on the part of the State to ensure that the necessary interventions are put in place at the most effective stages, which means as early as possible".

President Michael D Higgins from his speech at the launch of National Adult Literacy Awareness Week 2015

Core themes of our submission

The main themes for our submission are:

- the development of adult **learner agency**, and
- the supply of necessary **innovative supports** from FET providers and other government departments and agencies, to significantly expand access to adult literacy learning for those with less than a Level 4 qualification.

These themes should be advanced on the grounds of equity – as part of a new vision for adult literacy in Ireland.

¹ Available online at <https://bit.ly/2YhyINR>

Learner agency

NALA gathers the opinions of learners on their learning and recently we looked at overcoming barriers to accessing services. Some of the barriers identified by learners included:

- The ethos of person-centered learning feels diminished in some centres. For example, not every learner is ready to join a group. There is huge value and necessity for one-to-one tuition for new participants – this is now not available in all ETBs.
- Learning centres have become more formal. For example, the language used to get on a course is quite formal – ‘interviews’ are held.
- New systems and processes in place are turning some people off returning to learning and need to be better explained. For example, the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) form which asks for personal information such as PPS number. It is not always clear where this information is stored and who has access to it. A student who is a full-time carer was concerned his attendance at a literacy class would be shared with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and his benefits would be cut.

NALA is innovating from a learner centred / directed perspective. The changes we espouse are informed by learners, as well as through research and aims to improve their learning experience, in cooperation with stakeholders.

As an advocacy body for adults with literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs, we go beyond singularly collating the views of learners but rather analyse learner data along with other research evidence, and experiment to come up with innovative solutions that evolve the learning opportunities available. Examples include www.writeon.ie and www.helpmykidlearn.ie. This work is progressed in collaboration with stakeholders and we also recognise stakeholders’ contribution to the evolution of the FET sector. However it is important to acknowledge the tensions which exist for some stakeholders who have to balance the needs of others (for example, funders and employers) which may be at odds with those of learners with the least access to and experience of education who are our singular priority. Access to employment is of course a very important aim of social justice agenda but NALA is critical of this when it dominates concerns to the exclusion of other social justice issues. We prioritise learner needs over economic need.

Low literacy also costs in social terms. This can be seen across the domains of health (both physical and mental), crime, welfare and education and family (World Literacy Foundation 2015). Low literacy has also been linked to other social issues such as addiction, homelessness and suicide. Ireland can do better and could be great with improved adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

Learning Pathways

According to DES Adult Literacy Guidelines, adult learners in ETBs should have an individual learning plan. It appears that this is often not the case but it is worth exploring how better this ambition can be realized. Individual learning plans can develop learner agency. It can also clarify the access, transfer and progression arrangements in place for a learner within an ETB. The outcome of learning plans should be recorded in individual learning logs, enabling storage over the life-course and a facility to aid reflection and further lifelong learning planning. A national template for a learning log should be made available to all learners, to be managed by them.

Action: Create learning log and portfolio templates and make available on the SOLAS website for all to use.

Action: Learning pathways need to reflect the contexts which have meaning to people's lives and, whilst useful to have aligned to the National Qualification's Framework, should also highlight the wider benefits.

Action: Prioritise adults with less than a level 4 qualification in FET services to receive 10 hours of educational guidance.

Action: Ensure one to one tuition is in place in all ETBs in line with the DES Adult Literacy Guidelines.

Active Inclusion

A generational rupture now exists between those in Irish society who have achieved higher education and those who have not. Literacy is not neutral, it is bound up with power and powerlessness. 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) (Kerckhoff, A. and Glennie, E. 1999). We know that people with literacy and numeracy needs are treated less equally in society with less access to services and opportunities.

Poverty is one of the main causes of literacy needs and unmet literacy and numeracy needs are a factor in social exclusion and inequality. Low literacy skills are costing our society, economy and environment, financially and democratically. The cost of low skills to the global economy is estimated at USD \$1.2 trillion (World Literacy Foundation 2015).

In Ireland, one in six Irish adults has low literacy and one in four has low numeracy (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2012). Some of these people are participating in education and training programmes and as such this highlights the importance of the full adoption of approaches aimed at raising literacy and numeracy levels across further education and training. Nearly half of those scoring at the lowest level in the PIAAC survey are in work. We support the continued prioritisation of those with the lowest level of educational attainment in employee development programmes, like Skills to Advance.

There is robust research evidence of the persistence of low participation of people with less than upper secondary education in lifelong learning, despite policy interventions since the late 1990s. The current National Skills Strategy (2016) sets out to address this however without new approaches and the necessary funding, the situation is unlikely to change.

