The National Adult Literacy Agency

Distance Education Policy 2007 - 2010

NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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Executive Summary

NALA's work in the area of Distance Education involves the use of print, broadcast and web media along with telephone tutoring to target an adult audience who NALA believe would like support in improving reading, writing and numbers skills. While this support is available in traditional face-to-face situations through the Vocational Educational Committees, 92% of those adults identified as in need of support are currently not availing of this support. There are various reasons for this lack of involvement, many of which are associated with provision of adult learning in school building-based centres and in face-to-face interventions. Distance Education addresses many of these issues by facilitating anonymous learning in environments which do not require learners to attend centres in school grounds.

NALA's Distance Education Policy is to ensure people with literacy and numeracy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. To meet this goal, NALA is committed to widening access to literacy learning opportunities through the use of Distance Education approaches. This is reflected by the inclusion of Distance Education provision as part of NALA's *Strategic Plan 2007 – 2010*[1].

NALA's Distance Education Services must continue to expand, building on lessons learned in Ireland and internationally. This will require increased support, both in terms of funding but also in terms of 'buy-in' from partner organisations and stakeholders. This paper outlines why Distance Education is a cost effective strategy which can significantly increase the reach of the Adult Literacy Service and cater for a broader range of interventions than is possible with more traditional approaches to provision.

It is envisaged that future Distance Education initiatives will include some or all of the following:

- A web repository of best practice content
- Provision of learning materials across a variety of media platforms, including broadcast, the Web, print and telecommunications
- Increased and innovative use of web and associated technologies
- Collaboration with stakeholders including the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and RTÉ
- Increased access to formal accreditation of learning

There are significant challenges ahead, but our work to date has shown that Distance Education can provide opportunities for successful adult literacy interventions.

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[1] Objective 2, Project 3 states that NALA will 'develop and supply a range of distance literacy and numeracy learning programmes with our broadcast, funding and development partners.' (NALA, 2007a)

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline NALA's understanding of the adult literacy learner in Ireland today, explain what work has been done in the area of Distance Education provision to date, provide an international context for this work and set out NALA's plans for Distance Education provision to 2010.

The National Adult Literacy Agency was established as a membership-based organisation in 1980 to act as a co-ordinating body for all involved in adult literacy work, to raise awareness and to lobby for funding and recognition of the issue. Since 1980, adult literacy provision has been increasingly supported by successive governments and several reports have helped to give impetus to the adult literacy movement.

> *Lifelong Learning for All* (OECD, 1996) report highlighted the role of adult literacy in promoting competitiveness and employment, addressing poverty, promoting democracy and social cohesion, building a knowledge society and strengthening individuals, families and communities.
>
> *(NALA, 2005b)*

In 1997 the Education Research Centre (Morgan et al., 1997) as part of the OECD International Adults Literacy Survey (IALS), carried out a survey which examined how well adults could handle different types of reading and numeracy tasks which crop up regularly in work and in daily life – such as reading timetables, the labels on medicine bottles, or calculating and estimating quantities. This survey concluded that one in four – that is, about half a million - Irish adults 'have problems with even the simplest literacy task' (ibid., p43) such as reading instructions on a bottle of aspirin. It also found that one in six 'of those who are in employment are at the lowest level' (ibid., p50) Although the survey pointed out that literacy difficulties are most in evidence among adults over 40, Ireland still has one of the highest rates of literacy problems among those aged 16-25 years in OECD countries.

The report also established a clear link between literacy and economic productivity. To look at the issue from an economic perspective, the National Skills Strategy identified basic skills, in particular literacy, as being of increasing importance in the modern Irish workplace. This group showed that 28% of Ireland's labour force have lower secondary (Level 3) qualifications or less (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2007, p. 60). It is, however, important to note that formal qualifications do not necessarily translate to competency in literacy skills and knowledge. As a result, a target has been set to upskill 70,000 individuals from NFQ levels 1 and 2 to level 3 and 250,000 people from level 3 to level 4 and 5 by 2020. The importance of the National Skills Strategy is reinforced by the fact that many of the targets identified in the report have been included in the *National Development Plan 2007-2013*, for example the key target 'to reduce the numbers of people in the workforce with a level 3 qualification or less to 7% by 2020' (Government of Ireland, 2006, p. 192).

Since 1997, provision of adult literacy learning opportunities has grown from 5,000 places to just over 40,000 in 2006 (Department of Education and Science, 2006). Annual funding has also increased significantly from approximately €1m in 1997 to

over €30m in 2007. In spite of these successes, support is still only being provided to 8% of those adults identified by IALS. Clearly, we need to continue to push for a service that is both attractive and accessible to the other 92%. *NALA's Strategic Plan 2007 – 2013*, with its inclusion of Distance Education provision as a key component, focuses on both building the service and driving demand.

The aim of NALA's Distance Education Services is to provide high quality free distance learning opportunities targeted at improving literacy without regards to social, economic and cultural backgrounds and taking account of all levels of technical ability. It is useful at this stage to clarify what we mean by Distance Education.

Definitions

Distance Education is defined as occurring when learners[2] and tutors are separated by either space or time. This is a broad definition, which reflects the fact that distance education can involve people studying in a range of personal contexts using a number of learning or communication technologies.[3]

So distance learning can be characterised by a high degree of flexibility by which the student chooses and moves between a wide-range of learning environments in order to complete a period of study. Ideally, the student has the option to choose a learning environment that most suits their needs at any given time. This flexibility allows students to learn either independently or in a supported learning environment depending on the level of support needed.

Distance Education programmes share characteristics applied in traditional forms of literacy learning provision, as identified in *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Practice* (NALA, 2005b). These include:

- Learners learn without having to be in the presence of a tutor or other learner.
- Learners can select where and when learning takes place.
- The pace and sequence of learning is controlled by the learner.
- Learning takes place in a non-threatening atmosphere.
- Learners develop their capacity for independence and self-reliance as a learner.

Background and Rationale

An Improving Service

Since 1997, the development of coherent government policy initiatives and the ring-fencing of funding have permitted the VEC adult literacy service to expand and improve, reaching a greater number of adults. This is being accomplished through three primary strategies:

1. A national policy on adult education — the *Learning for Life White Paper* prioritises those with lowest literacy levels and identifies as a priority to explore the potential of DE in literacy provision (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 89). The National Anti-Poverty Strategy includes an adult literacy target to reduce the population with literacy difficulties (IALS Level 1) to 10-15% by 2016.
2. The expansion of adult education and training provision - this includes the Back to Education Initiative, the Return to Learning Programme, and FÁS's One Step Up programme.

