

**NALA Policy Brief  
on  
Workplace Basic  
Education  
in Ireland**

**September 2009**



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

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
Introduction	3
Position statement	3
Summary analysis	3
Background	3
Raising basic skills in the workplace	3
Policy Implications	4
Increasing participation	5
Government policy	5
Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF)	6
The way forward	7
Policy recommendation(s)	9
Conclusions	10
References / Sources consulted	10

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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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## Introduction

This policy brief is for NALA members and policy makers to state NALA's position on workplace basic education. The brief will inform and influence the relevant parties to address this area effectively.

## Position statement

NALA believes that workplace basic education (WBE) programmes are playing a critical role in addressing the skills of workers with less than a Level 4 qualification and should continue to be a Government priority through two key mechanisms:

1. Continuation and expansion of the Workplace Basic Education Fund (currently managed by FÁS)
2. Introduction of paid learning leave (PLL) for workers in Ireland without a level 4 qualification

## Summary analysis

### Background

Ireland is currently in a profound global economic crisis, not experienced for decades. The current economic climate has seen a huge increase in unemployment and retrenchment in public funding. Investment in education and training is needed, now more than ever, to ensure economic and social progress and assist individuals and communities to participate in civic society and democratic life and decision making, so that we can all work together to build an equitable and productive society and economy. Basic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, are now seen as a clear contributing factor to quality and progression in the workplace, while also facilitating greater participation in society.

There are currently 456,100 people in the labour force who have less than a level 4 qualification, of which 7% have only primary level or no qualifications.<sup>1</sup> In a recent survey overall 46.6% of all enterprises reported having at least some acute shortage of particular skills with 2.5% and 3.0% respectively of enterprises reported an acute shortage of numeracy and literacy skills.<sup>2</sup> Providing learning opportunities and supporting workers to improve their basic skills in the workplace is essential in order for individuals to operate successfully within the economy and society, if the Government is to meet its learning targets and employers are to meet European standards of productivity and competitiveness.

### Raising basic skills in the workplace

With 30% of the population having a national level 3 qualification or less,<sup>3</sup> equivalent to the Junior Certificate, literacy and numeracy difficulties have a direct impact on the workplace, effectiveness and productivity, career opportunities, personal finances, progression, family and everyday life. Changing skills

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<sup>1</sup> CSO website: [http://www.cso.ie/qnhs/calendar\\_quarters\\_qnhs.htm](http://www.cso.ie/qnhs/calendar_quarters_qnhs.htm) Table 23, January to March 2009

<sup>2</sup> CSO, Employee Skills, Training and Job Vacancies Survey 2006, February 2009 - <http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/earnings/current/empskills.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

needs in the workplace require employees to “build upon basic skills – such as literacy and numeracy – and to master ICT, innovation and learning how to learn in order to maintain their employability.”<sup>4</sup>

Improving basic skills benefits both the employer and employee. Employers who have supported basic skills in their workplace report many benefits, including:

- Increased profits
- Improved time-keeping, attendance, production targets and customer relations;
- Reductions in wastage;
- Better attention to quality, morale and more flexibility from employees.<sup>5</sup>

A recent Canadian study<sup>6</sup> shows a clear and significant association between pro-active investment in education in any period and a country’s subsequent growth and labour productivity. Specifically, a rise of 1 per cent in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5 per cent relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5 per cent rise in GDP per head. Similarly, the Leitch Review of Skills<sup>7</sup> reported that upskilling 3.5 million workers with low or no qualifications would lead to an annual net benefit of 0.3 % of GDP, and that these returns are similar to investment in people with higher level qualifications.

NALA recently commissioned an economist to do a cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training. He reported that there were economic gains for the individuals, the companies they worked for, the Exchequer, as well as the economy, for example, increased GDP and society at large.<sup>8</sup> The report found that “expenditure on adult literacy training generates high economic returns” with the annual income gain per person per level increase on the National Qualifications Framework being €3,810 and the gain to the Exchequer, in terms of reduced social welfare transfers and increased tax payments, being €1,531 per annum.

