

**Presentation to the**

**Joint Committee on  
Education and Social  
Protection**

**by the National Adult  
Literacy Agency  
25 November 2015**



**National Adult Literacy Agency**  
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

# Addressing Deficiencies in adult literacy and numeracy

## Introduction

NALA very much welcomes the opportunity to present to the Committee today on addressing deficiencies in adult literacy and numeracy in Ireland. NALA is committed to making sure people with literacy and numeracy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. We do this through providing innovative solutions, in policy and practice, to improve outcomes for adults with literacy or numeracy needs, working in partnership with a range of public and private stakeholders in Irish society.

Unmet adult literacy and numeracy needs have devastating consequences for individuals, communities and the economy. The recent OECD Adult Skills Survey<sup>1</sup> shows that one in six Irish adults (521,550 people) find reading and understanding everyday texts difficult: for example, reading a bus timetable or medicine instructions. One in four (754,000 people) has difficulties in real world maths, from basic addition and subtraction to calculating averages. The survey also showed that people who scored at the lowest literacy and numeracy levels often have no or low qualifications, earn less income, were unemployed and had poorer health. According to the Central Statistics Office, there is no statistical difference between the scores of adults in the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey and the 2012 Adult Skills Survey.

The European Commission response highlights that the least-skilled are caught in a "low-skills trap", which contributes to high unemployment and threatens growth and competitiveness<sup>2</sup>. Irish evidence acknowledges that further education and training (FET) is not "optimally aligned" with labour market needs<sup>3</sup>, and significant development is required<sup>4</sup>. The recent publication of the Further Education and Training Strategy holds promise if the required increased investment is forthcoming.

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<sup>1</sup> Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2012 Survey Results for Ireland: CSO, Dublin

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/PIAAC%20EU%20Analysis%2008%2010%202013%20-%20WEB%20version.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>

[http://www.nesc.ie/assets/files/Sec\\_Non\\_NESC\\_Papers/A%20strategic%20review%20of%20FET%20and%20Unemployed\\_Oct13.pdf](http://www.nesc.ie/assets/files/Sec_Non_NESC_Papers/A%20strategic%20review%20of%20FET%20and%20Unemployed_Oct13.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See *DES Review of ALCES Funded Provision 2012*, and *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019*.



## Widening Gap?

The National Skills Strategy set a target of upskilling 70,000 people to Level 3 by 2020<sup>5</sup> to leave 7% of the workforce with at most lower secondary qualifications. The current figure is 15.6%<sup>6</sup>, which means we are likely to miss the 7% target. Currently a review of the Strategy is under way and it presents an opportunity to reflect on why our performance has fallen so short of our ambitions and what needs to be done differently in the new National Skills Strategy to achieve such a target in the future.

Participation rates in lifelong learning in Ireland further illustrate the challenge, with Ireland at 7.3%, well behind the EU average of 10.5%. Furthermore, those with the highest educational attainment are most in evidence.

Currently, Education and Training Board (ETB) Adult Literacy Services provide adults with between 2 and 6 hours adult literacy tuition per week from its €30 million budget, but this is often insufficient to attain Level 3 certification. In fact, the number of hours or places available to learners has actually reduced since the OECD survey. There is also a particular gap in provision for long term unemployed and other cohorts with literacy, numeracy and or ICT needs. For example, the Momentum programme no longer funds certification at levels 3 and 4, while the educational support within Community Employment programmes was reduced.

## Creating conditions for raising adult literacy and numeracy levels

Decision makers need to commit to addressing the unacceptable levels of literacy and numeracy amongst our adult population, similar to the youth guarantee. Our greatest resource is people and we must enable more adults address their literacy and or numeracy needs and upskill by:

- Restoring previous levels of provision for adult literacy and basic skills.

<sup>5</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) *Tomorrow's Skills –Towards a National Skills Strategy*. Dublin: Forfás

<sup>6</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and SOLAS (2014) National Skills Bulletin 2014

- Providing access to more intensive learning options, particularly for the long term unemployed.
- Customising provision to engage low skilled, such as youth and those returning to the labour force, using blended learning and technology. For example, NALA's free interactive learning website [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie) supports independent and distance learning as well as expanding learning time and achievement within existing programmes, including the recognition of prior learning (RPL).
- Engaging employers in supporting low skilled workers in line with international policy and practice (e.g. UK, New Zealand, and USA).

## Recommendations

While unemployment rates are falling generally, those with low qualifications or skills remain particularly vulnerable. Early school leavers are over three times more likely to be unemployed than their counterparts with higher qualifications<sup>7</sup>.

- We believe that we can promote equality in our education and training system by ensuring all adults can achieve a basic education. By targeting people caught in a 'low skills trap', we can tackle some of the inequality of the current system and wider society.
- We believe that all unemployed people with no or low qualifications should have access to an intensive basic education course leading to a Level 3, Junior Certificate equivalent, qualification
- We believe that all adults with less than a Level 4, Leaving Certificate equivalent, qualification should have access to an intensive basic education course that enables them to move at least one level up.

Our education system is seen as one of the finest in the world, serving most people well. If you can get the basics, there are great opportunities and supports available to you. However, if you need the basics, you are consigned to part-time provision with no support. We believe that in Ireland, access to education and training should be fair and equitable, and that it is important to target initiatives at groups who would most benefit and who are at risk of being left behind. This has been the successful intent behind ensuring our children's literacy and numeracy is a national priority. This intent must be extended to adults. We believe that literacy is a human right and a tool for change that enables people to participate more fully in society.<sup>8</sup>

We believe that the Irish government should commit to providing:

<sup>7</sup> CSO QNHS, Quarter 1, 2015 Table S8 [QNHS Release \(Supplementary Tables\) Times Series Tables \(XLS 1,630KB\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> NALA, *Raising adult literacy and numeracy levels and working towards a more inclusive society –Strategic Plan 2014-16*, (2014).

- a guarantee of support to all adults with less than a Level 4 qualification to go back to learning; and
- an intensive basic education course at Level 3 to unemployed people with low qualifications.

These programmes could be funded through the National Training Fund, boosting the current Adult Literacy Budget to €50 million.

## Appendix 1

- **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 and numeracy skills, and
- committed to raising adult literacy and numeracy 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 and numeracy.

### **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 numeracy, 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 practiced their literacy or numeracy for a number of years lose confidence and skills.

### Further information and evidence

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