

The Return to Learning Initiative

*A Local Authority Workplace Pilot
Project supported by the
Department of Education and
Science, LANPAG and NALA*

Evaluation Report and Implementation Guidelines



NALA



LANPAG



Patricia Conboy
January 2002

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FOREWORD

The mission statement of NALA is to ensure that people with literacy difficulties have access to high quality learning opportunities. In working towards our mission the low participation rate in literacy programmes is to the fore. In Ireland, only 4% of the people who scored at level 1 in the International Adult Literacy Survey are receiving literacy tuition. This is not far behind the best efforts of other western industrialised countries with similar problems and greater resources.

One of the possibilities around increasing adult participation in learning opportunities is to open the workplace to such activity. For a number of years NALA has been promoting workplace literacy programmes within the VEC sector and to other key players, most notably to Government, the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the range of Social Partners.

When NALA was approached by LANPAG to discuss adult literacy difficulties in local authorities, we advocated pilot workplace literacy programmes, involving local VEC literacy services and their corresponding local authority.

Working within a partnership process is rewarding and challenging but often frustrating as we all see best through our own eyes. Working in a new partnership to pilot workplace literacy programmes some might say was too ambitious. But in a time of high prosperity in Ireland, opportunities to meet the needs of those with low literacy skills must be taken and maximised.

The role of an evaluator is to capture the learning from such an initiative and to make that learning available for the benefit of all. This report therefore offers the reader the opportunity to maximise on the rewards, be aware of the challenges and avoid some of the frustration related to a partnership based workplace literacy programme.

In driving and supporting workplace literacy, NALA working with its partners, is making headway towards its mission statement and more people with literacy difficulties are benefiting from quality learning opportunities.

Inez Bailey
Director

SUMMARY OF EVALUATION FINDINGS

The Return to Learning Initiative

The Return to Learning Initiative was developed and piloted during the period 2000-2001. The goal of the Initiative was to provide workplace literacy courses for the employees of five Local Authorities. The Local Authorities in question were Mayo, Meath, Offaly, Tipperary South Riding and South Dublin. The Return to Learning Initiative was developed jointly by LANPAG, the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group and NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency. It was implemented in collaboration with the VECS, the Vocational Education Committees in the five Local Authority areas. The Initiative was co-funded by the Department of Education and Science and LANPAG.

The Evaluation of the Return to Learning Initiative

The evaluation of the Return to Learning Initiative was conducted with reference to criteria of relevance, linkage, benefit and quality. The researcher combined a number of methods in her approach to the evaluation. These included desk research in relation to project and organisational documentation; participation in national meetings of LANPAG-NALA-VEC personnel who were involved in implementing the Initiative and visits to each of the five local settings in which Return to Learning was being piloted.

Relevance of the Return to Learning Initiative to the Needs of the Target Group

The relevance of the Return to Learning Initiative, and of the goals which shaped the pilot project, were considered in terms of their appropriateness to the needs of the target group: employees in Local Authority settings. Though the Adult Basic Education needs of the workers concerned had not been articulated publicly prior to the Initiative, they were real. Take-up of Return to Learning opportunities exceeded both expectations and targets set at the planning stage of the Initiative. It had been anticipated that nineteen Return to Learning groups might be formed across the five Local Authority areas. In fact, twenty five groups were established. A total of one hundred and forty participants registered for Return to Learning courses and, of those, one hundred and twenty participants completed the courses. The validity of one goal of the Initiative, to provide literacy training in the workplace, has been confirmed.

Another goal of the Initiative concerned the desire to ascertain the level of support required to implement Return to Learning courses at local level. The pilot experience shows that high levels of support and commitment are required and this needs to be borne in mind in planning the further development of the Return to Learning Initiative. The emphasis, named in the

goals for the Initiative, and applied to project design and implementation, on the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment for participants, has been crucial. It is a goal that seems, within the pilot time-frame, to have been realised. However it is also a feature of the Initiative that requires vigilance and monitoring in the long-term.

The Linkages underpinning the Return to Learning Initiative

A further aim of the evaluation was to ascertain the players' views of the effectiveness of the linkages between them in the implementation of the Return to Learning Initiative.

At the national level, the linkage between LANPAG and NALA, and the funding from both D/ES and LANPAG enabled an effective combination of knowledge and resources. This resulted in the piloting of the Return to Learning Initiative. With regard to national to local level linkage, there were gaps in terms of consultation and communication. The time-frame within which the Initiative was devised, developed and implemented was tight, just over one year, and this was a factor in the approach to consultation, communication and induction. Those, locally, who were concerned about gaps in communication and consultation worked around them, using a combination of their own experience, resources and support networks. However they would hope that those gaps would be closed in the future development of the Initiative. At the local level, the linkages were affected by some of the gaps already noted. However, in each of the settings, the linkages worked sufficiently well to enable the access and participation of employees in Return to Learning courses.

The Criteria of Benefit and Quality

The criterion of benefit was considered in the evaluation of Return to Learning Initiative from the participant perspective. Workers in five groups were asked if they had benefited from the experience and in what ways. Their feedback highlighted :

- An increase in self-confidence, with spin-offs in terms of communication and interaction with others.
- Literacy skill development reported in relation to their handling of specific literacy tasks, such as form-filling, letter-writing and newspaper reading.
- Greater familiarity with computers and some development in computer skills.
- The positive influence of participation in Return to Learning on their home and family lives.
- A re-awakening of an interest in learning and a desire to continue to learn now that this interest had been triggered for them.

The quality of Adult Basic Education offered through the Return to Learning Initiative was considered in light of the principles and standards of the ABE Quality Framework developed by NALA for the Irish setting. The reports of participants and Co-ordinators indicated that Return to Learning Courses were,

broadly, being implemented in a manner that was compatible with the principles and standards of the NALA ABE Quality Framework. Furthermore, there was a clear link between the benefits reported by participants and the character and quality of the learning process they had experienced in the Initiative. The planning and human resource implications of this linkage clearly need to be borne in mind in planning the future development of the Return to Learning Initiative.

A further consideration, with regard to the qualitative development of the Initiative in the future, concerns the need to strengthen its conceptual foundations. A deeper explication of the links between literacy development and human development, and the links between personal development and organisational development, would benefit the Return to Learning Initiative in the future.

Conclusion of the Evaluation

Workplace literacy programmes have been advocated as a mechanism to enable the access and participation in educational provision of employees with literacy difficulties. The experience of the Return to Learning Initiative shows that there are employees with literacy difficulties in the workplace and that, if an educational programme is introduced to them in an appropriate way, they will take-up the opportunity presented. The response of employee participants also shows that, if participants are afforded a good quality and adult-friendly educational experience, they will - in common with many other groups of adult students - derive valued personal outcomes, including a renewed pleasure in learning from that experience.

Crucially, the experience of the Return to Learning Initiative shows that introducing a literacy intervention in the workplace requires a high level of support and commitment on the part of those implementing and supporting the intervention.

In terms of introducing a literacy intervention in the workplace, an emphasis on creating a milieu that is safe and supportive - in the classroom, and even more critically in the workplace itself - is of fundamental importance. In the Return to Learning Initiative, this emphasis was present. Again, in terms of the future development of the Return to Learning Initiative, the maintenance of this emphasis on safety and support will be of core importance. Furthermore, longer-term monitoring is desirable to respond to the concern of some employees that they will experience negative consequences in the workplace if they openly acknowledge their literacy difficulties. This is a concern that cannot be addressed within the time-frame of a pilot project.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Perceptions of the Return to Learning Initiative were extremely positive at the time of the evaluation. All of the parties to the Initiative were in agreement that the Initiative should continue and the evaluation findings support this view. The question was not whether the Initiative should continue, but how.

The following is recommended:

- That future developments would take account of the developmental needs and expectations of the existing cohort of Return to Learning participants.
- That the development of the Initiative would happen **incrementally**; staggering the involvement of new Local Authorities **to ensure that standards of quality, care, support and safety are maintained** and the educational and partnership processes 'minded' as the Initiative is enlarged.
- That processes of planning, consultation and induction should not be short-circuited to get new local projects up and running; rather the approach to those processes should assimilate the learning gained from the pilot experience
- That the conceptual foundations of the Initiative would be strengthened; thus contributing to the mainstreaming of Return to Learning in the evolving training systems of Local Authorities in a way that connects the principles of good ABE practice with compatible thinking on organisational learning and development.
- That further development of the curriculum for the Return to Learning Initiative be undertaken.
- That a carefully structured induction process be devised for Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators participating in the Return to Learning Initiative for the first time. Such an induction process would include elements of literacy awareness training for Local Authority staff and briefing on the structures, procedures and culture of the Local Authority workplace for VEC staff.
- That Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators who have contributed to the piloting of Return to Learning be invited to participate in the planning and implementation of such induction and training processes.
- That in planning for the Return to Learning Initiative, those responsible think beyond the twenty week time-frame of an educational programme for participants and consider how best to support their longer term progression, both within and without the work setting.

