

Seeking a refreshed Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

Policy briefing

September 2009

“At the present time, the most urgent requirement for the literacy sector is to review, reaffirm and where necessary amend strategic decisions concerning the status of adult literacy on the national agenda, the vision and objectives to be adopted, the organisation and monitoring of these and the funding which should be assigned.”

Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science, May 2006. Fourth Report: Adult Literacy in Ireland.



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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Introduction

This is a policy brief prepared by NALA to propose a refreshed adult literacy and numeracy strategy to advance national policy to tackle the intolerably low literacy levels in Irish society.

The National Adult Literacy Programme was outlined in the White Paper *Learning for Life* in 2000 with priorities mapped out to 2006. The absence of a concerted strategy since 2006 is a weakness in tackling the “unacceptable” adult literacy levels (Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science, 2006). The economic and social environment has changed significantly since 2000, and a new impetus is needed to co-ordinate and leverage the national effort required to facilitate people to address literacy and qualification needs.

The National Skills Strategy recommends “drawing up an implementation strategy for the National Adult Literacy Programme for the period 2007-13” (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007) and this brief is a starting point.

Current economic situation

The National Economic and Social Council identified that Ireland faces a five-part crisis in banking, public finance, the economy, society and the country’s reputation (National Economic and Social Council, March 2009). In the context of the current economic downturn, characterised by rising unemployment and financial retrenchment, consideration of how best to align existing structures and maximize public resources available is at the heart of policy responses to social and economic issues. Substantive public sector reform is pending which may offer an opportunity to new thinking for old problems.

The All Island Skills Study 2008 noted that the numbers of workers with low qualifications has not fallen significantly in absolute terms, but accounted for fewer than one in four jobs in 2008, compared to one in three jobs in 2000. There are currently 456,100 people in the labour force who have less than a level 4 qualification (CSO, 2009), while 7% has only primary level or no formal qualifications at all. The National Skills Strategy has identified that 60-70% of the current workforce will still be in employment in 2020 and concluded that for Ireland to be competitive it needs to upskill 320,000 individuals within the workforce up to Leaving Certificate level (NFQ levels 4 & 5) by 2020.

The latest National Skills Bulletin (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2009) states that persons with low levels of education remain at greater risk of unemployment (within the period quarter 2 2007 and quarter 4 2008) with the unemployment rate of persons with less than secondary education increased from 7% to 12% over the period. Therefore, a priority must be to end this complex web of systemic inequality in education, the economy and society. Providing adult literacy learning opportunities to individuals and communities is part of what needs to happen. The link between enhanced literacy levels, basic skills and wider social and economic development is well accepted both in Ireland and internationally (Coulombe, S., J.F. Tremblay and S. Marchand, 2004). The National Skills Strategy recognises that a workforce with strong, adaptable skills is the corner-stone of a healthy and dynamic society. Continued 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.

Current provision and participation in education and training

Currently there are about 50,000 people participating in the VEC Adult Literacy service including 12,600 ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students (Department of Education and Science, 2008). This is only 7.5% of those at the lowest literacy level. However in order to meet current demand, 68% of tutors are volunteers and often adults can only access 2 to 4 hours tuition per week, which is equivalent to two full time study weeks per annum. There is some intensive tuition available for 2,352 learners, which are included in the figure above. Separate to this, the Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF) enables approximately 2,000 employees attend basic skills courses in the workplace.

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 (NALA, 2009). 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.

We know that people with literacy and numeracy difficulties are less likely to participate in education and training (Bailey, I. and Coleman, U., 1998). There is recognition that those with low/no qualifications have benefitted least from investment in training and adult education, as it is acknowledged “better educated employees are much more likely to partake in education/training” (FÁS, 2009). 15% of third-level qualified employees received education/training compared to under half of that rate (7%) for Leaving Certificate employees and one quarter of that rate (4%) for Junior Certificate employees (FÁS, 2008). 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 (Kerckhoff, A. and Glennie, E., 1999), which compounds inequalities further (Carneiro, P., & Heckman, J., 2003). The combination of these factors is likely to result in the increased vulnerability of those with literacy and numeracy needs or low qualifications in the coming decade.

We also know that a strategy to integrate literacy support and development into all education and vocational training programmes is very effective (NRDC, 2006). Integrating literacy reduces literacy barriers to access, participation and achievement in education and training programmes, and increases literacy levels, as part and parcel of the same process. The National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) in the UK found that qualification rates rose to 93% with the fully embedded approach (NRDC, 2007).

The need for a refreshed adult literacy and numeracy strategy

The National Skills Strategy reinforces current public policy consensus, evident from the National Development Plan (NDP) 07-13, Towards 2016 (T16) and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science Report on Adult Literacy, that significant and radical action is needed to tackle adult literacy levels in Ireland. These policies recognise the social imperative to develop adult literacy levels nationally as well as for individuals, that literacy and basic skills are key to social inclusion, and that social and economic development are intrinsically linked.