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[2] The term 'learner' is used in this document to describe people engaged in independent study. The word 'student' denotes a person who is engaged in some level of formal intervention, through participation in a VEC adult literacy class for example.
[3] Note that this paper is not part of an academic discussion on a definition of distance education. Associated pedagogical and philosophical issues of openness and flexibility are therefore dealt with in the context of practical provision.

3. The ongoing 'professionalisation' of the VEC Adult Literacy Service – the development of third level qualifications for practitioners has led to many organisers and tutors undertaking formal learning programmes. The implementation of dedicated quality assurance programmes such as the *Evolving Quality Framework*[4] and *Mapping the Learning Journey*[5] has also led to quality driven improvements of offerings across centres. This has also been supported by the accreditation of centres and the validation of programmes through FETAC.

An Imperfect Service

While the provision of opportunities for adults to return to education has increased since 1997, there still remain significant barriers to greater participation (NALA, 1998). Currently, participation rates are low - there are just over 40,000 students currently registered in VEC Adult Literacy services. This represents 8% of those with literacy difficulties (Morgan et al., 1997). Barriers to access and participation are complex but include informational, situational, motivational and institutional issues.

Examples of reasons determined for non-participation include:
- Lack of information on available supports,
- the stigma attached to "going public" about a literacy problem,
- negative experiences with previous school-based education,
- fear of starting tuition,
- lack of childcare,
- no access to transport,
- not enough time, and
- financial constraints.

Distance Education approaches to provision can directly address some of these factors and lead to greater participation.

Moving beyond access and participation, the VEC Adult Literacy Service, as it is currently organised, may struggle to cope with increasing numbers of students. This is typical of challenges faced by traditional bricks and mortar-based organisations in dealing with increasing numbers of students. Within the VEC Adult Literacy Services, 1,424 tutors are employed on a full or part time basis, while 3,622 people work as voluntary tutors. These tutors provide an estimated 5,000 hours of tutoring per week (Department of Education and Science, 2006). As a consequence of these numbers, the demand on tutors is great and most students typically receive only 2 hours of tuition per week. Increased immigration has also seen increased demand for English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) support from non-Irish nationals through the VECs in recent years (ibid.). In many cases, as demand for places increased from 5,000 in 1997 to over

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[4] The Evolving Quality Framework is a guide that supports the recognition, pursuit and maintenance of consistent quality in Adult Basic Education. Available from
http://www.nala.ie/publications/qualityframework.html
[5] Mapping the Learning Journey is a framework for summarising and recording progress of literacy learners. Further information on implementation is available from
http://www.nala.ie/mlj/mainstreaming.html

40,000 in 2006, centres have struggled to recruit more tutors and have coped with the increased demand by providing more group than one-to-one interventions.

As NALA continues its work in increasing public awareness of literacy, Distance Education may be one solution to the problem of providing quality educational learning opportunities to increasing numbers of adults looking for tuition.

The White Paper on Adult Education and ICT

From the range of international projects available and feedback from NALA's Distance Education projects, it is clear that technology is becoming more and more critical both as a form of literacy but also as a range of media through which to convey information and facilitate learning.

The Irish Government *White Paper on Adult Education* (2000) recognised the rapid growth of the Internet in Ireland. Such growth inevitably means that increasing numbers of adults will seek access to education and training opportunities by using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) as a medium for learning.

> *Educational institutions in Ireland, while to the forefront in teaching about IT, have been slow in utilising IT in their teaching, particularly in the development of out of classroom teaching. While this has implications for the education sector in the context of global competition, it also reduces the range and choice of possibilities which adult students in Ireland can avail of in their learning pursuits.*
> *(Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 99).*

Learning for Life recognised the many advantages of ICT as a medium for learning for adults in Ireland.

> *As an opportunity for adult students, ICT provides a whole new mechanism for overcoming distance; for accessing information from one's home or workplace; for pursuing accredited learning programmes as more and more institutions adapt their programmes for electronic delivery and for interaction with other students in a virtual classroom environment.*
> *(Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 99).*

The Information Society Commission also recognised that new technology can be used as a way of overcoming obstacles such as physical access for people with disabilities enabling a higher degree of equity (Information Society Commission, 2003, p.119).

Although the *Learning for Life* paper acknowledged the benefits of distance learning programmes, it was also concerned with the limitations of ICT in educational applications and concedes that it is better to look at virtual learning environments in the role of supplementing rather than replacing face-to-face learning opportunities. It nonetheless stated that the application of ICT in adult education practice is still in its infancy and a vast potential remains to be realised.

> *If this potential is to be tapped, and indeed if Ireland as a society is to maintain its position vis-à-vis other countries in the information revolution, it is imperative that the learning blocks in accessing IT are removed.*
> *(Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 99).*

The *White Paper* also states that the National Adult Literacy Programme should develop the potential of ICT and broadcasting in literacy training. The Paper recommends the establishment of a National Adult Basic ICT Skills Programme and predicts the provision of a dedicated education channel on RTE's digital platform. However, RTÉ is currently predicting 2012 as the earliest start to digital broadcasting in Ireland, and a National Adult Basic ICT Skills Programme has yet to be implemented.

NALA Distance Education Services are committed to realising the potential of ICT in literacy learning. Projects to date have involved the integrated use of computers, mobile phones, digital photography and the Internet. NALA will continue to expand the use of technology in making content available to take account of the increasing convergence of technologies and the cost effectiveness of e-assessment and e-learning approaches. Future provision will take account of contemporary practice to ensure that NALA is making best use of technologies available to maximise reach and effectiveness.

Digital Literacy

The importance of addressing the ICT needs of those most at risk of 'e-exclusion' is further emphasised by the Information Society Commission in *eInclusion: expanding the Information Society in Ireland* (2003). This report recommends the development of a National eInclusion Action Plan and within this plan to target the most excluded groups as identified in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. Specifically, the Commission lists the following as late adopters of ICT:

- housewives,
- retired people,
- tradesmen,
- workers in agriculture, forestry and fishing, and
- the unemployed.

The link between these late adopters and the likelihood of low literacy levels within these target groups is explicitly made. As the Information Society grows and the importance of using ICT in our everyday lives increases, this group of late adopters is at increasing risk of further exclusion. Those with stronger ICT skills have an advantage when it comes to accessing information on practically every area of modern life – from ATMs to online government information resources to email to online social networking. The rate of technological innovation is staggering and those with low levels of ICT literacy skills will find it increasingly difficult to keep up to date and participate as fully as their more technically capable 'e-citizens'.