- That Project Co-ordinators would be employed on a contract rather than an 'hours' basis, as at present; an arrangement which seems more appropriate given the responsibilities attached to their role in the implementation of Return to Learning courses and the degree of flexibility this role requires.
- That Return to Learning courses be conducted during the October-March period to lessen disruption to existing Local Authority work practices.

INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT

The Return to Learning Initiative

The Return to Learning Initiative was developed and piloted during the period 2000-2001. The goal of the Initiative was to provide workplace literacy courses for the employees of five Local Authorities. The Local Authorities in question were Mayo, Meath, Offaly, Tipperary South Riding and South Dublin. The Return to Learning Initiative was developed jointly by LANPAG, the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group and NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency. It was implemented in collaboration with the VECS, the Vocational Education Committees in the five Local Authority areas. The Initiative was co-funded by the Department of Education and Science and LANPAG.

The Purpose of the Report

The main purpose of this report is to present the findings of an evaluation of the Return to Learning Initiative which was conducted in May-June 2001. The evaluation was commissioned by NALA, funded by the Department of Education and Science and LANPAG and conducted by an Independent Researcher.

The Organisation of the Report

The report is organised as follows :

Chapter One introduces the key players in the Return to Learning Initiative; presents background information on adult literacy in Ireland; traces the origins of the Return to Learning Initiative and provides an overview of the structure of the project.

Chapter Two describes the approach adopted to the evaluation of the Return to Learning Initiative.

Chapter Three provides information on the implementation of the Return to Learning Initiative; it also presents the views and experience of a sample of employee participants in the Return to Learning Initiative.

Chapter Four discusses evaluation findings in terms of the relevance of the Return to Learning Initiative to the needs of participants.

Chapter Five discusses evaluation findings with reference to the linkages, at national and local level, which underpinned the implementation of the Initiative.

Chapter Six considers the evaluation findings with regard to the benefits of the Initiative to participants and the degree of compatibility between educational practice in the Initiative and standards set out in the Evolving Adult Basic Education Quality Framework.

Chapter Seven draws conclusions from the evaluation findings.

Chapter Eight presents guidelines to support the implementation of the Return to Learning Initiative in the future.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONTEXT FOR THE RETURN TO LEARNING INITIATIVE

1.1 Introduction

There are three sections to this chapter of the report. The first section introduces the key players in the Return to Learning Initiative. The second section presents background information on adult literacy in Ireland and considers some aspects of workplace literacy provision. The third section traces the origins of the Return to Learning Initiative and provides an overview of the structure of the project.

The Key Players

1.2 NALA

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a membership organisation with voluntary status, concerned with national co-ordination, training and policy development in adult literacy work in Ireland. Members include individual students, tutors and organisers as well as voluntary groups, Vocational Education Committees (VECs), Libraries, Trade Unions, Training Workshops and Centres for the Unemployed.

1.3 LANPAG

The Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) is a joint union/management group with membership drawn from senior management and union officials from all the unions involved. The unions are IMPACT, SIPTU, ATGWU and the Craft Group of Unions. The Local Government Management Services Board (LGMSB) have nominated the management representatives to the group and the Trade Unions have nominated their representatives¹.

The role of LANPAG is to co-ordinate, advise and support each Local Authority in devising “a partnership approach” in the workplace. Aspects of Local Authority partnership structures are described below because these were the organisational mechanism through which the Return to Learning Initiative was introduced in Local Authorities.

¹ The LGMSB provides Human Resource Services to the Local Authorities.

1.4 The VECs

The Vocational Education Committees (VECs) are the statutory providers of education for adults in their own areas. VECs in Clondalkin, Lucan and Tallaght in South Dublin, Mayo, Meath, Offaly and South Tipperary supported the Return to Learning Initiative.

1.5 Local Authorities and the Partnership Approach

According to LANPAG, the partnership approach which the thirty four Local Authorities are seeking to adopt “refers to a new and different type of relationship in the workplace between management, employees and their trade unions”². The partnership approach stems from the Partnership 2000 National Agreement and has been reiterated in the current National Agreement, Programme for Prosperity and Fairness.

The objective of partnership is “to achieve joint ownership by management, unions and staff and to replace the adversarial approach to change with an open co-operative process based on effective consultation and participation by all concerned for the progression and implementation of strategic goals, service delivery objectives, and associated action programmes”³.

The five partnership principles are: Consensus decision-making, information sharing, employee participation and consultation, development of joint objectives, co-operation and trust, and joint problem-solving.

1.6 Local Partnership Committees

At the local level, Partnership Committees have been established in each Local Authority. Each committee is comprised of employee, union and management representatives. Its role is “to effectively manage and steer” the partnership process in the local authority.

1.7 Partnership Facilitators

Partnership Facilitators have been appointed in each Local Authority and their role is :

- to provide training and operational support to the Partnership Committee and Partnership Working Groups;
- to provide administrative and secretarial support to the Partnership Committee and Partnership Working Groups;
- to develop commitment and support for the Partnership process;
- provide facilitation services for all groups as required; and

² LANPAG, (undated), A Framework for Partnership in the Local Authorities, Dublin: LANPAG, p. 1.

³ LANPAG, op.cit.,p.2.

- liaise with the National Partnership Advisory Group, other facilitators and external agencies as appropriate⁴.

1.8 The Local Authorities in the Return to Learning Initiative

Mayo County Council has thirty one elected members and employs a staff of 1,100. It is responsible for providing services in the geographic area of Co. Mayo, the third largest county in Ireland.

Meath County Council has twenty nine elected members and employs 520 staff. It is responsible for providing services in the geographic area of Co. Meath.

The Local Authority of **Tipperary South Riding** has twenty six elected members and a staff of over 500. It is responsible for providing services in the geographic area of South Tipperary.

Offaly Local Authorities includes one County Council and three Town Councils. Together they have forty eight elected members. They employ approximately 400 staff and are responsible for providing services in a county identified as having the lowest per-capita income in the country.

South Dublin County Council has twenty-six elected members and a staff of approximately 1,500. South Dublin is the second largest county and the third largest local authority in the State. The Local Authority provides services in a geographic area which stretches southwards from the river Liffey to the Wicklow border and from Dublin city westwards to the Kildare border.

Adult Literacy in Ireland

1.9 Literacy Levels in Ireland

The results for Ireland of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) were published in 1997⁵. The aim of the IALS was to provide comparative profiles of the literacy skills of adults aged between 16 and 64 years in nine countries. Rather than divide a population into those considered 'literate' and 'illiterate', the study sought to identify five levels of literacy to cover demands at work, in the home and the community. The Irish results show that 25% of the population score at the lowest level (Level 1), meaning that those concerned will have problems with all but the simplest literacy tasks. Roughly one sixth of the Irish population scored at the highest levels (Levels 4 and 5).

The study found an association between age and literacy levels, with higher percentages of older age-groups scoring at Level I. Likewise, there was an

⁴ Dillon, Gerry, Workplace Partnership in Local Authorities, Presentation to staff of Offaly Local Authorities, March 2000.

⁵ Morgan, M., Hickey, B., Kellaghan, T., (1997), Report to the Minister for Education on the International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland, Dublin: Educational Research Centre, St. Patrick's College.

association between literacy levels and educational attainment. Three fifths of those at Level One in the study were found to have completed primary schooling only. Another key finding of the IALS concerned the association between low levels of literacy and low levels of participation in second-chance education and training. The study also found that over one-sixth of people in employment were at literacy Level 1⁶.

1.10 Irish Adult Education Policy

The White Paper on Adult Education acknowledged that the IALS had placed the literacy issue centre-stage in Irish educational policy⁷. Within the framework of the National Adult Literacy Programme, the White Paper outlined future priorities in terms of adult literacy provision, including:

- An increase in the number of clients reached and the scale of investment;
- the development of strategies to address the under-representation of men in literacy and other basic education programmes; and
- expanded provision for workplace literacy⁸.

It was also envisaged within the White Paper that adult literacy provision would be developed and expanded as part of a lifelong learning continuum, which would occur in “a multiplicity of sites” and be “voluntary and self-motivated” on the part of participants.

1.11 The Programme for Prosperity and Fairness

The thinking in the White Paper matches emphases in the current national agreement, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness to which Government, employers, trade unions, farmers and the community and voluntary sector are parties. The Programme highlights the importance of: lifelong learning; the provision of second-chance education and training opportunities to those who want to re-enter the system; the promotion of the responsiveness and relevance of the education and training system in terms of promoting citizenship, social inclusion and community advancement; the development of a lifelong learning culture in the workplace; and the value of enhanced skills development at all levels of the workplace⁹.