However, the infrastructure currently in place to realise lifelong learning policy in Ireland consists of a number of institutions constructed for different purposes and at different times. This presents challenges for providers as well as the policy makers overseeing the implementation of lifelong learning policy. Increasing demand and ensuring the flexibility of supply will be key to achieving these aims, and specific targeted programmes will be essential to engage and support those with literacy difficulties and low/no-educational qualifications.

It is vital that a refreshed strategy is developed as a matter of urgency. It should straddle education and training and take account of the broader contexts of adult literacy and numeracy development. It is also important that the mechanisms for its development, implementation and review are clear, and that the strategy can identify progress and refine its actions and responses on an ongoing basis with up to date data.

Such a response will raise literacy and numeracy levels, as well as impact on employability, competitiveness, children's school performance, and social inclusion. Furthermore, a cost benefit analysis of adult literacy found that the benefits outweigh the costs within 2 years, and solely from the exchequer perspective, costs are repaid within 5 years (NALA, 2009).

Given the scale of the challenge in relation to literacy levels and low qualifications, a specific focus on how these needs can be addressed, is required. This should be provided by a refreshed adult literacy and numeracy strategy.

The way forward

A refreshed national adult literacy and numeracy strategy will provide a renewed and specific response to the scale of the challenge in relation to low qualification attainment and literacy levels of adults and workers. The strategy should focus on improving adults' skills for many purposes including in the workplace. This would facilitate the enhanced co-ordination required among the key stakeholders active in the field, and provide for the evaluation and monitoring of achievement necessary to provide the oversight needed to drive on the implementation of this agenda.

A refreshed national Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

A refreshed strategy needs to cover a co-ordinated approach across departments and stakeholders and include **10 key points** or elements covering:

1. Continued development of workplace basic education (WBE)
2. Integration of literacy into publicly funded education / training programmes
3. Distance learning at Levels 1 - 3
4. Numeracy
5. Family literacy
6. ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)
7. Intensive literacy
8. Health literacy
9. Initiatives to promote literacy opportunities
10. Monitoring and evaluation

1. Continued development of workplace basic education (WBE)

As identified by the National Skills Strategy and the National Development Plan, literacy and numeracy development for workers is key to Ireland's economic development and to competitiveness and productivity. A refreshed strategy should include a specific focus on workplace basic education development. As part of this strategy, there is a need for a WBE plan to be developed in consultation with partners such as employers, trade unions and practitioners.

The WBE Fund should be increased on a phased basis with appropriate systems and structures developed and reinforced. The funding should continue to support the provision of workplace basic education 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.

As we are aware that those with low or no qualifications are the least likely to engage in training (the Matthew principle), therefore NALA believes that workers in Ireland without a level 4 qualification should have access to paid learning leave to develop their basic literacy and numeracy skills, as has been the strategy in other European countries. Other initiatives to support the hard to engage should also be explored, including individual learning accounts, among others.

2. Integration of literacy into publicly funded education / 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. International evidence highlights the efficacy of an integrated or embedded literacy strategy (NRDC, 2006), as it removes unnecessary literacy barriers to access, persistence, and achievement, enables greater numbers of adults to raise their literacy levels, and achieve targets and raises capacity of providers (e.g. VECs, FAS, Skillnets) to deal with literacy issues across all programmes and levels, delivering programmes more inclusively and effectively.

NALA believes there is a need to develop and deliver 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.

3. Distance learning at Levels 1 to 3

To advance the flexibility of provision, distance education options should be a part of the range of opportunities available to people who wish to upskill from Levels 1 to 3. The NALA Distance Learning Service was the first to make awards 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 the first 8 months of 2009, NALA's Distance Learning Service has had 3,300 phone calls to their freephone line with nearly 400 callers engaged in distance learning, and over 2,400 referred to VEC adult literacy services.

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, levels 1 and 3 should be developed, subject to funding, and should be used as an integral part of all education and training providers' suite of options.

4. Numeracy

Numeracy is a major area that policy has identified as requiring development. This is because numeracy is recognised as being even more closely associated with disadvantage than literacy (NRDC, 2005) and as having significant correlates with productivity and competitiveness. However, the national response has been relatively weak and it requires a specific focus in a refreshed strategy that will promote participation and engagement, enhance the effectiveness of practice, and reinforce social inclusion and economic development.

NALA calls for the development of a Government numeracy strategy to be developed building on the work of NALA's Numeracy Strategy.

5. Family literacy

Family literacy provides a win-win scenario to policy makers. Family literacy programmes improve the literacy practices of parents and other family members. This has a very significant knock on effect on school performance of children.

There is a large body of evidence that demonstrates that parental engagement has a positive affect on a child's academic performance (Fan, X. and Chen, M., 2001) at both primary and secondary levels (Feinstein, L. and Symons, J., 1999). This results in improved school achievement, greater cognitive

ability, greater problem-solving skills, increased school enjoyment and attendance and fewer behavioural issues (Melhuish, E., Sylva, K., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B., 2001).

However, research also suggests that parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on a child's educational outcomes than any other demographic measure, including social class, level of parental education or income (Feinstein and Symons, 1999), so whilst parental background may explain parental interest it is not the most defining factor. This offers potential opportunities to break inter-generational cycles of under-achievement by working with those families who do not, or may not know how, to best support their child's learning.