### **Policy implications**

About 10% of adults with less than level 4 qualifications are attending training (In 2008 50,000 attended their local VEC adult literacy services and 1,500 workers attended courses under the FÁS Skills for Work initiative). NALA has received approximately 3,230 calls to their national freephone support line since January 2009, with 380 of those engaging in our Distance Learning Service.

Currently 456,100 people in the labour force have less than a level 4 qualification, and by the year 2020, the NSS state that this figure should be reduced to 180,000 workers.<sup>9</sup> As 70% of the 2020 workforce is already in the labour market, we cannot rely on only the community VEC adult literacy service to meet these challenging targets. This equates to an upskilling of nearly 300,000 workers with basic education needs,

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<sup>4</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2008), All-Island Skills Study, pg 128

<sup>5</sup> National Adult Literacy Agency (2006), An Employers’ Guide to Basic Skills at Work, Dublin: NALA

<sup>6</sup> Coulombe, S., J.F. Tremblay and S. Marchand, International Adult Literacy Survey, Literacy Scores, Human Capital and Growth across Fourteen OECD Countries, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, 2004

<sup>7</sup> Leitch Review of Skills (2006), Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills, HM Treasury: London

<sup>8</sup> NALA (2009), A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training Research Report, Dublin: NALA

<sup>9</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007), Tomorrow’s Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy, page 12

much of which can be addressed through workplace basic education training with the appropriate policies and supports in place.

### **Increasing participation**

We know that people with literacy and numeracy difficulties are less likely to participate in education and training.<sup>10</sup> It is acknowledged that “better educated employees are much more likely to partake in education/training (15% of third-level graduates compared to 4% of those with a Junior Certificate).”<sup>11</sup> This situation compounds the Matthew effect whereby people who need the most assistance are the least likely to be assisted while those who need the least assistance are the most likely to be assisted.<sup>12</sup>

Research demonstrates that lack of time is one of the biggest barriers to people taking up learning<sup>13</sup> and we are aware that many workers, particularly those in full-time employment, already struggle to maintain a work-life balance therefore taking on additional training in their own time may not be possible.

NALA contend that measures like access to paid learning leave, particularly to enhance participation for workers with less than a Level 4 qualification, are essential if the Government is to meet its learning targets, employers are to meet European standards of productivity and competitiveness, and for workers to enrich their own working and home lives. Workers and workplaces must be supported to provide basic skills training within working hours, otherwise the numbers moving up a level will not increase and the National Skills Strategy targets will not be met.

### **Government policy**

The National Skills Strategy (NSS) states that:

*“The Expert Group proposes a vision of Ireland in 2020 in which a well-educated and highly skilled population contributes optimally to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy ..... individuals who do not currently hold a qualification equivalent to NFQ Level 4 or 5 should be assisted to achieve such an award, through either full- or part-time study, without incurring tuition costs and with a level of subsistence, where appropriate, provided by the State.”<sup>14</sup>*

The UK Government recently launched their refreshed Skills for Life Strategy, which sets itself the “ambition to be a world leader in skills by 2020 and want 95 per cent of the working-age population to possess at least functional levels of literacy and numeracy”.<sup>15</sup> In order to raise demand for literacy and particularly numeracy skills they propose many elements including:

- a marketing campaign in 2009;
- expansion of Train to Gain – workplace basic education provision;
- increase Skills Pledge;

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<sup>10</sup> Bailey, I. and Coleman, U. (1998), Access and Participation in Adult Literacy Schemes, Dublin: NALA

<sup>11</sup> FÁS Irish Labour Market Review 2008, published March 2009

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

<sup>13</sup> Performance and Innovation Unit, (2001), In Demand: Adult Skills for the 21st Century

<sup>14</sup> Towards a National Skills Strategy (2007), Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy, page 93

<sup>15</sup> Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (2009), Skills for Life: Changing Lives

- continue to trial and roll-out skills accounts and the new adult advancement and careers service; and
- create a statutory right that would enable employees to request from their employer time away from their core duties to undertake relevant training in 2010.