As well as using ICT for everyday functions, educational opportunities are increasingly being provided in contexts that require greater ICT skills. The ability to understand and use ICT and engage with broadcasting technologies is a key element in accessing open and distance education for example. This is evidenced by the number of Irish universities who have recently established on-line class management systems to virtually manage students and coursework.

It is often argued that because people engaging with literacy learning on a low level generally don't have advanced ICT skills, it is better to provide opportunities using more traditional methods. There are two strong arguments against this thinking.

Firstly, there is a capacity issue. As explained earlier, traditional classroom-based and face-to-face interventions are currently at capacity in coping with 40,000 students. In order to reach and teach the estimated other 460,000 potential learners, there is no other option than to embrace ICT.

And secondly, this approach envisages 'literacy skills' as equating to reading and writing in print-based contexts, and using ICT as a new form of 'digital literacy'. Certainly there are unique and specialised skills and competencies required for developing digital literacy skills, but this logic fails to take account of the everyday circumstances where reading and writing is required through engagement with technologies such as mobile phones, ATMs, work-based computerised forms, the Internet and so on. Rather than treat 'traditional literacy' and 'digital literacy' as two separate areas of learning, there exists an opportunity now to integrate 'both' of these areas by providing literacy learning opportunities through the medium of ICT.

The EU commission workshop, *Promoting Digital Literacy* (European Commission, 2004), made 3 very clear recommendations that point to the increasingly centrality of ICT in society today:

- Put digital literacy at the core of public responsibility so it is recognised as a crucial knowledge area by all Member States
- Define and implement a pan-European digital literacy curriculum for the teaching of 'digital basic skills'. This should be defined in detail and focused on education, citizenship and the workforce.
- Make digital literacy interdisciplinary, so that it is at the core of public responsibility.

NALA's Principles of Distance Education Provision

NALA is committed to ensuring people with literacy and numeracy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. To meet this goal, NALA's Distance Education Policy is to widen access to literacy learning opportunities through the use of Distance Education approaches.

Widening access involves both the provision of information on options available to potential students and also providing learning materials for those students who opt to participate in basic education exclusively through distance education.

Information is provided through targeted promotional campaigns and broadcast aspects of provision in prime-time slots. This is further supported by operation of a Freephone support line staffed by experienced tutors. This service enables students to make informed choices about their learning choices and to aim for realistic progression opportunities.

Learning opportunities are provided in a variety of media formats to cater for varied learning styles. This includes the use of broadcast programming, operation of the Freephone line, distribution of printed materials and delivery of content over the Internet.

NALA's Distance Education Services are underpinned by a student-centred approach to programme development and programme delivery which addresses students' goals, assists them in devising a learning plan which works towards those goals, provides learning experiences which are tailored to students' needs and aspirations, and implements a mechanism for tracking their progress. This strategy draws on a wide range of learning materials and is assisted by the interaction of students with key project staff.

In ensuring as wide a range of student participation as possible, NALA is committed to the application of technology and different media platforms to the provision of learning opportunities. This includes print, telecommunications, the Internet and the broadcast media of television and radio. As new technology becomes available, NALA is committed to investigating new possibilities offered.

It is the policy of NALA's Distance Education Services to ensure that students are assessed regularly and constructively in ways which support the teaching and learning process and also, where appropriate, to provide evidence of achievement that will support certification of their learning. Assessment processes gather information and supply evidence of students' progress towards their individual learning goals, including those which involve working towards the standards for accreditation.

Distance Education Work to 2007

Since 2000, NALA has been working with the Department of Education and Science (DES) and RTÉ to explore and develop literacy through distance education. We have developed seven highly successful TV series, two radio series and three learning websites with associated print and Freephone support. Each of these standalone projects has also been independently evaluated, with the results published on www.nala.ie. These initiatives can be defined as separate distance education models, using different media combinations:

	TV	Radio	Print material	Freephone support	Web	Other Media
Model 1	✓		✓	✓	✓	VHS and DVD copies available following series broadcast
Model 2		✓	✓	✓		CD copies available following series broadcast
Model 3					✓	CD-ROMs with interactive multimedia literacy content
Model 4			✓		✓	CD-ROMs with interactive multimedia literacy content

Model 1 – TV, Print, Freephone and Web
In this model, TV is used as the primary medium to motivate, inform and teach. The content includes awareness-raising elements in the form of factual profiles of learners and learning processes as well as teaching elements in the form of short packages providing instruction on practical reading, writing and numeracy skills. The programmes prompt viewers to call a dedicated Freephone number, staffed by experienced tutors. Through this contact, students can order copies of the supporting printed materials, be put in contact with a local literacy scheme or seek further support over the phone.[6]

99% of Irish households have televisions, with 50% having a second or more sets (CSO 2002). The national broadcaster, RTÉ, continues to attract the largest audience shares, consistently averaging around 40% of the total number of viewers (AC Nielsen 2007). Because of this large captive TV viewing audience, television is a very efficient medium for communication in Ireland. This is the cornerstone of Model 1.

Printed materials form the core learning materials for this model and are posted to students free of charge following a call to the Freephone support line. The materials are arranged in chapters that correspond to the TV series and provide additional learning content to supplement the didactic content broadcast. The books are now printed in full colour, on heavy grade paper and are ring bound to allow for easier

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[6] Copies of the workbooks for each series can be downloaded from www.nala.ie/publications.

access. The books are used by both independent learners and students in formal schemes. Demand each year is strong and feedback is consistently positive.

The Freephone line is used to allow individuals to order books and receive personalised tuition free of charge.

The website provides a further opportunity for learners to engage in interactive learning exercises and games, as well as watch streamed videos of the programmes and stay in contact with tutors. The website for *The Really Useful Guide to Words and Numbers* can be found at www.rug.ie, while www.readwritenow.ie contains basic information on *Read Write Now 5.*

Two series of *The Really Useful Guide to Words and Numbers* and five series of *Read Write Now* were broadcast between September 2000 and April 2007 following this model. The series were seen by a large number of viewers and large numbers of the accompanying workbook were distributed to independent learners and literacy services in Ireland.