1.12 Workplace Literacy Provision

Earlier NALA research had recommended the establishment of work-based

⁶ M. Morgan et al, op. cit., pp. vii – ix.

⁷ Department of Education and Science, (2000), Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education, Dublin: Stationery Office.

⁸ Department of Education and Science, op.cit., pp 88 – 89.

⁹ Government of Ireland, (undated), Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, pp. 106 – 107.

literacy schemes in Ireland, co-ordinated by local literacy schemes¹⁰. Subsequently, NALA incorporated a commitment to the development of work-based literacy programmes in its Strategic Plan for the period 1999 - 2001¹¹. The promotion of workplace provision as a strategy in tackling literacy problems has formed a strand in the organisation's research, training and lobbying activities throughout this time.

In the Irish setting, both the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and the Joint Committee on Lifelong Learning have recommended government and employer action to address the needs of those in the workforce who have low levels of literacy and numeracy skills¹².

In Great Britain, the government is implementing a new Adult Literacy Strategy based strongly on the recommendations of the Moser Report¹³. Moser's ten point national strategy for action advocates radical change in the role of employers in promoting workers' basic skills: "They need to demand more skill of their employees and to do more to help their employees to acquire it".

Proponents of workplace literacy provision do not necessarily share similar philosophical perspectives on the role of education in the lives of individuals and societies. Examining "dominant discourses of learning at work", Garrick identifies at least three. The first is influenced by human capital theory which refers to the productive capabilities of human beings and thinks in terms of human value and performance as a return on investment in a cost-to-benefit ratio. The second is influenced by the humanistic tradition which holds "that the individual may be most productive when he or she feels that work is personally meaningful, not simply an instrumental means to another end." The third is concerned with cognition and focuses on how the mind works and cognitive development as manifested in enhanced problem-solving abilities and the growth of expertise¹⁴.

1.13 Adult Basic Education in Ireland

Many practitioners of Adult Basic Education in Ireland talk about "the adult literacy ethos". This term encapsulates something of the values and practices which have come to characterise "good" Adult Basic Education provision as offered in Adult Education centres and Literacy Schemes throughout the

¹⁰ Bailey, I. and Coleman, U., (undated), Access and Participation in Adult Literacy Schemes, Dublin: NALA, p.58.

¹¹ NALA, Strategic Plan, 1999-2001, Dublin: NALA, p.11.

¹² See Actions for a Learning Society, a Report from the Joint Committee on Lifelong Learning and Responding to Ireland's Growing Skill Needs, A Report on In-Company Training from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs.

¹³ Moser Report, (February, 1999), Improving Literacy and Numeracy, A Fresh Start, The Report of the Working Group chaired by Sir Claus Moser.

¹⁴ John Garrick, The dominant discourses of learning at work in Boud, D. and Garrick, J. (eds), (1999), Understanding Learning at Work, London: Routledge.

country. Noting that, as a system of provision, ABE has developed “from the ground up” and “almost entirely outside the formal school system”, Coleman emphasises features which have been core to ABE in the Irish setting: the commitment to the provision of a form of education that is personalised and student-centred; the collaboration of students and tutors in the learning process; and the development of teaching methods and approaches to preparation for examinations and other forms of assessment shaped by this collaborative process¹⁵.

A NALA research study which identified barriers to participation in adult literacy schemes drew on the experience and insights of adult students. In its findings, the study also reflected the needs and concerns ABE providers have to address if they are to enable the access and participation of adults with reading and writing difficulties¹⁶. The barriers to participation were of four kinds :

- Informational, that is to do with difficulties in accessing or understanding information about literacy tuition.
- Situational, that is to do with any aspect of a person’s life which would make it difficult for them to avail of literacy tuition. The main situational barriers were time, distance and transport. Confidentiality was also a concern.
- Institutional, that is to do with the inflexible or unresponsive nature of the education system itself, for example, memories of school, inappropriate teaching methods.
- Dispositional, that is anything in a person’s thoughts, feelings or attitudes that would negatively affect their motivation to return to education. The main dispositional barriers were low self-esteem, reflected in shame and embarrassment about low levels of educational attainment, and fear of the unknown.

1.14 The NALA Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education

In consultation with ABE students, tutors, organisers and providers throughout the country, NALA has developed an evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education. The Quality Framework does mirror the student-centred focus of ABE as it has developed in Ireland.

The Quality Framework has five ‘Guiding Principles’ which make a general value statement¹⁷. These concern:

- the student’s right to attend classes voluntarily and to set his/her own goals;
- an ethical code of confidentiality, respect and trust;
- respect for cultural differences at all levels of an organisation;

¹⁵ Coleman, U., *Adult Basic Education: Into the Rose Garden*, The Adult Learner, 1998.

¹⁶ Bailey, I. and Coleman, U., (undated), *Access and Participation in Adult Literacy Schemes*, Dublin: NALA.

¹⁷ NALA, (1999), *Evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education*, Dublin: NALA.

- the creation of an atmosphere of social interaction, informality and enjoyment; and
- enabling students to participate fully in all aspects of the organisation, including evaluation.

There are six quality statements setting out desired standards for student experience within an Adult Literacy Scheme. These relate to :

- The student's initial contact with a programme when a starting point for learning is negotiated, information about the programme is provided and students are referred to alternative programmes if the existing programme cannot meet their needs.
- The student-tutor relationship, recognising the adult status of the student and characterised by respect, trust and collaboration.
- The provision of a range of a tuition options, including one-to-one tuition to meet student needs.
- The conduct of initial and ongoing student assessment to determine student needs.
- The provision of information and guidance to students about a variety of learning opportunities and progression routes.
- The provision of access to a range of accredited courses.

As explained in Chapter Two of this report, the Quality Framework provides a reference point for discussion of some of the evaluation findings concerning the Return to Learning Initiative.

The Return to Learning Initiative

1.15 The Origins of the Initiative

The seeds of the Return to Learning Initiative were sown in March 2000. At that time, a member of LANPAG, at the request of the Advisory Group, made contact with staff in NALA as part of a research process to explore the idea of a Workplace Literacy project. The LANPAG member in question was an LGMSB staff member and nominee to the Advisory Group. LANPAG took the step of initiating this research in response to concerns expressed by one of their members, a Trade Union representative. This member had suggested that literacy problems were presenting a barrier to some workers in terms of occupational advancement and the take-up of promotional opportunities in the Local Authorities.

Further to the initial meeting with NALA, at which a range of possible responses were explored by both parties, the LANPAG member drafted a project proposal. On the advice of NALA, she then made contact with the Department of Education and Science, the D/ES. The next meeting, in June, involved a representative of D/ES, the LANPAG member and NALA's Director and

Development Worker. Arising from that meeting, funding was made available for a Workplace Literacy Initiative to the tune of £70,000, comprising matching sums of £35,000 each from D/ES and LANPAG.

With funding in place, NALA, LANPAG and D/ES met in September to consider where to locate the pilot workplace sites and how to allocate the budget for the Initiative (see Appendices One and Two for copies of the original budget and the budget as revised mid-way through the Initiative).

1.16 The Development of the Return to Learning Initiative

It was agreed that the workplace literacy project would be piloted in five Local Authorities. These were chosen to include a geographic spread, rural and urban settings and the presence of VECs with the capacity to support the Initiative.

Senior management from two of those Local Authorities were represented on LANPAG, a third was located in Dublin as a major urban area and a fourth was matched with a VEC which had a good pilot project record. The fifth, Meath, was invited to replace Monaghan when Monaghan Local Authority withdrew from the Initiative in November 2000¹⁸.

In terms of linkages at this stage of the Initiative, LANPAG wrote formally to the County Managers in each of the five Local Authorities concerned. The role of enabling and supporting the implementation of the Initiative was assigned to the Partnership Facilitators since LANPAG viewed the Initiative as part of the process of creating a partnership approach in the Local Authorities. D/ES wrote to the CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) of the VECs in September 2000 and these letters were followed up by NALA in the same month with letters about the Initiative to the CEOs, the AEOs (Adult Education Organisers) and ALOs (Adult Literacy Organisers).

NALA's experience in terms of the Return to Education FAS/VEC Initiative, mentioned above, was a major influence on the design and the development of the Return to Learning Initiative¹⁹. As with Return to Education, it was envisaged that the workplace literacy project would be implemented at local level in co-operation with the VECs. They were asked to identify and employ part-time Project Co-ordinators and tutors who would be directly paid by them with project funding from the D/ES and LANPAG channelled through NALA.

¹⁸ Meath is also the constituency of the Minister for the Environment and Local Government, Mr. Noel Dempsey, T.D.

¹⁹ See McArdle, M., (1999), Evaluation Report of the NALA Return to Education Course in Mullingar and Ballyfermot and Conboy, P., 2000, Implementation Guide for NALA/FAS/VEC Return to Education Programmes, both published by NALA.