A New Skills Agenda for Europe (European Commission 2016) has outlined a three- step approach called Upskilling Pathways². The first step is to ensure that citizens can easily assess their skills. Following their completion of an assessment, people can explore offers that meet their learning needs and flexibility requirements. The third and final step is to

² Available online at <https://bit.ly/2YeIMDf>

ensure that people are able to validate their skills level through certification. Upskilling Pathways draws from research, including from the OECD regarding important factors which should be incorporated into the design of learning opportunities. For example learning should be available 'just in time and just enough'. Learning should demonstrate personalisation or learner centeredness and weighted supports to those who need them most. This presents clear challenges to our current providers.

In Ireland assessment is usually embedded within education and training programmes, accessed after they have decided to join a course. Upskilling Pathways compels us to think about how to make an assessment process available to the general public prior to joining a course. Adult information and guidance services also play a role here, as do the many other stakeholders who are liaising with people for other purposes, for example health and welfare services.

Access related actions under active inclusion

Action: Scale up the availability of learning opportunities for people with literacy and numeracy needs and with less than upper secondary education, in line with the identified need.

Action: Establish a learning entitlement for all people with less than a Leaving Certificate or equivalent. A clear monetary value of learning and learning supports (guidance, childcare, expenses) available to a citizen through state funded provision should be established.

Action: Carry out a gap analysis on the availability of learning opportunities, including supports, and identified need.

Action: NALA in partnership with ETBI, is developing a new open access SkillsChecker, a tool for people to assess their basic skills levels and explore options. The learning from this policy experimentation project funded by the EU should be incorporated into the new FET strategy.

Quality in teaching and learning actions under active inclusion

Action: Clear to see plan for the explicit integration of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum from Level 1-6.

Action: Adoption of the Guidelines for Family Literacy (forthcoming 2019) leading to a range of family literacy programmes available at community level.

Action: Work inter-departmentally with the Department of Health to improve health literacy. See policy alignment suggestion below calling for a whole-of-government strategy that would include many government departments and address health literacy.

Action: Adoption of the Guidelines for the Inclusion of People with Intellectual Disability (NALA/SOLAS forthcoming 2019)

Action: Implement actions to increase adult numeracy learning opportunities drawing on the adult numeracy research currently underway and to be published in 2020.

Blended and distance learning

NALA has for over a decade sought to explore and utilise technology solutions to bringing learning closer to those excluded. Following successful testing using low technology solutions including TV, NALA developed a unique online learning platform, www.writeon.ie for people who wished to develop their literacy and numeracy as well as a range of other skills, all set against the National Qualifications Framework at levels 1-4. This platform has evolved over the years to provide significant curricular support and a blended learning solution for those working at these levels. It also provides RPL, the only consistently available national option that is highly efficient as managed online with the associated reduction in administration costs. NALA is mid-way through the development of a new platform for www.writeon.ie which will bring increased functionality and ease of access for all users.

Action: www.writeon.ie should be promoted by all stakeholders to people with less than an upper secondary qualification, or a literacy and numeracy need as a free to use learning resource that also provides Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

Professional development

NALA provides a range of professional development supports to those working with people with literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs. Events and workshops continue to be an important vehicle for practitioners to meet and share their practice. In addition to face to face opportunities across Ireland, NALA also delivers webinars and is building PD offerings through our new learning management system using Brightspace.

Action: Increase professional development opportunities for practitioners involved in the delivery of literacy, numeracy and digital skills competence across the FET sector.

Action: Build capacity of providers to scale up the availability of ESOL learning opportunities.

Lifelong Learning and Workplace Upskilling

In 2018 SOLAS published a background paper and policy framework for skills development of people in employment. The new policy will “target support for vulnerable groups in the Irish Workforce, particularly those who have lower skills levels and who need more opportunities to advance in their working lives and careers, to sustain their employment and to avoid displacement or to avail of emerging job opportunities.”

Ireland’s National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025 has a target of upskilling 165,000 people from PIAAC Level 1 in literacy (from 17.5% to 12%) and 256,000 people from PIAAC Level 1 in numeracy (from 25.6% to 17%), by 2025. This is the same target we had in the NSS 2007 and as we did not meet this target, it was rolled over. CSO data shows us that currently there are 445,800 people (aged 25-64) who have less than a QQI Level 4 qualification – 233,300 (52%) are employed and 24,900 (6%) are unemployed (CSO, 2013).

