

NALA Policy Brief on Distance Learning in Adult Literacy

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NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established in 1980 and is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA has campaigned for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

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Position Statement

NALA's mission statement 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 Learning approaches. This is reflected by the inclusion of the development of a Distance Learning Service as part of NALA's *Strategic Plan 2007 – 2010*.

The purpose of this document is to set out the rationale for distance learning to be an integrated and full funded part of a flexible solution to adult literacy and numeracy provision in Ireland.

Issue Statement

To advance the flexibility of provision, distance learning options must be a part of the range of opportunities available to people who wish to upskill at and from Levels 1 to 3. The NALA Distance Learning Service was the first to make any awards available at Level 2 and to contribute to the achievement of the qualification targets set for workers with low or no skills. This is an example of how distance learning can deliver tangible, measurable results and value for money, targeted at those with less than level 4 qualifications.

In 2009, NALA's Distance Learning Service has had over 4,440 phone calls to their freephone line with 472 callers engaged in distance learning, and over 2,400 referred to VEC adult literacy services. By the end of 2009, 108 learners will have been approved to receive over 450 minor awards at level 2.

NALA advocates for increased opportunities for adults to engage in literacy learning using a range of distance learning options and including blending learning. Building on NALA's distance learning work at level 2, we are working towards developing levels 1 and 3 distance learning awards, and supporting their integration into education and training providers' suite of options.

Summary Analysis

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 has lower secondary (Level 3) qualifications or less (EGFSN, 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 (Government of Ireland, 2006, p. 192). 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’.

Since 1997, provision of adult literacy learning opportunities has grown from 5,000 places to almost 50,000 in 2008 (Department of Education and Science, VEC Adult Literacy Returns, unpublished 2008). Annual funding has also increased significantly from approximately €1m in 1997 to €30m in 2008. In spite of these successes, support is still only being provided to less

than 10% of those adults identified by IALS. There are many barriers to greater participation in local literacy services (NALA, 1998), which 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.

Clearly, current centre-based provision on its own does not provide a flexible enough solution to meet the needs of the 90% of adults not engaging in services. We need to continue to push for a service that is both attractive and accessible to those 450,000 adults identified by IALS who could benefit from literacy learning provision. It is particularly key to creatively target learners with the most basic needs, corresponding to Levels 1, 2 and 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications of Ireland. Research has shown that it is this cohort that would most benefit from intervention, and who are also least likely to participate in adult education.

NALA’s Distance Learning Service

NALA’s Strategic Plan 2007 – 2010, with its inclusion of Distance Learning provision as a key component, focuses on both building the service and driving demand. NALA’s work in the area of Distance Learning 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. Distance learning directly addresses barrier issues by providing free, anonymous learning in environments which do not require learners to attend centres in school grounds. It also facilitates busy adults learning at times and a pace that suits them.

Currently, the only distance learning available to basic literacy learners in Ireland is provided by NALA on an annual project-based funding. Since 2000, NALA has been using television, radio, printed material, a freephone line, distance learning tutors, multimedia resources and the Internet to reach out to large numbers of adults in Ireland.

Since 2000, NALA has

- produced prime time television series each year with average viewing numbers of 137,000 people (12.26% of the viewing public);
- received an annual average of 4,945 calls to its freephone service;
- distributed over 232,000 workbooks to independent learners and literacy providers; and
- developed Ireland's first online learning portal providing opportunities for accredited learning at Level 2 on the National Framework for Qualifications.

International Perspectives

No other country in the world has yet developed the range of distance learning options developed by NALA for adult basic education. Online learning is available through www.ich-will-schreiben-lernen.de in Germany but this site does not provide accreditation options. The BBC has integrated literacy into storylines on Eastenders and Coronation Street as well as producing DVDs with literacy related content but this is not linked to a national freephone referral service.

Distance learning for teacher training is quite advanced throughout the world. For example, Brazil uses video and print materials to train primary school teachers through its national distance learning system, PROFORMACAO. Training for teachers at primary level is also available through correspondence distance learning in Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Radio is used in Mongolia and South Africa as part of an integrated strategy to train primary school teachers.