1.17 The Structure of Provision

The original time-frame for the Initiative envisaged a lead-in and introduction to the Initiative in each of the local authorities during the period October-December 2000, with classes starting in January 2001. During this period, Project Co-ordinators were expected to work in collaboration with Partnership Facilitators in each of the Local Authorities.

The plan for Return to Learning envisaged the provision of four hours tuition per week over a twenty week period, with course content incorporating literacy skills, numeracy and computer skills training. Groups of worker participants were to be released from their duties to participate in classes tutored by Project Co-ordinators and tutors identified through the VEC system. In terms of curriculum, the course outline which was used for the earlier FAS/VEC Return to Education Initiative was also proposed to Co-ordinators by NALA for what became known as the Return to Learning Initiative (see Appendix Three).

THE APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION

2.1 Focus of the Evaluation

The evaluation was conducted with reference to agreed evaluation criteria²⁰. These were criteria of relevance, linkage, benefit and quality. The core questions for the evaluation, in light of those criteria, were :

- To what extent does the intervention fit with the needs of the target population in the workplace in terms of demand for, take-up and design of the project?
- Are the linkages within and between the various agencies/organisations involved in providing the programme effective?
- Do participants benefit from the intervention in terms of literacy skills development, social development, educational/vocational progression?
- Does the intervention, considered in relation to relevant dimensions of NALA's Adult Basic Education Quality Framework, offer quality ABE provision to participants?

2.2 Methods Used

The researcher combined a number of methods in her approach to the evaluation. Desk research was conducted in relation to project and organisational documentation about the Return to Learning Initiative. The researcher also attended two national meetings of key LANPAG-NALA-VEC personnel who were involved in implementing the Initiative.

She visited each of the five local settings in which Return to Learning was piloted. Her aim was to conduct individual interviews with the Project Co-ordinator, the Partnership Facilitator, the Adult Literacy Organiser and, if involved, the Adult Education Organiser, in each of those settings. She also aimed to meet and talk with one group of participants in each local setting. With both individuals and groups, the interviewer conducted semi-structured interviews intended to explore themes and issues suggested by the evaluation criteria outlined above (See Appendix Four for one sample interview schedule).

Practical arrangements for evaluation visits, for example about the scheduling of meetings, were made by the Project Co-ordinator in each of those settings.

²⁰ Conboy, P., Workplace Project in the Local Authorities, Evaluation Proposal, December 2000.

2.3 Overall Approach

A primarily qualitative approach has been adopted in this evaluation, that is there has been direct and personal contact with people involved in the Initiative. There has also been an emphasis on understanding both the context in which evaluation participants have worked and their perceptions of the process as a whole²¹.

The model of evaluation within which the researcher works is that of evaluation as an educational process with a developmental purpose and potential in terms of groups and organisations²².

2.4 Limits of the Evaluation

In this report, the researcher aims to represent the range of views encountered in the evaluation accurately. However, there are some limits to the evaluation which readers should bear in mind when reading this report.

The first concerns the timing of the evaluation. The fieldwork was conducted at, approximately, a mid-way point in terms of the implementation, on a pilot basis, of Return to Learning courses around the country. Some issues have been named and flagged in the course of the evaluation about which the researcher cannot make any conclusive statements in the short-term. In other words, these are issues that need to be tracked and monitored in the long-term and beyond the time-frame for the evaluation of a pilot project.

The second concerns the profiling of worker participants in the Return to Learning Initiative. The researcher had hoped, though the assistance of relevant staff members, to complete participant profiles, providing baseline biographic and educational data about workers taking up the Return to Learning courses. In reality this was not possible due to pressures on staff time and the sheer numbers of potential participants coming forward. A consideration of the benefits of the Initiative to participants relies then on the reports of those participating in once-off group interviews²³.

²¹ Patton, Michael Quinn, (1987), *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*, Newbury Park, London, New Delhi: Sage.

²² See Marsden, D. and Oakley, P., eds., (1990, 1995), *Evaluating Social Development Projects*, Development Guidelines No. 5, Oxford: Oxfam.

²³ In each of the five local settings, Project Co-ordinators, or sometimes ALOs, conducted informal assessments of participants' literacy levels in the early stages of the Initiative. However, there is, as yet, no widely agreed and used Assessment Framework for use in Adult Basic Education and the assessment approaches and criteria used varied from one setting to another. The researcher has not sought to draw on data of this kind for the evaluation. It should be noted that NALA is currently working on the development of a national assessment framework for Adult Basic Education in Ireland.

The third concerns the scope of the evaluation. It was designed to provide an overview of the Return to Learning Initiative as it unfolded in practice. Of necessity, it entailed once-off visits to each of the local settings in which the Initiative was being piloted. There were consistent trends and themes in the feedback of all those involved across the five settings. The evaluation presents those themes and trends, not an in-depth analysis of, for example, the application of the ABE Quality Framework in each and every one of the many groups set up as part of the Return to Learning Initiative.

CHAPTER THREE

'RETURN TO LEARNING' IN ACTION

3.1 Introduction

There are two sections to this chapter of the report. The first chapter concerns the implementation of the Return to Learning Initiative. The second presents participant feedback on their experience of the process.

Return to Learning in Action

3.2 Presenting a Message about Literacy in the Workplace

Project Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators met each other for the first time at a meeting in Dublin in October 2000. The meeting was attended by NALA, LANPAG, D/ES and VEC representatives and chaired by LANPAG. There were five subsequent meetings of this grouping (with the exception of D/ES) at national level. These meetings took place in November and December 2000 and January, April and June 2001.

The early national meetings were focused on the question of how best to introduce a literacy programme in the workplace. A baseline document, Return to Learning, had been agreed by NALA, LANPAG and D/ES and this was used to introduce the Return to Learning Initiative to participants in those meetings. This document set out information under eight headings: Guidelines on framework and procedures; publicity and recruitment; roles of organisations; job description of Project Co-ordinator; list of Project Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators; broad curriculum; case studies of previous (workplace) projects; and quotes from previous basic education programmes²⁴.

There was deep concern on the part of LANPAG and of Local Authority representatives about the possibility of stigmatising or offending groups of workers with an explicit message about literacy training.

A Partnership Facilitator recalls: *"We were concerned about the sensitivity of the project. We felt it would be identified with outdoor staff..."*

A participant in those meetings recalled: *"We were paralysed at one point in the project by over-stating the problem..."* The issue was, according to this individual, lack of *"faith in the training people (with literacy backgrounds) had received to handle this kind of thing"*.

²⁴ See NALA, LANPAG, D/ES, Return to Learning, Workplace Project in the Local Authorities, October 2000, unpublished document.

The issue, according to another participant in the same meetings, was that *“initially it was not done in a partnership way...we were presented with ‘this is how it will be done’...a partnership way would have been talking and involving people in the formulation of the project...”*

3.3 Introducing Return to Learning in Local Authorities

It was the role of partnership Facilitators to act as a bridge between Project Co-ordinators and employees in Local Authority workplaces. Together, they gave a lot of thought to the question of how best to introduce the Return to Learning Initiative to employees in each of the five local settings. There were variations from one place to another, but the strategy employed was based on a combination of:

- Introducing the Project Co-ordinator and the Return to Learning Initiative to the local Partnership Committee;
- Circulating written information to employees about the Initiative, whether letters, notes in payslips or posters for display in the workplace;
- Seeking the support of senior staff (Area Engineers and Supervisors) for the Initiative;
- Meeting with groups of employees to tell them about the Initiative and to invite their participation;
- Enabling potential participants to make follow-up enquiries on a one-to-one basis and/or to then meet with the Project Co-ordinator.

In some local settings, Adult Literacy Organisers were invited to be part of the process of introducing the Initiative in the workplace setting.

In two settings, the Initiative was quickly established with potential participants identifying themselves and arrangements in place for individual interviews with Co-ordinators by late January, 2001. In the other three settings, there was a slower start though, in all cases, the Initiative was eventually established.

3.4 The Infrastructure and Human Resource Requirements for the Initiative

Meeting the infrastructure and human resource requirements for the Initiative posed a significant challenge in each of the local settings. Suitable premises were required, as well as access to computers hardware and the availability of group tutors, with adult education skills, who could conduct classes in Communications, Numeracy and Information Technology skills. Tutors for the Return to Learning Initiative were allocated through the VECs.

In some settings, tutors were available who could combine tuition in the three dimensions of the course in their classes. In others, these responsibilities were divided amongst three different tutors to the same groups of students. The researcher met participants in settings where both kinds of arrangement obtained i.e. a class with three tutors and a class with a single tutor for literacy,

numeracy and I.T. training. Participants in both settings were satisfied. In the former case, the Co-ordinator arranged regular tutor meetings to maintain cohesion in the course. A Co-ordinator working in the second set-up felt that it had advantages because the time for the Return to Learning course was short and participants could settle down better with one tutor than with three.