The table below shows viewing and workbook distribution figures for each of the series.[7]

Project	Average Number of Viewers (% of viewing public)	Number of Workbooks Issued (to August 2007)
Read Write Now 1	136,000 (19%)	40,000
Read Write Now 2	188,000 (16%)	36,880
Read Write Now 3	130,000 (10%)	38,170
Read Write Now 4	124,000 (9%)	38,150
Read Write Now 5	35,000 (5.4%)	32,530
The really useful guide to words and numbers Series 1	85,000 (10%)	23,369
The really useful guide to words and numbers Series 2	78,083 (10.15%)	23,113

Table 1

Model 2 – Radio, Print and Freephone
Ireland has one of the highest rates of radio listnership in Europe, with 85% of the population tuning into national, regional and local broadcasts daily (Joint National Listenership Research, 2006). In 2001, NALA ran two projects, the *Read Write Now* radio literacy series and the *Time 4 Learning* numeracy radio series.

The *Read Write Now* radio literacy series consisted of a single series of 10 radio programmes supported by a printed study pack. The series was targeted at basic students, specifically catering for those students who found the Read Write Now TV

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[7] Evaluations of these seven projects can be found on www.nala.ie/publications.

series too difficult. Programmes used a tutoring session between a tutor and student, to cover each of the programme's three literacy learning points. Students followed these radio broadcasts with their study pack.

The *Time 4 Learning* radio numeracy series was structured similarly to the *Read Write Now radio* series – 10 radio programmes supported by a printed study pack. This series was targeted at students with basic numeracy skills.[8]

Model 3 – The Internet and CD-ROMs
This model refers to delivery of learning content either using the Internet or CD-ROMs.

With content designed for the Internet, non-dynamic versions of the content are also made available on CD-ROMs. While the Internet has been used as a supporting component of Model 1, this model sees interactive online content standing on its own. *www.literacytools.ie* is an example of this approach. This site was launched in 2001 and features text, graphics and interactive quizzes presented in a simple, accessible web interface.

Since 2001, NALA has produced a number of CD-ROMs with a range of interactive learning content, catering for a diverse target group. Content from the *Read Write Now* TV series was combined with other interactive content in 2 CD-ROMs, which were then distributed to learning centres. *Technology at Work* was produced in 2006, and features interactive content covering subjects such as how to use fax machines, printers and ATMs. A web version of this content can be seen at
http://literacy.hosting365.ie/techatwork/main.html

Model 4 – CD-ROMs with Print
This model uses printed material in conjunction with multimedia elements such as DVDs or CD-ROMs. NALA's production of the *Safe and Well* resource, in conjunction with FÁS and the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), features a printed workbook with interactive content on an enclosed CD-ROM. The CD-ROM content is also replicated on www.ecollege.ie.

Lessons Learned
Every project to date has been evaluated independently. All of these evaluations are available from www.nala.ie. A brief synopsis of the principle conclusions drawn by these evaluations may be useful at this point:

The approach is effective.
- Our services are used by independent students (NALA, 2002).
- Materials are used by people in VECs as well (NALA, 2002).

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[8] Evaluations of these two projects can be found on www.nala.ie/publications.

- The approach of distributing learning materials in print, TV and web formats is popular both among independent learners and service-based students (NALA, 2006).
- The model of using different media to distribute learning materials is cost effective (NALA, 2005a).
- People like the flexibility and privacy offered by learning through the medium of television (NALA, 2003a).

The approach is cost effective. Government spending in adult education is €23 million per annum, with just over 40,000 adults participating. The annual spend for each Distance Education project ranged from €500,000 to €800,000. At its peak, *Read Write Now* regularly had in excess of 200,000 adults tuning in each week. For each series of *Read Write Now* and *The Really Useful Guide to Words and Numbers,* Freephone tutors handled between 5,000 and 10,000 support calls, resulting in a similar number of workbooks being posted out to individual distance education learners. At its peak, www.rug.ie was receiving over 1,800 hits per day from 2,500 different users. In addition, the various providers of adult literacy tuition received an average of 15,000 workbooks and DVDs per series. (NALA, 2007b)

Publicity and positioning in a broadcast schedule are key to the success of initiatives.

- The amount of publicity given to an initiative has a direct correlation to the numbers of people engaging with that project (NALA 2006, and NALA 2007).
- A prime time TV slot attracts more viewers (NALA, 2007).

Content needs to reflect the real world needs of learners:

- Learners have increasing access to PCs but they need support in using them (NALA, 2006).
- The Internet is used by learners to access information and learning (NALA, 2003b).
- While independent adult literacy learners are keen to use ICT as a medium for learning, those students in learning centres are likely to encounter a number of barriers in accessing learning through the medium of computers (NALA, 2003b).
- ICT learning outcomes should be included in future projects (NALA, 2006).
- Numeracy learning outcomes should be included in future projects (NALA, 2006).

The Freephone aspect of support needs to be developed.

- The Freephone line has increasingly been used as a referral and ordering service rather than a tuition support service (NALA, 2007).
- The use of the Freephone line has declined from 10,258 calls during Read Write Now 1 to 6,441 during the Really Useful Guide to Words and Numbers.

Following on from the seven projects involving radio and TV broadcast elements, it is very clear that mass media is an appropriate and powerful way to raise awareness

among a larger audience. A Media Advisory Group[9] is convened at regular intervals during each of NALA's Distance Education projects. Through discussions with the main national broadcaster, RTÉ, in this Group, it has become clear that a prime time slot is unlikely to be achieved for future shows with didactic content. Consequently, the broadcast element of *The Workshop* has moved from having both 'reach and teach' elements, as in previous series, to being more of a motivational and awareness raising series.

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[9] The Media Advisory Group is convened by NALA and is composed of representatives of the Adult Literacy Student body, the Department of Education and Science, the Adult Literacy Organiser Association, the Irish Vocational Education Association and RTÉ. In 2007, the NALA Executive and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment were invited to put forward representatives to sit on this group.

Distance Learning 2007 – 2008

NALA is currently working on developing a new Distance Education project. Tentatively titled *The Workshop*, this project is composed of four elements:

- A new 8-part TV series
- Printed materials
- A website
- A Freephone support function

The Workshop is intended to address two main aims:

1. provide learning opportunities to those people who have not chosen to engage with local literacy services; and
2. motivate viewers to make the decision to seek out second chance educational opportunities.

The Workshop is funded by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland and the Department of Education and Science (DES). RTÉ have undertaken to broadcast the series and as such, also invest a fee in purchasing a license from the TV production company. The series is due to be broadcast from February 2008.