Secondary and tertiary education is also well catered for internationally with examples such as:

- Telesecundaria in Mexico using television to reach almost one million rurally situated secondary school students;
- Telecurso in Brazil providing self study and blended learning options for young adults since the 1960s;
- The Open University in the UK using television, radio, ICT and postal correspondence to provide flexible learning options at third level; and
- The Radio and TV University system established in China in 1960 to cater for tertiary level students;

Ireland's profile in using innovative distance learning options for basic education for adults is growing year on year. In the Netherland, 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. Yearly presentations at the international Literacy Campaign organised by the Frankfurt Bookfair always draw interest from other countries, who believe we have developed something unique in Ireland, and regard Ireland as a world leader in this regard.

In terms of national policies, international bodies such as UNESCO and the EU have been advocating the integration of distance learning into wider national educational policies for the last 20 years. One of the main arguments in UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy (2002-2007), is that the overall priority for education worldwide should focus on promoting innovative best practice distance learning approaches in national education policies. The European Union has consistently increased distance education components of its educational programmes, and has included open and distance learning explicitly in 1992 Maastricht Treaty (European Parliament and Council, 2006). Examples of countries with national distance learning policies include China, Brazil, South Africa and India.

Learning from these examples, NALA believes that distance learning brings many advantages to the provision of literacy learning opportunities in Ireland:

- It acts as a central referring system for directing adults to those services most suitable to their needs;
- It can increase the capacity of existing services by freeing up local resources from repetitive and administrative tasks such as accreditation submission and verification;
- It is available 24/7 so shift workers can access online resources at any time or be contacted by distance learning tutors at typically unsocial hours;
- It provides a standardised system for the assessment of literacy levels;
- It is consistent with a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) model;
- It offers free accreditation options to large numbers without the need for additional resources;
- It widens participation to include groups often hard to reach, such as those rurally isolated, shift workers, homemakers, and invalid or disabled adults;
- It integrates Information and Telecommunications Skills into delivery.

Policy Recommendations

NALA believes distance learning must be established as a plank of basic education provision for adult literacy learners in Ireland.

There are three key steps required to make this happen:

1. On a national level, continue to secure cross departmental support for the on-going development of the Distance Learning Service as part of a Refreshed Literacy Strategy.
2. With providers, develop blended learning options using NALA's distance learning resources through existing adult literacy provision channels, such as the VECs.
3. Through NALA's promotional work, explain the benefits of the service to increase integration into blended solutions and raise awareness among potential new learners.

The cost involved in consolidating distance learning in this way is extremely small in relative terms. For example, the cost of extending the NALA Distance Learning Service to cover web based learning and accreditation at Level 3 in Communications, Maths and Computer Literacy is

€50,000. While funding has been provided every year since 2000 to develop a Distance Learning Service, the difficulty to date has been in developing a continuity of service due to the uncertainty of annual funding.

In terms of working with other organisations, NALA has already seen an uptake in the distance learning service by students in the VEC Adult Literacy Service and pilot work is currently under way with a number of providers around integrating distance learning provision as part of blended offerings. These blended offerings in themselves bring benefits in terms of increased capacity, more efficient use of resources and increasing levels of interest in, and access to, accreditation.

Summary

It is clear that current literacy provision is only reaching up to 10% of those identified as in need of support of basic education. It is further evident that there is a demand for NALA's Distance Learning Service, which has been running since 2000, and an increasing demand for accreditation at lower levels. NALA's Distance Learning Service has also directly addressed the targets set out by the government's National Skills Strategy. With limited accreditation options available through traditional classroom-based provision, it is likely that demand for distance learning and accreditation will grow into the future, either through independent study or through blended learning options. It is imperative then that policy makers and providers grasp the opportunity presented by NALA's Distance Learning Service, support this work into the future, and give basic learners the chance they need to get back into education.

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