Requirements for premises and access to computers were met through the combined resources of VECs and Local Authorities. One Partnership Facilitator emphasised the importance of providing “good facilities... it sends the message to the men that ‘we’re important’...”. In one setting, the participants had themselves identified the preferred venue for their classes and this was the Training Room in the local Fire Station. It was comfortable and secluded, with secure parking and access to computers within the Training Room. For all of these reasons, participant feedback on the venue was positive. In a different setting, where participants were attending classes in an Adult Education Centre, the feedback of VEC staff was positive. It was felt that the presence of the participants added to the sense of energy and “buzz” in the building and this was good for those working there and other users.

3.5 An Overview of Return to Learning in Action

Table One presents an overview of the Return to Learning Initiative in action, showing the number of participants starting and completing courses in each Local Authority, the number of participant groups projected and the numbers actually started²⁵.

Table One: Numbers of Groups and Participants

	South Dublin	Offaly	Tipperary South Riding	Mayo	Meath
No. of groups projected	4	2	5	6	2
No. of groups started	7	4	4	9	1
No. of participants starting	51	21	15	42	10
No. of participants completing	45	19	15	32	9

²⁵ In each setting, a small number of participants took up a one-to-one rather than group tuition option and they are included in the overall figures.

3.6 Profile of Participants in One Setting

As indicated earlier (c.f. paragraph 2.4), it was not possible to profile all of the participants in the Return to Learning Initiative. Profile details of fifteen participants from one setting, recorded by the Co-ordinator, are included here for illustrative purposes.

In this setting, as in the four other areas, all of the participants were male. In terms of age range, two were aged 25 – 34, six were aged 35 – 44, three were aged 45 – 54 and four were 55 – 64. With regard to standard of education reached, seven had reached primary school; five had reached junior cycle; two, senior cycle; and one had been in further education²⁶. In relation to school leaving age, one had been 12 or under; six were aged 13-14; four were aged 15-16; three were aged 17 –18; and one was older. At the time of completing the course, four participants were said by the Co-ordinator to be at Literacy Level 1, eight at Literacy Level 2 and three at Literacy Level 3²⁷.

Participant Feedback

3.7 Introduction

Twenty six men participated in the five group interviews, with an average of five participants in each group²⁸. Across the five groups, participants shared broadly similar responses to their experience of the Return to Learning Initiative and these are documented in this section of the report.

3.8 Responses to the Return to Learning Initiative

3.8.1 Reaction to the Initiative

The reaction of the participants in each of the five groups to the Return to Learning Initiative was extremely positive. They saw the courses they were attending as a chance to renew their education and as “*an opportunity*” to “*brush up*”, “*revise*” and “*update*” learning and skills development that had been interrupted or stymied when they left school.

In one group, one individual indicated that he did not think the term ‘adult literacy’ should be used in relation to the courses. He found the term “*insulting in a way*” because of the “*inference*” that participants are illiterate. Another

²⁶ This individual had a particular interest in developing oral communication skills.

²⁷ This categorisation is currently used by D/ES. Level 1: Those without reading and writing skills, or with very poor skills. Level 2: Those who have an acceptable reading standard but whose writing/spelling skills are not adequate to enable them to participate effectively in social and economic life. Level 3: Those whose skills were adequate on leaving school but now need updating to facilitate a return to further education and training.

²⁸ The groups concerned were in Clondalkin, South Dublin; Clonmel and Killenaule in South Tipperary; Tullamore, Offaly; and Navan, Meath.

participant responded: *“The reality is that this is what it is (an adult literacy course).”* All of the members of the group were in agreement that it would be best to describe the course in terms of *“updating reading and writing”*. It was said that: *“nurses and doctors have to go away to update as well, it should be the same for the general man.”*

3.8.2 Motivation to Participate

Participants decided to undertake the ‘Return to Learning’ courses because they wanted to work on their basic skills. Needs ranged from the general *“I wanted to learn to read and write”* to the more particular *“I could read and write, but the spelling was brutal”*.

In three groups, there were individuals who had specific work-related needs. One had needs in relation to report-writing. One had not been successful at interviews for promotion and attributed this to difficulties with reading and writing. The third individual would have liked to be able to apply for positions in the Council which *“always go to outsiders”*, but felt unable to do so because of his difficulties with reading and writing.

Many individuals accounted for their reading and writing difficulties by explaining that they had left school early: *“I was the eldest of eighteen and I left school at ten”; “I was dragged out of school... at sixteen it was time to start serving your trade”; “I left at fourteen... school was like a prison and I couldn’t wait to get out”*.

The chance to develop computer skills was also a big attraction for participants and, in a high proportion of cases, had triggered initial participant response to the advance publicity about the Return to Learning Initiative. There was a widespread view that participants could be left behind in a computer age unless they developed the relevant skills: *“Computers are everywhere now”*.

In two groups, participants also said that the computer dimension *“cloaked”* the Return to Learning courses and removed the *“stigma”* of attending the classes. They could say to their colleagues: *“I’m going to a computer class”*.

3.8.3 Volunteering to Participate

There were three strands in the comments from individuals on their decision to come forward as potential participants in the Return to Learning Courses.

In three of the five local authority settings, the computer skills dimensions of the courses were highlighted in advance written information circulated to employees. A proportion of participants came forward because of their interest in developing computer skills. When the precise nature of the Return to Learning programmes was explained to them, they decided to proceed for the reasons outlined above.

A second strand comprised participants who had no qualms about indicating that they had difficulties with aspects of reading and writing. The majority of these individuals worked in one local authority setting.

The third strand was of participants who felt *“hesitant”* about coming forward. Having spoken with the Programme Co-ordinator, either on telephone, in person or through a combination of both, they decided to take the step of registering for the course.

A small number of individuals said that they had been encouraged to participate by more senior staff in their workplace.

3.9 The Local Authority Setting

3.9.1 A Traditional Divide

With one exception, all of the participants whom the researcher met were “Outdoor staff” in their local authorities, now known as General Operatives and responsible primarily for work on the roads. They described a traditional, hierarchical divide in their local authority settings between “outdoor” and “indoor” (or office and management) staff. Participants in one group said it was *“like apartheid”* in their county council. In another group participants said: *“them and us is always there”* and traced this back to the time when outdoor staff *“took their caps off to the engineers. That is the way things were”*.

The divide had been reflected in education and training practice, with opportunities available to indoor rather than outdoor staff. Participants saw some signs of change in this scenario and the Return to Learning courses were one of those signs of change. Prior to the Return to Learning Initiative, participants’ workplace education and training had been in Health and Safety and First Aid. In one group, this was described as *“the council covering itself... they have to give it to you by law”*.

3.9.2 Response of Colleagues

With odd exceptions, participants felt that they had the support of their immediate superiors, be they Overseers, Supervisors or Engineers, to attend the course during work-time. There had been scattered instances of superiors complaining that the course interfered with work practice, but these difficulties had been ironed out with the support of Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators.

In each of the five groups, participants volunteered the view that the timing of the course was a problem since it clashed with the Summer Roads programme, the busiest time of the year for the outdoor staff. They recommended the start-up of courses in October/November of each year.

In each of the five groups, participants had experienced some “*slagging*” from work colleagues. For example, in one group, three individuals recalled: “*The first week, the boys made a laugh of us. We told them nothing, so it stopped*”; “*They were quizzing us so they could make a laugh of us*”; “*They asked ‘can you spell now?’...*” However, in another group, participants said that they had got both positive and negative feedback, the positive as the course continued: “*Some see it as a courageous step, the slagging has settled down and we’re more complimented now*”.

3.9.3 Workers who did not come forward

In each of the five groups, participants said that they had colleagues whom, they suspected, regretted not taking up the “*Return to Learning*” option and who might, if the course was offered again, participate in the classes. Participants in one group suggested reasons why colleagues had not signed up: “*They didn’t like to be shown up in public*”; “*... fear that they would be laughed at*”; “*They might have felt Council might be trying to find out if they’re educated enough to continue... that you’d do something that would leave the Council open*” (i.e. to a legal challenge if employee made a mistake at work).

Another viewpoint was expressed as a question: “*What do we want education for to drive a shovel?*” Participants in one group discussed this point. One of them said: “*A lot of lads working in the County Council think it’s a waste of time... they poke fun and ask ‘what are you going to get?’.. that would put a lot of lads off*”. As the discussion progressed, participants concluded that they were doing the course “*to better themselves*” regardless of the outcomes at work.