The TV series follows the progress of 12 adults drawn from across Ireland undertaking a course of learning over 8 weeks in a dedicated learning centre. The 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary format has become increasingly popular with prime time audiences and it is hoped will attract large numbers of viewers.

The printed materials are targeted at FETAC Level 2 learners and are principally organised to support the development of portfolios of evidence to allow learners achieve awards at this level.[10]

As well as providing a supported learning environment, The Workshop has a wider awareness raising agenda, aimed at informing television viewers of learning options available to them and then motivating these adults to take the decision to return to education. Key to this is showing the wide range of opportunities currently available to adults, including workplace based options.

In addition, The Workshop will support learners in achieving qualifications at Level 2 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), thereby enabling the acquisition of a first award and providing both the motivation and the path to progress to higher level qualifications.

The Workshop is designed to help people to achieve a Level 2 award. It is a pioneering project and the first time Level 2 awards will be awarded through distance learning methods. It is hoped that the project will become a template for developing awards at a range of levels to directly target potential learners who are currently excluded from participating in educational initiatives delivered in other ways.

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[10] Further information on FETAC awards can be found at www.fetac.ie.

Distance Education Internationally

At a European Policy level, Distance Education plays a significant role in the provision of learning opportunities to adults. The Lisbon Strategy, agreed by EU States in 2000, aims to make the EU the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. Lifelong learning is a core element of this strategy, central not only to competitiveness and employability but also to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development.

The objectives set out by the Lisbon Strategy in the context of lifelong learning aim:

- to promote understanding among teachers, students, decision-makers and the public at large of the implications of ODL and ICT for education, as well as the critical and responsible use of ICT for educational purposes;
- to ensure that pedagogical considerations are given proper weight in the development of ICT and multimedia-based educational products and services;
- to promote access to improved methods and educational resources as well as to results and best practices in this field.

The Council of Ministers agreed in 2002 to aim for Europe's education systems to become a 'world quality reference' by 2010 by encouraging the mobility of students and teachers, cooperation between schools and universities and the development of distance education. In 2004, a target of 80% of 25-59 year olds was set for participation in lifelong learning. A significant aspect of the Lisbon Strategy is the promotion of elearning as a key component of meeting this 80% target.

The European Union Open and Distance Learning Liaison Committee was formed in 1998 by a series of networks concerned with provision of distance learning in the public and private sectors. (European ODL Liaison Committee, 2004) In their *Distance Learning and eLearning in European Policy and Practice: The Vision and the Reality* (2004) paper, they note that the promise held out by elearning in the Lisbon Strategy has failed to materialise. As a result, emphasis has now moved away from the promotion of a simplistic over-hyped elearning to development of smaller, higher quality projects that combine best of practice online learning elements with more traditional pedagogical approaches.

In November 2006, the European Parliament and Council established an action programme in the field of lifelong learning (European Parliament and Council, 2006). The objective of the 'Action Programme in the Field of Lifelong Learning 2007-2013' is to develop and foster interchange, cooperation and mobility so that education and training systems become a world quality reference in accordance with the Lisbon strategy.

This objective is supported by six sub-programmes. These sub-programmes are structured in the same way and address the teaching and learning needs of all participants as well as of the institutions and organisations providing or facilitating education and training in each respective sector. All the actions incorporate mobility, language and new technology.

The *Grundtvig[11]* programme addresses adult education and aims to respond to the educational challenge of an ageing population in Europe, and help provide adults with pathways to improving their knowledge and competences.

Its operational objectives include:

- improving cooperation (quality and volume);
- supporting and sourcing alternatives for underprivileged and vulnerable persons, such as older people and those who have left education without basic qualifications;
- supporting the development of innovative practices and their transfer between countries; and
- supporting the development of innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies and practices.

Given the commitment of the European Union to the development of more inclusive and innovative forms of education, including the application of elearning to the area of lifelong learning, NALA's work to date in using Distance Education methodologies has been far sighted and successful. It is imperative that we continue to learn from this work and develop even more effective strategies to bring more Irish adults into lifelong learning.

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[11] Further information on the *Grundtvig* programme can be found at
http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/llp/grundtvig/index_en.html

International Distance Education Case Studies

Distance Education is not new. In some shape or form, it has been around since the mid-Nineteenth century, with the Russians pioneering techniques to make consistently high quality learning materials available to geographically dispersed adult audiences. In the 150 years since these early efforts, Distance Education has been used across a range of learning contexts all over the world, sometimes for didactic purpose and in other cases as general awareness raising or motivational prompts. The following examples give a flavour of some of these applications.

Australia - Videoconferencing

In 1992, a videoconferencing network called the *Tanami Network* was set up between seven Aboriginal-owned sites in Australia's Northern Territories. This service has successfully provided access to secondary and tertiary level education in an area where low population density make traditional classroom-based forms of educational delivery impossible. The Australian Federal Department of Education currently flies adult learners to regional centres for residential courses as part of its approach to provision of literacy learning opportunities. Because of the distances and lack of resources involved, this often results in learners taking 8 to 10 years to complete a 3-year course, as well as creating social barriers to greater participation in this area of education. The Tanami Network is currently lobbying for funding to use its videoconferencing facilities to increase access to adult education.

The network moved from satellite videoconferencing to web-based ISDN conferencing in 2003 and is in the process of expanding its offering beyond the Northern territories through the national Outback Digital Network[12].

Germany – TV for Awareness

The German project Bayrischer Rundfunk / Redaktion Bralpha and Bundesverband Alphabetisierung[13] includes a six part soap opera series centred around the lives of a group of Bundesleage football players and staff members. This aims to increase awareness of literacy issues. Footballers often leave school early to take up apprenticeships with football clubs. As a result, they can frequently encounter literacy and numeracy difficulties later in life. The series presents these contexts through the lives of fictional football players. The series is accompanied by a series of printed books with famous footballers telling their stories.

A similar approach to awareness has been adopted by scriptwriters on BBC's Eastenders show with a central character, Keith, encountering problems in his everyday life because of poor reading and writing skills. As part of its *RAW* campaign, the BBC released an interactive DVD featuring many of Eastenders' favourite characters asking the viewers to answer questions using their TV remote control.[14]

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[12] The Outback Digital Network is funded through the 'Networking the Nation' branch of the Australian Department of Communications, Information, Technology and the Arts. Further information can be found in the 2000 annual report at http://www.dcita.gov.au/annualreport00/appendix.html.
13 This appears to translate as 'F.A.N -Football. Literacy Campaign. Network'.
[14] Further information on RaW can be found at http://www.bbc.co.uk/raw/.