The National Skills Council spring statement (2018) identifies key priorities, stating that: “Soft skills, transversal skills and the mastery of core competencies in numeracy, literacy and digital technologies remain critical for employees in all sectors and opportunities to develop and enhance these skills are vital.”

A recent NESC report on Moving from Welfare to Work notes that “Some of the interviewees are very far from the labour market, and contend with problems that are difficult to address, such as serious literacy difficulties.” The report recommends:

1. Tailored supports to help more vulnerable groups to progress. Vulnerable groups include Travellers, African migrants, lone parents; people with a disability; those with literacy difficulties, poor English, no work experience or contacts, a history of addiction or time in prison.
2. More **intensive** literacy and numeracy education is required for those with low literacy levels, as well as vocational literacy supports to ensure better access to employment and training.

Action: Implement the two recommendations from the Moving from Welfare to Work report (see above).

Action: Increase the investment in the Skills for Work programme to specifically target employees with literacy and numeracy needs in small medium enterprises and sectors with highest levels of workers with low educational attainment.

Action: Introduce a targeted paid learning leave programme for employees in work with literacy, numeracy and digital needs and or less than a level 4 qualification to develop their basic literacy and numeracy skills if they wish to do so. This intervention would be for a maximum time period and funded through our social insurance (PRSI) system.

Meeting Skills Gaps

Research on the impact of raising literacy, numeracy and digital skills of the labour force is linked to a rise in productivity also know there is a positive and rapid return on investment across the board, for participants, the companies they work for, the Exchequer as well as a significant return to economic development (NALA, 2009). To meet the skills gaps we must have an adult population with functioning literacy and numeracy to fully engage in economic participant – either as a producer or consumer. The current €31 million adult literacy budget provides for literacy tuition provision (2 to 6 hours per week) for 60,000 adults. This means 11% of adults who have literacy needs are getting literacy support. This is insufficient to address the issue effectively and meet current government targets.

Action: All adults with literacy, numeracy and digital needs and or less than a QQI Level 4 qualification should have access to a high quality and relevant learning programmes with a local education and training provider that meets the person's literacy development and vocational needs. This would include intensive and flexible tuition options; appropriate supports as required (income, transport, child and elder care), work placement where appropriate and progression opportunities.

New Modes of Delivery

We have already provided details of www.writeon.ie as a new mode of delivery. The challenge of Upskilling Pathways has inspired a new project to make assessment for accessible to learners. NALA has also developed health literacy curricula for example in our efforts to meet learners' needs as well as national policy.

It would be useful to be able to see how learners views gathered through NALA's Student Development Fund and other processes are considered through quality assurance systems in ETBs to inform the development of new ways of delivering learning in ways that suit learners. Identifying changes and evolutions based on learner feedback would enhance the motivation of learners to continue to give their time to feedback mechanisms. NALA has gathered students' views on the development of a Learner Charter in ETBs, plain English, reasons why students want or not to do accreditation, where they are struggling with numeracy, their use of libraries and views on what would improve literacy in the next 10 years.

Action: SOLAS should continue to promote learning, partnership and collaboration between stakeholders and work t

Other areas for consideration

Action: SOLAS and all FET stakeholders should adopt plain English guidelines across all information provided to the public and to learners.

Action: Grant-aided bodies should receive multi-annual funding agreements in line with those granted to ETBs.

Action: Ensure relevant staff in the FET sector have literacy awareness training to ensure there is a contemporary understanding of the importance of literacy, numeracy and digital skills in Irish society, based on international research.

Policy alignment and coherence

There are several government departments, state agencies and national policy documents and implementation plans that identify and work to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills in Ireland. However, this work often depends on the knowledge and goodwill of people working in sectors. We would like to see better coordinating, sharing and aligning of initiatives to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills. NALA believe there is a need for new thinking and to develop a **creative and ambitious whole-of-government strategy** to meaningfully improve literacy, numeracy and digital skills in the next 10 years. NALA is working with TASC (think-tank for action on social change) to develop a 10-year strategy and policy framework and we will publish this at the end of the year.

Conclusion

Every person has a right to literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Having these basic skills enables a person to have a voice and participate fully in society; to continue learning and extend their education; and to access the same opportunities as everyone else. By improving these skills, Ireland can be a better and more equal society.

To improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills effectively will require intensive literacy tuition which will increase the success rate of basic skills learners and support people with the weakest skills. For employees with basic skills needs, targeted paid learning leave to support improving their basic skills would show real government commitment to upskilling and lead the way in Europe in this area.

Ireland must invest in people, invest in adult literacy and invest in society.

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