3.10 The Learning Process

3.10.1 A Positive Learning Experience

Participants were unanimous in their positive comments about the nature of the learning process in which they had been engaged through the Return to Learning Initiative. The comment of one participant reflected that of many others: “*I go out of here feeling good on a Friday*”. Various factors contributed to the quality of the learning process which participants experienced and valued.

3.10.2 Tutor as Cornerstone

Participants liked the approach tutors took to working with them. There were two aspects to this: the nature of the tutor-student relationship and the method of tuition. Participants described how tutors made them feel “*welcome*”, “*at ease*”, “*comfortable*”, “*confident*”, “*she’s so good to make you feel you have something to offer*”. Participants also said that they had “*a bit of craic*” and experienced a sense of equality within the course setting: “*it’s a level playing pitch*”; “*we’re all equal around the table*”; “*I don’t see P. as a teacher*”. One participant recalled: “*I was nervous the first day ... P. settled us, he wasn’t like a tutor in a suit and tie, he relaxed us into the situation...and he said ‘if any of this is stupid or tedious, tell me’...*”

In one of the groups, participants favourably contrasted their experience in Return to Learning with their school experience. One individual remembered his experience of trying and failing to learn algebra in primary school: *“we were taught with fear and the stick... now with A., its so simple”*; another in the same group, *“going to school, the teachers ran through it and you picked it or you didn’t”*. This sense of surprise that learning could be accessible was echoed in another group: *“cubic measurement is so simple; and “the method of learning is so good ... how things are explained to us”*.

3.10.3 Value of Group Membership

Participants also valued their membership of groups and the opportunities this provided for sharing information, learning to listen to each other, giving each other support and help and learning from each other. In one group, participants listed some of the benefits: *“we’re a help to each other”; we’re consulting one another; there’s a teamwork approach; you make friends; it gives you confidence”*.

3.10.4 A Sense of Satisfaction

All of the participants whom the researcher met were glad that they had signed up for the Return to Learning courses and felt that they had benefited from the experience: *“We’re getting satisfaction and its costing us nothing”; “We’re bettering ourselves”; “I felt it a bit of a challenge to come back and revise”; “We’re coming here for ourselves”*. The comment of one individual that *“education is no load to carry”* captures the spirit of much of their feedback.

3.10.5 Reservations

Two participants who were glad that they had undertaken the course did express some reservations. One of these individuals had found the course basic and would have liked more of a focus on verbal communication skills. The second individual was not sure that he would continue as a participant if a follow-up course was offered: *“What would it come back as?”*, he asked. The same individual had an interest in qualifying for a trade.

3.11 Participant Outcomes

3.11.1 Mind Alive

In each of the five groups, there were individuals who felt that their interest in learning had been re-awakened. They made remarks like: *“I wouldn’t have been interested in (that) before... now I’m like a sponge. I want to learn more”; “... Your whole mind is open again.. it was probably stagnant for such a long time”; and “We’re only beginning to learn again.. I’m going ‘Jesus, I remember that’...my mind was dead for such a long time. We need a Stage Two. This is only an introduction to the process of learning”*.

In three of the groups, participants spontaneously asked about the continuation of the Return to Learning courses. They said that, now that they had re-entered education, become “*mature students*”, as one participant expressed it, “*we all want to go further*”.

3.11.2 Growth in Self-Confidence

In four of the five groups, participants emphasised the effects of participation in the Return to Learning courses in terms of the growth of their own self-confidence. This sense of confidence benefited them in two ways primarily. The first related specifically to their handling of reading and writing tasks. Individuals said, for example, that they felt more assured about their spelling, the lay-out of letters and reading in front of others. The second way in which participants felt more confident was in communication and interaction with others. They made remarks like: “*I have confidence going to the foreman*”; “*I’m able to listen to what people are actually saying*”; “*...people you’d be talking to, now you’d debate instead of just saying ‘yes’ and ‘no’.*”

Three individuals thought that the course would ultimately make a difference in terms of their membership of clubs or the Union: “*At the AGM, don’t look for me as Secretary.. my head was always down because of the fear factor.*”

3.11.3 Literacy Tasks

In each of the five groups, participants identified a range of specific reading, writing and/or numeracy tasks which they had tackled on the Return to Learning courses and which were of practical use to them in their own lives, whether at work, at home or in their social lives. These tasks included :

- Reading wage-slips and bank statements;
- Understanding the new system of tax credits and the Euro;
- Measurement: “*Its handy. I’ll be able to do more when sizing windows in a house*” ;
- Handling emergency and other telephone calls and written messages in the workplace;
- Reading newspapers: “*I can pick up a paper and work through it better*”.
- Letter-writing: “*I wrote back. I wouldn’t have done that before*”;
- Form-filling, including Sick Leave and Annual Leave forms;
- Cross-words: “*It makes you think. I never knew how they were done before*”;
- Reading, including Health and Safety, First Aid material and Operating Manuals at work;
- Using a dictionary to check the spelling of words: “*I look it up and I give a bit of thought to the words*”.

3.11.4 On the Home-front

In four of the five groups, there were individuals who said that participation in the course had influenced them on the home-front with their families. One individual had decided to learn sign-language to communicate with a disabled grandchild. A second individual was reading bed-time stories to his child. Two others felt they could be more involved with their children's learning and homework.

3.11.5 Computer Skills

At the time of the fieldwork, participants in three of the five groups had had some computer training. All were pleased about this and wanted more of the same. As one individual said: *"I'd never got a chance to do a computer, but to be able to say 'I can do that'..."* Several were glad specifically to be keeping pace with their children who were already familiar with computers.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RELEVANCE OF RETURN TO LEARNING TO PARTICIPANTS

4.1 The Criterion of Relevance

The researcher has sifted through the evaluation data with the aim of addressing questions about the relevance of the Return to Learning Initiative to participants. According to McKeown, “the criterion of relevance is used to assess the degree of fit or appropriateness between the needs of the target group and the objectives of the intervention”²⁹. In considering the relevance of an intervention, one asks how the needs of a target group have been determined and how an intervention meets those needs.

4.2 The ABE Needs of Local Authority Workers

There was no formal assessment of the Adult Basic Education needs of Local Authority workers prior to the inception of the Return to Learning Initiative. The needs were inferred from two sources. The first was the International Adult Literacy Survey, the findings of which have been used by agencies like NALA and the Department of Education and Science to provide a baseline view of literacy needs in the Irish population³⁰. The second source was a trade union member of LANPAG, the Local Authority Partnership Advisory Group who expressed concern, on the basis of personal knowledge, about literacy difficulties as a barrier to worker progression and promotion in the workplace. This concern was taken up by LANPAG, as outlined in Chapter Three of this report.

The expectation, on the part of all parties to the Initiative, was that the need for ABE intervention would emerge among certain categories and grades of staff in Local Authorities, notably General Operatives, known as outdoor staff, primarily working on roads programmes.

4.3 Demand for ABE Provision

There was no apparent demand for ABE provision in the Local Authorities prior to the Return to Learning Initiative. A Training Needs Analysis completed in one Local Authority, for example, had identified training needs amongst

²⁹ McKeown, K., *Evaluation: Its Language and Logic*, Administration, Vol. 47, No. 1, Spring 1999.

³⁰ See the Return to Learning October 2000 Project Document which anticipated twenty five per cent of employees with literacy difficulties and ten per cent of those staff coming forward.

General Operative staff as primarily related to Health and Safety, First Aid, Dealing with the Public and Assertiveness and Communication Skills³¹.

However, there was awareness that reading and writing difficulties were issues for some staff and, in terms of work practice, accommodations were made to deal with the problem³². One Personnel Manager said they had always been aware of literacy as a difficulty for some staff, but the problem had been *“how to approach it”*.

In the same Local Authority, an Overseer said: *“On travel expenses, I’m supposed to get a man to fill out a travel sheet in front of me and to sign it. I never do that. I give it to them overnight and I know the family helps them to fill it out”*.

4.4 Take-Up of the Return to Learning Initiative

During the planning phase of the Return to Learning Initiative, a key concern for the Partnership Facilitators was how to openly introduce this “supersensitive” issue in the workplace. Expectations that workers would take-up the Return to Learning opportunity were limited. Echoing the view of others, one Facilitator recalled her early concerns :

*“For me, it was ‘how are we going to get people on board?’
These are older men, outdoors in the main, they don’t put up their hands to anything...”*

Another remarked: *“I felt the principle was good, but I didn’t feel it would work...”*.

A third Facilitator said, about the response of the Local Partnership Committee: *“They were supportive, but doubtful”*.

In fact, workers in local authorities did respond to the Return to the Learning Initiative and did take up the opportunity presented in larger numbers than any of those planning the Initiative had anticipated. All were men. Take-up was such that resources and budgets had to be revisited and expanded upwards in the course of the pilot project.