Mexico – TV in the Classroom

The *Telesecundaria* project is a blended learning model, combining television, classroom and print-based delivery methods. Set up in 1968 by the Mexican Ministry of Public Education, the project has evolved to allow specialised teachers and eventually communities develop and deliver their own heavily contextualised learning materials via a satellite broadcast system. In 1993, *Telesecundaria* was used in 9,000 schools by over 600,000 students. While the system was originally set up to deliver curriculum-based content at a lower secondary school level, it is now being used to integrate vocational and community-based issues into secondary level education.[15]

Since 1996, the *Telesecundria* model has been deployed in the Central American countries Panama, Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica, and trials are under way in California and Florida in North America.

The concept of playing pre-recorded instructional lessons in classrooms has also been used by various private institutions in Thailand and South Korea to teach English as a Foreign Language to adult learners.

The Netherlands – TV, Print and Freephone

The *Lees en Schrijf!* project was launched on March 5th 2007. It translates as 'Read and Write' and is closely modelled on NALA's *Read Write Now* initiative. The series was developed by an independent production company, MiraMedia, in association with the Dutch government backed eTV production funding body. A TV series is used in conjunction with printed materials, a website, a Freephone tutor support line and a DVD. Significant funding has been invested in promoting the project, with bus, billboard, television and radio advertising campaigns being rolled out in the six months leading up to the first broadcast.[16]

The US – TV, Print, Classroom and the Internet

The Adult Literacy Media Alliance (ALMA) launched *TV411* in 1998. ALMA is a project run by the US-based international non-profit organisation, Education Development Center Inc. Funding for ALMA is principally through the Ford Foundation and the Wallace Foundation. ALMA creates educational multimedia learning materials for dissemination through broadcast media, the Internet, and literacy and community-based programmes across the United States.

Focussing on health, family and financial literacy, the project broadcasts 30-minute programmes with accompanying printed packs for learners, lesson plans for teachers, and interactive web content. Since 1999, the TV programmes have been available to 65% of American households through public and cable television broadcasts. 700,000 printed books have been distributed, 500,000 people have

[15] Further information on Telesecundria can be found at http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/lwf/doc/portfolio/abstract8.htm
[16] Further information can be found at www.leesenschrijf.nl.

visited the website and the series has been used in classroom-based settings across the US.[17]

UK - The Internet

The *BBC Skillswise* project combines a TV series and website to provide a rich multimedia resource for use by tutors and learners alike. The Skillswise website is based on the Adult and Literacy and Numeracy Core Curriculums for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The TV programmes began broadcast in March 2002 and are repeated on BBC's Learning Zone during school terms. The website consists of fact sheets, worksheets, quizzes and games to help improve skills. Topics include workplace literacy and ICT and using the Internet.

Further information can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise.

Worldwide – The Internet

The *Google Literacy Project* was launched in October 2006 as part of the Frankfurt Book Fair's new Literacy Campaign[18]. The project is designed to become a worldwide repository of literacy and numeracy related resources, all of which are organised and tagged for easy recall. Currently, it hosts text, graphics, multimedia elements and videos in a 'Youtube' format.[19]

Germany – The Internet

Funded by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF), the website www.ich-will.de[20] is a free elearning portal designed for use by learners and tutors. The site features an initial reflective online assessment, followed by a diagnostic assessment. Learners are directed to study small chunks of learning at their own pace. Formative assessment throughout allows learner to modify the sequence of learning, depending on requirements.

The portal went online on 8 September 2004. More than 18,000 unique users use the portal regularly, with support from online tutors. There are also around 2,500 learners in literacy courses learning via PC with support from 480 course tutors.

Tutors can access a learning management system to enrol students and assign learning. Where tutors need support in using the technology, this is available through the Portal, Zweite Chance Online project at www.zweite-chance-online.de.

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[17] Further information on TV411 is available at http://www.tv411.org/about_alma/impact.shtml.
[18] The Frankfurt Book Fair is the world's largest trade fair for books. The fair is organised by a subsidiary company of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association and traces its origins back to the days of Gutenberg, 500 years ago. In 2006, the Fair organised a Literacy Campaign to run in the days leading up to the event, attended by representatives of national and international organisations concerned with combatting literacy difficulties.
[19] Further information on Google's Literacy Project is available at www.google.com/literacy.
[20] This is the shortened form of the original URL 'www.ich-will-schreiben-lernen.de', which translated as 'I want to learn how to write'.

Literacy Distance Education Services in Ireland 2008 - 2010

As can be seen, Distance Education in the area of adult literacy learning in Ireland has advanced significantly since 2000. However, in order to progress provision further, we now need to take stock and plan for the future.

At this point, it may be useful to recap the main points that have been described in further detail above. These can be synopsised in the following statements:

- We have significant numbers of adults in Ireland who need support in improving their literacy and numeracy skills.
- Literacy learning provision has improved but there are barriers to greater participation in terms of learner circumstances and service capacity.
- Current adult literacy participation indicates that only 8% of those identified at the lowest level by IALS are availing of support.
- Distance education has been used successfully in a variety of formats for adult education internationally.
- Distance education approaches have reached large numbers of literacy learners in Ireland.
- Demand for distance education materials is significant but not overwhelming.
- Demand is greatest during publicity campaigns.
- The Irish government is committed to improving access to lifelong learning and to greater e-inclusion.
- The Irish government is committed to integrating ICT into learning.
- There remain infrastructural and economic problems with potential learners accessing computers.

There are also broader principles that need to be taken on board in developing materials for adult literacy learners.

Literacy awareness must be tackled in tandem with provision of learning opportunities. Broadcast technologies are important in addressing barrier issues such as lack of information, the stigma attached to "going public" about a literacy problem and fear of starting tuition.

The principles that underlie good adult literacy practice should apply to distance education provision of this type of material. These principles have been in evidence during NALA's development of successful distance adult literacy learning initiatives over the past number years:
- a holistic curriculum;
- a view of the student as a self-directed, self-motivated student;
- a recognition of the student as the centre of the learning process;
- a core-learning objective of preparing the student for a life of learning rather than for a terminal, end-of-learning examination.