In 2009 under the DEIS project, there are 19 family literacy projects at a cost of €200,000 compared with school completion projects at a cost of €30 million per annum. NALA believes family literacy needs to be expanded and developed.

6. ESOL

People with language and literacy needs require dedicated supports. This group, as well as those with no literacy difficulties but with a language need, is currently serviced via the adult literacy fund. The strategy should address the role and remit of the literacy budget in relation to these two groups. The numbers of ESOL students accessing tuition through the VEC adult literacy services is about 12,600, which is 26% of the total (Department of Education and Science, 2008).

NALA calls for a totally separate line of funding for all ESOL provision, both ESOL language and literacy.

7. Intensive literacy

Mainstream VEC adult literacy services provide an average of 2 hours tuition per week with some intensive options of 6 hours per week. UK and US research shows that at least 100-200 hours are required to move up a level on a National Framework of Qualifications. Intensive literacy provides a more realistic opportunity for learners to make measurable gains. The Moser Report states that "a learner would need many years to get to a threshold basic skills level. In the USA, the research shows that between 550-600 hours of instruction are needed to become fully literate and numerate" (The report of the working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser, 1999).

Recent research in Ireland on a cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training found gains for the individuals, the companies they worked for, the Exchequer, as well as the economy, for example, increased GDP and society at large (NALA, 2009). 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.

NALA advocates strongly for intensive basic education options to be made more widely available to adults, therefore enhancing the learning intensity and experience.

8. Health

Evidence shows that healthcare systems in industrial nations, such as Ireland, are getting more complex and therefore more demanding for patients (OECD, 2005). Health literacy should be a fundamental consideration in health policy and programme planning. NALA wishes to see health literacy explored as a communication and training issue.

Attention also needs to be given to the design and complexity of healthcare settings and systems, which could be encouraged to conduct literacy audits such as NALA's health literacy audit that helps organisations and individuals to find literacy barriers and respond to them. There needs to be a specific health literacy budget in place to research and respond to health literacy and the issue should also be included in all national population surveys.

NALA calls for the development of a Health Literacy Plan in consultation with the Health Service Executive, building on results from the European Health Literacy Survey currently underway.

9. Initiatives to promote literacy opportunities

A specific approach to engaging adults with literacy difficulties to improve their skills and gain nationally recognised qualifications is required. 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 low qualifications.

NALA calls for increased promotional and awareness raising initiatives to encourage and motivate adults to return to learning, including TV and radio initiatives. Other initiatives that should continue to be explored include brokerage services, paid learning leave for workers with literacy needs, and possibly even financial incentives for engaging in basic education and training.

10. Monitoring and evaluation

A clear implementation plan that identifies an evaluation and monitoring process is key to tracking success, refining responses, and delivering achievement of any strategy.

Ireland has not carried out an adult literacy survey since 1995. Commitments to carrying out an adult literacy survey were given in the White Paper 2000, and NAPS 2003-2005. However, these commitments were never acted on. NALA believes that Ireland needs to continue to participate in PIAAC so as to provide up to date data, and measure progress against national targets. PIAAC however should not be the only monitoring mechanism. The data are useful for associated information on rates of participation, socio-economic background etc.

In addition, annual evaluations by the Department of Education and Science should be carried out. Targets should be related to the range and quality of initiatives and provision. That would mean gathering a range of data about that (for example, using the Evolving Quality Framework) and having ongoing systematic evaluation by participants on learning programmes (during, after, and 'long after' their participation) as well as by all others involved in the services or initiatives.

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 (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007). We know that:

- A competitive economy, cannot exist when businesses lose orders and profit as a result of poor basic skills (NALA, 2006).
- An adaptable and productive workforce is unattainable when 30% of the workforce holds only the lowest qualifications.
- A high level of social inclusion cannot be achieved when 25% of Irish adults cannot follow basic instructions such as those on the label of a packet of aspirin (OECD, 1997).

It is clear that raising literacy and numeracy skills of Irish adults must be an urgent priority for our Government, economy and society. A world-class economic and social infrastructure is beyond our reach unless there is a refreshed adult literacy and numeracy strategy that brings new thinking to old problems, in order to advance national policy to tackle the intolerably low literacy levels in Irish society.

Notes

The National Adult Literacy Agency

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA was established in 1980 and has campaigned since then for the recognition of, and responses to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland. NALA is committed to making sure people with literacy and numeracy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs.

How we define literacy

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. However, it includes more than the technical skills of communications: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.

It is important to note that if a person needs to develop confidence and skill in particular literacy practices, it does not mean that the individual has difficulties with all of the basics of reading, writing, verbal communication and number work. Our skills tend to be ‘spiky’, which means that we can be very good at one thing but have a real difficulty with another. It is also possible for our skills to become rusty if we have not practiced or used them for a while. The definition given here highlights also that ‘literacy’ is not just a question of ‘skills’, but is a social practice that is always part of broader contexts, practices and purposes.

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