4.5 Goals and Needs

The goals of the Return to Learning Initiative were stated in the broadest of terms. They were :

- To give Local Authority employees in five pilot areas an opportunity to attend a literacy skills course;
- To ascertain the level of support required to facilitate a return to learning for local authority staff; and
- To create a ‘safe’ and supportive learning environment for staff³³.

³¹ Unpublished Training Strategy document, developed for one of the five participating Local Authorities.

³² A reality also noted in the report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, op.cit., p.5.

³³ NALA, LANPAG, D/ES, op.cit., p.3.

4.6 The Opportunity to Participate in Literacy Skills Training

The levels of take-up by, and retention of, workers within the Return to Learning Initiative do suggest the validity of the goal of offering literacy training opportunities to employees in the local authorities. Employees have expressed their needs, in the ABE sphere, in both word and action in their response to the Return to Learning Initiative.

It is also clear that participants were enabled to take-up the Return to Learning opportunity. One factor in this has been the provision of access during work-time, thus overcoming some of the situational barriers identified in NALA's earlier research on participation in literacy provision (c.f. paragraph 1.13). Another key factor has been the ability of Project Co-ordinators to establish some degree of rapport with prospective participants during their initial contacts. Speaking about one Co-ordinator, a Partnership Facilitator and Adult Literacy Organiser respectively noted his/her personal qualities ³⁴:

X "was very safe and non-judgemental".

X "is very charming and has a particular skill of encouraging people in... and is so non-threatening..."

In one setting where workers did respond in large numbers, the Project Co-ordinator was asked what exactly he/she did say to them in explaining the purpose of Return to Learning.

"I told them that I was involved in adult education, that the course was aimed at those who had left school early and, as a result, wouldn't have developed reading and writing skills as they would have done otherwise.. and due to the nature of the job, they mightn't use those skills. I explained that we would need their feedback and that the course would be geared to their needs."

4.7 Workers who did not take-up Return to Learning

It should also be noted that both participants in the Return to Learning Initiative and supervisory and management staff were aware of other employees with literacy needs who did not come forward for a variety of reasons including embarrassment, fear and uncertainty.

A Project Co-ordinator in one setting was of the view that there were staff with very low levels of literacy skills who had not come forward during the pilot. His/her hope was that word of mouth from colleagues might encourage them to do so if the Initiative continued for a second year.

Participants in the current Return to Learning also expressed the view that some of their colleagues might now come forward if the courses were offered in the future.

³⁴ Pronouns 'his' and 'hers' are both used to maintain anonymity of Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators, who were told that evaluation reports would not be personalised.

4.8 Levels of Support Required

In terms of the level of support required to facilitate the participation of workers in the Return to Learning Initiative, the pilot experience shows that this is high.

At the time of the evaluation fieldwork (May-June 2000), satisfaction levels on the part of worker participants were high. Furthermore, both Partnership Facilitators and Programme Co-ordinators were confident that they were engaged in a successful pilot project. However, the context for this was one of high levels of support on a number of fronts in relation to a pilot initiative.

4.8.1 Support of Employers and Colleagues

The agreement of employers to the release of staff from work duties for educational reasons was a prerequisite for the implementation of the pilot Initiative. As one Partnership Facilitator put it: *“There was no problem about releasing people from work. That would have come straight down the line ... from management and county engineer level”*.

The willingness (with some exceptions) of engineering and supervisory staff to accommodate the disruption of work practices to enable worker participation in courses was also important. The following comments from an Overseer and an Engineer are illustrative.

“If you know workers are going to be absent, you can work around it... if they're coming and going, it's a different matter”.

An Engineer

“Releasing men was a problem because it was new. It meant cancelling machinery on different days. It was a bit awkward at the start, but we've adjusted and got into a routine”.

An Overseer

4.8.2 Support of Partnership Facilitators

Ongoing commitment and energy was required from Partnership Facilitators to support the Initiative.

“I was very lucky. I was working with X (who) was very enthusiastic and positive, made it very easy for me and was marvellous in terms of her support ...”.

A Project Co-ordinator about a Facilitator

"...very few initiatives we'd have gone as far to advance them as this one.. there was extra energy on this one, its not the usual...I've no doubt if a Circular was sent down from the Department, as often happens, it would have gone nowhere".

A Partnership Facilitator

"I kept in touch with Supervisors all the time during the project.. because it did cause problems for them when several workers were absent".

A Partnership Facilitator

4.8.3 Support of Project Co-ordinators

The availability of Project Co-ordinators with a specific responsibility in relation to the Initiative and an ability to 'mind' the process and those involved in it was seen as another important support.

"The Co-ordinator is the key person".

A Partnership Facilitator

"The Co-ordinator keeps it alive.. needs to be there, full-time and dedicated... otherwise it won't work".

A Partnership Facilitator

4.8.4 Support of Adult Literacy Organisers

The level and quality of support that Adult Literacy Organisers and Adult Literacy Schemes within VECs could make available was also of significance in the implementation of the Return to Learning Initiative. One Co-ordinator, for example, spoke of the difference it made to him/her to have the support of an ALO with experience, skill and *"a vision of adult literacy"* and how it should develop when issues arose in the course of Return to Learning. Another Co-ordinator, working very much on his/her own in the early stages of the Initiative *"felt a lot of pressure on me solely"*.

4.9 A Safe and Supportive Learning Environment

There are two dimensions to the matter of a safe and supportive learning environment for participants in the Return to Learning Initiative. One relates to the learning environment within the classroom and participants have recounted their own experience of that environment in Chapter Three of the report. The second relates to the workplace as an environment in which to promote literacy provision.

4.10 Concerns about Literacy Training in the Workplace

Concerns about the safety of participants in literacy training in the workplace relate to their vulnerability as employees and the reactions of their colleagues. Both concerns were raised during the Return to Learning Initiative.

In relation to workplace literacy, Hoddinott, for example, has advocated a re-appraisal of trade union support for this kind of intervention, identifying a number of issues including those of job security for employees and increased scrutiny of employees by employers³⁵. Potential participants in one Local Authority shared their concerns with the Project Co-ordinator:

“One of the fears was that, ‘I’m joining this course and putting my cards on the table as needing basic help ... will I be the last for promotion?.. Will I be the first to be let go?’... I could assure them that this was not the Council’s attitude... (but) the only thing that will help it is when they see one bunch go through... how this one (group of participants) is dealt with by the Council is very important.”

Uncertainty about raising the literacy issue in the workplace were also expressed by Partnership Facilitators as noted earlier. One Facilitator was concerned that doing so would open potential candidates to ridicule from colleagues:

“It’s a harder world out there as you may or may not know. It can be a cruel world. It’s a man’s world... (but) men are often not as hard as they pretend to be when they’re portraying a hard man attitude.. and there can be a bigger stigma ...”

4.11 Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment

The concerns expressed above remain real and cannot be addressed conclusively within the framework of a pilot project. As the Project Co-ordinator above noted, much depends on the future experience of Return to Learning participants in their workplaces. It also has to be said that, though some concerns were expressed during the evaluation, they were not a dominant theme on feedback on the pilot project.

In planning the Return to Learning Initiative, real efforts have been made to create a sense of safety and support for potential participants. One Local Authority staff member acknowledged the argument against workplace literacy as *“the fear of Big Brother knowing everything”*, but went on to say *“here the programme is in a positive light”*. A LANPAG representative also said that *“coming forward was seen as a positive thing”*.

4.12 The Computer Dimension

The computer dimension was regarded in the Return to Learning Initiative as a

³⁵ Hoddinott, S., The worker basic skills ‘crisis’: some industrial relations implications, in Rainbird, H. (ed), (2000), Training in the Workplace, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.

way of enabling potential participants to come forward more easily. The intention was to make the Initiative attractive and, as far as some were concerned, to “cloak” it. The feedback of some, but not all, participants indicates that this has been important to them.

A Partnership Facilitator reflects: *“I had thought at the beginning that doing night classes might cause the participants less difficulty than a workplace course. Now all know and there is no difficulty.. they just say they’re going to the library to do a computer course”.*

Though the strategy has worked, and there is clearly a huge degree of interest amongst local authority staff in developing computer skills, the pilot experience does highlight the need to pitch the introductory messages about Return to Learning accurately. Large numbers of individuals came forward initially who were primarily or solely interested in developing computer skills. This is an indicator that the balance between conveying the purpose of Return to Learning courses and ‘shielding’ potential participants was not struck in all cases.

4.13 Confidentiality

All of the parties to the Return to Learning Initiative were in agreement about the importance of assuring potential participants that confidentiality would be guaranteed in relation to their participation in Return to Learning courses. In practice, this meant that workers’ immediate superiors knew about their absence from work to participate in classes and, that information about participation was given on ‘a need to know’ basis. In so far as there were written participant records, these were held by the Project Co-ordinator.