### **Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF)**

The Government announced a Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF) to be set up under the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment in 2004 with a budget of €2m for 2005. The fund was given to FÁS to manage, under the Services to Business section, guided by a National Steering Group consisting of representatives from relevant stakeholders.<sup>16</sup> The central aim of the Fund (Skills for Work) is to develop initiatives to provide opportunities for employees' to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, on a 100% grant aided basis. Its objectives were to:

- Promote literacy and numeracy training for employees;
- Develop and deliver agreed initiatives in literacy and numeracy training; and
- Evaluate and document good practice in this area.

In 2006-7, an evaluation of the WBEF was undertaken by WRC Social and Economic Consultants. They draw essentially positive conclusions about the initiative "from a standing start, FÁS and its partners have made notable achievements within the confines of a limited exercise."<sup>17</sup> The report states "there is significant appetite for basic education and other inputs amongst employers and employees ... and the results suggest that the WBEF is meeting the initial needs of at least some of the target population of government policy in terms of workplace basic education and literacy provision."

The evaluation highlighted some issues in the programme. One was the lack of centrally or generally available content at NFQ Level 3. Another was the use of the programme to provide English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). While recognising that such language learning was valuable for both employers and their employees, the evaluation argued that this was diverting attention from the core objective of literacy. FÁS has accepted this argument and has re-focused the programme exclusively on literacy (and related communications).

The €3 million fund (in 2009) has enabled the development of workplace basic education programmes throughout the country in many different employment sectors. It also funded materials and resources to be used on these courses. About 2,000 persons were trained on the programme in 2007 and 1,500 in 2008. In 2008 however there were some operational problems where the position of co-ordinators changed from one organisation to another and there was a temporary stalling of the work. This resulted in only €1.5 million being spent in that year. 2009 has seen good activity so far with approximately 1,150 learners up to May 2009.

NALA believe this fund is key to offering workplace learning opportunities for workers with less than level 4 qualifications and should be maintained and expanded over time.

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<sup>16</sup> This group includes FÁS, Department of Education & Science / IVEA, NALA, ICTU, SFA, ISME and CIF.

<sup>17</sup> WRC Social and Economic Consultants (2007), Evaluation of Initiatives taken under the Workplace Basic Education Fund, unpublished

## The way forward

In NALA's experience in this area over the last decade indicates there are a number of key policy areas that should be addressed including:

- a) Expansion of workplace literacy learning opportunities
- b) Specific approaches to engaging the low skilled
- c) Integration of literacy into publicly funded education and training programmes
- d) Promotion and adoption by organisations of Whole Organisation Approach to literacy
- e) Collaboration and joined up thinking at policy/implementation levels
- f) Monitoring and evaluation

### (a) Expansion of workplace learning opportunities

There are currently 479,900 people in the labour force who have less than a level 4 qualification and by the year 2020 the NSS state that this figure should be reduced to 180,000 workers<sup>18</sup>. As 70% of the 2020 workforce is already in the labour market, we cannot rely on compulsory educational changes to meet these challenging targets. This equates to an up skilling of nearly 330,000 workers with basic education needs to level 4. On average approximately 2,000 places are available each year through the Workplace Basic Education Fund. We need more flexible opportunities to learn within the workplace to be developed and expanded nationally.

### (b) Specific approaches to engaging the low skilled

The National Skills Strategy identified that this group is the least likely to participate in education and training. Flexibility of approach and provision will be key to the participation and persistence in training for workers with no or little qualifications. Other initiatives that should continue to be explored include brokerage services, paid learning leave (PLL) for low skilled and possibly even financial incentives such as tax breaks for engaging in education and training for participants with low educational attainment or basic skills needs. Individuals must be supported to return to learning, particularly through paid learning leave, otherwise the numbers moving up a level will not increase.

- **Prioritise people with below level 4 qualifications for paid learning leave / support**

There should be targeted and time specific access to paid learning leave for workers in Ireland without a level 4 qualification.

- **Developing new models of workplace learning**

The focus on employer awareness and reliance on them as the gatekeeper to access employees has proven costly and insufficient. There is a need to widen access by offering individuals in the labour market an entitlement to workplace learning opportunities, for example, using NALA's Distance Learning Service.