Based on NALA's work to date, the following characteristics have been identified as important to the success of distance adult literacy learning projects:

- Materials should be presented in a variety of ways to engage and maintain an audience;
- Blending various technologies creates stimulating and flexible learning opportunities;
- Catering for a range of learning levels allows projects to reach a wider audience;
- Different learning styles need to be considered in designing and presenting materials;
- Taking account of students' previous knowledge and skills is critical;
- Learning experiences should be enjoyable;
- The option of accreditation is desirable;
- Learners with disabilities must be accommodated;
- Projects must be cost effective;
- Learners should incur minimal costs in undertaking learning;
- Materials need to be culturally inclusive.

Challenges

In implementing the NALA Distance Education Policy, it is obvious that there are challenges ahead.

The **demographics** of Ireland have changed significantly in the last 10 years. Adult education provision must reflect this change.

Infrastructure continues to be an issue for those outside of major urban centres. Data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2006) shows that access to computers and the Internet is limited:

- 51% of people have a home PC.
- 43% have home Internet access.
- 72% access the Internet from home; 34% access the Internet from work.
- 47% have broadband access.
- Broadband access at the time of writing is at 10.5%, with the EU average at 15.7%.

RTÉ are committed to the implementation of a **digital broadcasting** system by 2012. This will have the effect of increasing the bandwidth available for broadcasting content into homes, but it will also lead to greater competition for viewers' attention. NALA should grow partnerships with the national broadcaster, the BCI, community broadcasters and providers of digital broadcasting technology.

ICT skills in the general population and among adult literacy practitioners remain low. This is highlighted in the Read Write Now 4 and 5 evaluations where interviewees reported on limited ICT capacity in VEC adult literacy services (NALA, 2005a, 2006). However, the Internet provides opportunities for unrivalled and cost effective interaction between learners and content and needs to be pursued. In addition, as accreditation becomes increasingly available for learners, Web deployed content offers opportunities to assess existing knowledge and skills and provide directed learning to large numbers of independent learners.

As is common in the Adult Education sector, **funding** for Distance Education work is currently provided on a project-by-project basis using a combination of Department of Education and Science, Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, and RTÉ. This limits the capacity to develop long term strategies and show joined-up thinking between projects. It is also less cost effective, where economies are scale are possible with larger and longer term projects.

Meeting Challenges

Given the context and the challenges, the implementation of a viable long term Distance Education Strategy as set out in NALA's Strategic Plan (NALA, 2007) requires the successful completion of four tasks.

Task 1 – Continue to seek funding for distance education projects

Distance Education has been successful in reaching thousands of people who are not currently participating in adult literacy learning. From a cost-benefits perspective, distance education is compelling. In addition, traditional providers of face-to-face tuition are operating at capacity. As awareness increases through new series such as *The Workshop*, NALA expect demand for traditional and distance education provision to grow. This will need to be matched with increased funding.

To date, all funding for NALA Distance Education projects have been on a project-by-project rather than strategic basis. This has resulted in Distance Education learners being supported for periods ranging from three to six months in duration and to a lack of progression and continuity in materials. With longer term funding, NALA can build on resources and approaches year-by-year and provide a continuity of provision that is not possible under the existing system.

With the growing realisation that traditional forms of literacy education need to be integrated into vocational learning programmes, new partnerships are emerging. One indication of progressive government thinking in this area is the appointment of a Minister of State for Lifelong Learning working in both the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Discussions are ongoing with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment regarding possible additional funding of *The Workshop*. Should this approach to funding prove successful, it may become the basis for future work in the area. It is possible that providers in other areas such as Family Literacy and Financial Literacy could see the benefits of integrating Distance Education approaches into their work.

Funding for the broadcast elements of projects is now the responsibility of the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland. NALA must now begin work on a proposal for the development of a project with a 2009 broadcast schedule. To ensure a successful application, it is important to continue to raise awareness of literacy with the BCI, RTÉ and the TV production company involved.

To ensure continued funding of Distance Education Literacy initiatives, regular strategic meetings should be scheduled with key decision makers in the organisations listed above. Pursuing bilateral meetings is likely to meet with limited success, so NALA should consider establishing a forum where matters relating to the direction and funding of future initiatives can be explored.

One other potential source of funding is the *Grundtvig* programme. NALA is currently awaiting decisions on participation in several projects funded by this body. However, NALA has not been the main originator of these potential projects. NALA should investigate the development of Distance Education project applications for submission to this fund. Attendance at international conferences and seminars will help to raise NALA's profile and open up opportunities for such collaboration.

In seeking longer-term funding, NALA needs to provide clear analysis as to the benefits of pursuing distance education approaches to provision. Through this analysis, it is hoped that existing providers will decide to work with NALA in providing high quality learning opportunities to increasing numbers of students.

Task 2 – Develop standards for distance education materials and production

The *NALA Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Practice* (2005b) is currently in circulation and use by many providers. The adoption of this document illustrates that NALA is fulfilling an important role in ensuring high standards in the sector. NALA has also been to the fore of developing the *Evolving Quality Framework* and *Mapping the Learning Journey.*

Content for all of NALA's Distance Education projects to date has been driven by the NALA Distance Education Co-Ordinator. This aspect of the role has frequently been time-consuming to the detriment of the more long-term and strategic aspects of the function. Reasons for this include the lack of appropriately trained content writers and editors, and the lack of standards for development of content in this area. It is important to establish a panel of freelance production staff and develop standards for future materials development.

Much scope continues to exist for the provision of ICT training for literacy tutors. As technology becomes more pervasive, tutors will need to become increasingly competent in this area. However, as such provision does not fall within NALA's remit, it falls on bodies such as FÁS and representative bodies such as the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) to consider the integration of online and distance learning approaches into initial tutor training to meet this demand.

In addition to production of materials, NALA needs to be aware of where support is most needed. As NALA moves to implement its new strategic plan, research has a critical role in two key areas relevant to Distance Education – what the potential learners needs to learn and how they need to learn it. Feedback from the evaluation reports from the projects to date have helped to direct learning in the following project. For example, we identified digital literacy as an area that must be integrated more into our work following *Read Write Now 4* and the results of the evaluation of *Read Write Now 5* (NALA, 2006) validated this change. However, it is important that

NALA is proactive in finding out where the demands are likely to be rather than reacting to criticism of initiatives. One example of this proactivity is the area of workplace basic education, where we are already working with organisations in the supply of workplace based opportunities. We need to predict where other needs may arise and determine if Distance Education has a role to play in that area. Possible avenues to explore funding of research of this nature include the BCI's Research[21] fund and various European funds.

In terms of delivery methods, we are seeing an unprecedented rate of change in the information society. Technology evolves on a monthly basis with new opportunities presenting themselves for the easier dissemination of information and learning. Significant research is needed to keep abreast of these changes, to evaluate their appropriacy and to decide how best to integrate them into Distance Education provision. For example, as I write, the growth of online social networking[22] has taken over from 2006's 'blogging' phase. *The Workshop* website will include a blogging tool now that the technology has been proven and its appropriacy for use as an online learning journal has been determined. Other possible areas of interest are use of SMS[23] technology, online assessment, eportfolio systems, video conferencing and open sources applications.

Task 3 – Secure FETAC accreditation as distance education provider

The development of awards at Levels 1 and 2, FETAC, in conjunction with stakeholders such as NALA and the IVEA, is providing an opportunity for learners to receive accreditation for their learning. In August 2007, NALA's Distance Education Quality Assurance System (NALA, 2007c) was approved by FETAC. We expect to have *The Workshop* validated as the first Distance Education literacy learning programme at this level by October 2007. This places us to the fore of providing accreditation options to low level literacy learners in Ireland.

NALA must continue to work with learners to provide desirable accreditation options. Consultation with FETAC must be continued to ensure development of an accreditation system that is of most benefit to learners. Contact with the NALA membership as well as ongoing discussions with stakeholders such as the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Irish Vocational Education Association will be important.

As an accredited provider, this places a large administrative burden on NALA. We must investigate options for reducing this burden through the application of new technologies to the task. Research into development of online delivery methods should be pursued, particularly in the areas of eportfolios, elearning content, content management systems, and learner management systems. This can be achieved by

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[21] Further information can be found at http://www.bci.ie/research_reports/policy.html

[22] Popular examples include www.facebook.com, www.bebo.com, www.linkedin.com and www.myspace.com.

[23] SMS is short for 'Short Message Service' and is used to refer to 'texting' as a means of communication between mobile phones.

- contact with bodies such as Oscail, The National Centre for Technology in Education, the Irish Learning Technology Association, various third level bodies,and the Digital Learning Repository
- attendance at conferences such as EdTech07 and the Frankfurt Book Fair Literacy Project
- ongoing discussions with commercial bodies such as ThirdForce Plc, Alison Learning and Microsoft.

Task 4 - Develop a distance education web platform

The tasks above clearly show that increasing NALA's capacity to deliver content over the Web is important. Internet usage will only continue to grow as retailers and employers look to leverage cost savings advantages offered by online transactions in a growingly competitive market. Indeed it offers NALA significant savings in delivery costs and dramatically increases our ability to broadcast our message. Already we use the Internet to shop, bank, find information, communicate and work. Our audience, if not already using the web, will be doing so tomorrow. We need to be cautious about developing web capacity for three reasons –branding, obsolescence and return on investment.

All of NALA's websites to date have been branded differently. NALA therefore does not have a single unified web presence. Once the NALA brand is formalised and the new NALA website is live, it will be important to ensure that web users have a practically seamless experience in moving from one NALA site to the next. The incorporation of branding guidelines into the design of future sites is subsequently important. However, to further aid the recognition of NALA websites, we must develop a single literacy portal site. To the user, this presents the illusion of always 'staying' within the one site. In practice, it is in fact the consolidation of different sites under a single branded identity, with possible sharing of common functions such as Searches and Contact forms. As the developer of online learning materials, the Distance Education Co-Ordinator must take a lead role in the development of this portal.

It is important that NALA's development of web offerings is done in a strategic manner. Developing standalone websites to match the demands of specific projects is rarely cost or time effective. While the development of one web platform might be envisaged as part of Task 2 above, it is important to view the web platform as ubiquitous, standing above all of the individual projects that are funded. So we must plan for the future and use technologies that will still be in use in 5 years time, or will have been assimilated into newer technologies. Rather than betting on Betamax in the 1970s, the wise consumer waited until VHS had won that was before deciding to invest. Similarly, we must be careful not to invest in technologies that will not be supported next year or will cost us money to redevelop in the future. As in Task 3, the importance of careful research with key partners and information providers cannot be overstated.

The second consideration in developing a web platform is return on investment. NALA has already invested significantly in producing Distance Education materials on a project-by-project basis. Over 800 printed pages of learning materials, 200

screens of interactive online content, 42 hours of broadcast quality video and 10 hours of broadcast quality audio have been developed since 2000. We are in the unique position of having a vast amount of quality assured content that can easily be repurposed for new projects if we adopt best practice web development policies. There are two stages involved in doing this - assessing and classifying content, and converting content.

To assess content, NALA must work with experienced practitioners to review existing materials. This ties in with the development of a panel of production experts as set out in Task 2.

This content must then be classified in accordance with an internationally recognised taxonomy[24]. We must continue dialogue with those Irish third level institutions who are developing a national Digital Learning Repository.

Finally, in converting the selected content to a format best suited to online delivery, it is important that we develop our working relationships with a web partner. The current developer of NALA websites is Biznet Solutions. We should continue to discuss plans with Biznet, but develop a panel of other external experts to provide independent advice. This panel should include content experts such as adult literacy practitioners and elearning experts such as Avallain[25]. In piloting content, NALA should investigate the possibility of using existing learning centres or other public offices for adults to access the Internet free of charge.

In considering web deployment of materials, NALA also needs to take account of how digital broadcasting may affect mass media consumers in Ireland. NALA should strengthen its partnerships with RTÉ and the BCI to ensure that literacy provision is included in the possible development of a digital learning channel. This dialogue might best be placed within the context of forums as mentioned above rather than through one-to-one meetings.

Conclusions

Distance Education has proven itself as a cost effective and efficient model for provision of learning opportunities to adult literacy learning in Ireland. It has been successful in reaching new audiences, in raising awareness of issues among the general population, in attracting new learners to the VEC Adult Literacy Services and in improving the skills and competencies of independent learners. We are now at a crossroads in taking the concept of Distance Education provision to the next level, in reaching greater numbers, in motivating more potential learners and in providing higher quality learning opportunities. By taking on board lessons learned, by

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[24] A taxonomy is a classification system, which allows developers to attach 'tags' to items describing attributes such as content, author, level, media type and length.
[25] Swiss-based commercial company who developed German Literacy Portal Zweite Chance Online at www.zweite-chance-online.de.

following up on government policy, by harnessing all that tomorrow's technology has to offer, NALA is uniquely placed to become a thought leader in the area and to help the Adult Literacy Service make yet another leap forward in addressing the needs of 500,000 Irish adults.

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