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<sup>18</sup> Towards a National Skills Strategy (2007), Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy, page 12

### **(c) Integration of literacy into publicly funded education and training programmes**

The National Skills Strategy identified that literacy and generic basic skills should be integrated into all public funded education and training programmes. There is a need for a concerted strategy on integrating literacy to achieve this.

### **(d) Promotion and adoption of a Whole Organisation Approach to literacy**

From an organisational point of view, NALA also believes that businesses and organisations should take a strategic, whole-organisation approach to literacy in the workplace, as a matter of priority. International research, for example from the UK<sup>19</sup> and New Zealand<sup>20</sup> indicates that by being aware of literacy issues, organisations can be more effective in meeting the needs of those who use their services. This would involve providing information, advice and supports in relation to a number of inter-related strands in a whole-organisation approach:

1. literacy-proofing company policies, procedures and practices;
2. providing literacy awareness training for management and staff of member companies;
3. facilitating access to and promoting uptake of dedicated literacy learning opportunities; and
4. integrating literacy support into all staff training programmes and on-the-job learning.

### **(e) Collaboration and joined up thinking**

There is a need for co-ordinated approach between all state agencies and organisations who are working in the area of workplace basic education. For example, a lack of cohesion and joined up thinking can lead to lack of effectiveness through the not sharing experiences and models and doubling up of work.

### **(f) Monitoring and evaluation**

NALA believes monitoring and evaluation is essential to effectively measure the effectiveness of activity and approaches being implemented. Through this you can not only identify what is working and not working but also share good practice and plan more efficiently.

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<sup>19</sup> Financial Services Authority, 2003. *Towards a Strategy for Financial Capability*. London: Financial Services Authority.

<sup>20</sup> Workbase, 2002. *Voices from Management*. Auckland: Workbase.



## Policy recommendation(s)

From a national policy perspective, NALA recommends a comprehensive strategy to development of workplace basic education to include:

- **increasing funding** for the Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF) to continue providing courses and to promote and develop creative and innovative measures to increase participation rates such as employee led learning and blending distance learning into workplace learning programmes.
- that workers in Ireland without a level 4 qualification should have access to **paid learning leave** to develop their basic literacy and numeracy skills (see NALA's policy briefing on Paid Learning Leave).
- the development and delivery of an **integrated literacy strategy** based on a number of core strands, such as a set of national guidelines; a programme of professional development linked to the guidelines; and resources and materials to support the design and delivery of integrated programmes in a range of settings.
- Government, businesses and organisations should adopt a strategic, **whole-organisation approach** to literacy.
- developing a **mechanism** through which collaboration can be realised with relevant Government Departments and state agencies, social partners and adult literacy providers to assist more joined up, on-the-ground collaborative activity and sharing of good practice.
- comprehensive and effective **monitoring and evaluation** systems be set up.

In relation to delivery and practice, NALA recommends:

- that each FÁS region should have a **local contact person** (for example, Skills for Work co-ordinator) with responsibility for WBE. In some regions, this may require more than one person.
- that **course development** (course content, manuals, materials) is evaluated, documented and shared amongst regions, sectors and providers.
- continued development of relevant and innovative workplace related learning **materials**, particularly at FETAC level 3.
- that **research** is commissioned to support and enhance practice and identify issues.
- that all courses are **monitored** and **evaluated** and amended as appropriate.

## Conclusion

The National Skills Strategy clearly states that we need to invest in 'human capital', people not jobs; it is people who will increase our knowledge based economy.<sup>21</sup> Raising literacy and numeracy skills through the workplace is an urgent priority for the Irish economy and society. NALA believes that key actions under key policy areas need to be part of a new, refreshed National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

NALA is looking forward to the publication of the Implementation of the National Skills Strategy and will continue our work to contribute to addressing the unmet literacy needs for adults in the workplace.

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<sup>21</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) *Tomorrow's Skills – Towards a National Skills Strategy*. Dublin: page 13