One Facilitator commented that the influence of the VEC had been important in relation to confidentiality:

“A benefit of the link to the VEC is the weight they place on confidentiality.. even myself, I could have lost sight of that once the course was set up...”.

A second Partnership Facilitator spoke about an individual, a trade union representative, who had come forward and been channelled into one-to-one literacy tuition. This individual was *“influential”* within the organisation. The Facilitator in question had been stringent about confidentiality because *“it could weaken and undermine him if word gets out”.*

A third Partnership Facilitator indicated that there had been absolute respect for the need for confidentiality within his/her organisation, but that as time had gone on, the participants themselves had relaxed and begun to speak more openly about the Return to Learning courses: *“It takes time for people to build up trust themselves.”*

4.14 The Partnership Mechanisms

The Return to Learning Initiative has been introduced through the Partnership Facilitators rather than through Personnel and Human Resource Development staff in the Local Authorities. It has also been introduced in collaboration with an external agency. Both factors have been identified by a cross-section of Local Authority and VEC personnel as significant in enhancing the acceptability and safety of the Initiative in the eyes of employees.

"Partnership is a good process to use... if it was only through Personnel, people would be suspicious.. the traditional perception is that personnel pointed out what was wrong, not what we did right."

"The workers would see me as a shirt and tie.. and would have a sense of stigma if I went out to them... they were more relaxed when (the Project Co-ordinator) went out to them."

Local Authority Staff

"One of the strengths of the model is that you are separate from the Council. You have that independence.. it helps on (trust in) the confidentiality and privacy.. and you don't come with any baggage they may feel about what the Council has done in the past...also, the adult education ethos is there and established in the Scheme and that's a strength..".

A Project Co-ordinator

4.15 Summary

The relevance of the Return to Learning Initiative has been considered in terms of its appropriateness to the needs of the target population. Though the ABE needs of the workers concerned had not been articulated publicly prior to the Initiative, they were real. The validity of one goal of the Initiative, to provide literacy training in the workplace, has been confirmed.

Another goal concerned the desire to ascertain the level of support required to implement the Initiative at local level. The pilot experience shows that high levels of support and commitment are required and this needs to be borne in mind when making plans for the further development of the Return to Learning Initiative. The emphasis, named in the goals for the Initiative, and applied to project design and implementation, on the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment for participants, have been crucial. It is a goal that seems, within the pilot time-frame, to have been realised. However it is also a feature of the Initiative that requires vigilance and monitoring in the long-term.

LINKAGES UNDERPINNING THE RETURN TO LEARNING INITIATIVE

5.1 The Criterion of Linkage

In considering the evaluation findings with reference to the criterion of linkage, the researcher has aimed to ascertain the players' views of the effectiveness of linkages between them in the implementation of the Return to Learning Initiative.

5.2 The Linkages in the Initiative

The Return to Learning Initiative was underpinned by linkages within and between organisations at a number of different levels. These were :

- Linkages between the national organisations, NALA and LANPAG³⁶.
- Linkages between the national organisations and their own local constituencies. In the case of NALA, these were the VECs and the Project Co-ordinators. In the case of LANPAG, these were the Local Authorities, specifically County Managers and Partnership Facilitators.
- Linkages within and between organisations, and their representatives, at the local level. These would be, for example, between Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators at local level; and between Adult Literacy Organisers and Project Co-ordinators within the VECs and between Partnership Facilitators and key groupings of staff i.e. engineers and supervisory staff within the local authorities.

5.3 Linkages at the National Level

LANPAG and NALA linked with each other through the mechanism of meetings at the national level, attended also by Project Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators (c.f. paragraph 3.2). NALA's Development Worker and LANPAG's Information Officer also liaised with each other on a one-to-one basis in relation to operational issues as they arose during the pilot project. LANPAG set the agenda for, and chaired, the national level meetings. These took place in LGMSB offices which also provide a physical home for LANPAG.

³⁶ The role of D/ES was to provide funding to the Return to Learning Initiative. Beyond introductory letters to CEOs of VECs about the Initiative, D/ES was not involved in the project at an operational level. Its role is not therefore considered in this section of the report.

Both NALA and LANPAG share the view that the linkage between them represented “a pooling of knowledge and resources”. NALA was perceived to have “the literacy expertise” and LANPAG the mechanisms to enable literacy providers to access workers in Local Authority settings. NALA noted that “each had something quite different to bring” to the working arrangement between them³⁷. LANPAG said: “We had the idea and NALA were the experts on this”. NALA said of LANPAG: “They were willing to oil the wheels. Wherever it needed a little bit of a push and a shove, they were willing to do it”. NALA also noted LANPAG’s strong sense of “ownership” of the Initiative: “It was their idea and everything flowed from that”.

NALA saw itself as playing an important role in ensuring that the focus of the Return to Learning Initiative remained on literacy and was not diluted due to concerns about the sensitivity of the issue in the workplace³⁸. LANPAG for its part says: “It was important that (the Initiative was about) literacy and that it was seen as important to develop the individual for themselves, not just for work”.

LANPAG hopes that the “kudos” for this as a Local Authority Initiative, “although done in conjunction with NALA and the VECs”, will encourage the Local Authorities to claim it and continue the process they have started.

5.4 National to Local Level Linkages

5.4.1 Bringing Project Co-ordinators into the Initiative

In considering how the Project Co-ordinators were linked into the Return to Learning Initiative, the focus was on their introduction to and induction into the Initiative from the national level.

All of the Project Co-ordinators were experienced literacy tutors. Two had prior experience as Project Co-ordinators, both of FAS/VEC Return to Education programmes for Community Employment Participants.

As a prelude to their work on Return to Learning, NALA recommended that Project Co-ordinators attend a Workplace Basic Skills Training course, conducted in Dublin in two blocks of two days, four weeks apart from each other. One of the co-ordinators was a tutor on the course, another had already completed a similar training course and two others attended the course in question.

³⁷ See Mattessich, P.W. and Monsey, B.R. (1992), Collaboration: What makes it work, A Review of the Research Literature on Factors influencing Collaboration, St. Paul, Minnesota: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. Among the factors found by the authors to enable effective collaboration are the following: Members see collaboration as in their mutual self-interest; there are concrete, attainable goals and objectives; there is a unique purpose, in that the mission and goals or approach of the collaborative group differ, at least in part, from the mission and goals or approach of the member organisations; and there are sufficient funds to support the operation of the collaborative group.

³⁸ For example, suggestions at earlier national meetings that the computer skills dimensions of Return to Learning might be highlighted were opposed by NALA and D/ES on the grounds that the Initiative could miss the target group and that literacy funding, now that it was becoming available nationally, needed to be ‘ringfenced’ for that purpose.

Project Co-ordinators met each other at a meeting in NALA in October 2000 when they were briefed primarily, they say, about the Workplace Basic Skills Training course. Project co-ordinators then had lunch with representatives of NALA and of LANPAG and went from the lunch to a meeting facilitated by LANPAG in the offices of the LGMSB. It was at this meeting that the Project Co-ordinators met for the first time with the Partnership Facilitators with whom they were to link on the introduction of the Return to Learning Initiative in their respective Local Authority settings.

Individual Co-ordinators found aspects of the Workplace Training Course helpful. However, in hindsight, individual Co-ordinators make a number of points about the induction process :

- Local authority representatives should contribute to the induction process for co-ordinators;
- Co-ordinators need to learn about the culture, structure and systems of the local authority workplace before they begin to work in that setting; and
- More thought needs to be given to the best way in which to create the initial links between Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators. For example, one Co-ordinator recalls: *“X and I met in Dublin. It would have been much better to meet in the Council on a one-to-one basis. At that meeting, I heard X for the first time on his/her fears and anxieties”*. Another Co-ordinator was of the opinion that it would have been better had he/she been introduced to the Partnership Facilitator by the County Manager.

5.4.2 Partnership Facilitators

One Partnership Facilitator had requested the inclusion of his/her Local Authority in the Return to Learning Initiative and was *“very happy to proceed”* with it. Another recalled: *“The County Manager agreed and it more or less landed on my desk.”* Two others were working with Local Authorities which had senior management represented on LANPAG. A fifth says: *“I got a note from LANPAG to say we’d been chosen. I was delighted, but apprehensive”*.

The Partnership Facilitators met as a group before first meeting the Project Co-ordinators for the Return to Learning Initiative. However, there was no structured induction process. In relation to preparation for participation in the Initiative, LANPAG says that they *“were as prepared as you could be in a situation like that”* which was taking everybody into new and unknown territory for the first time.

Two individual Partnership Facilitators offered contrasting views of LANPAG’s role :

“LANPAG’s role has been just excellent in bringing people together. They were the facilitators.... and they’d be important with city and county managers (in bringing them into the process)...”

“Communication between LANPAG and the local level is not great.. I’d put it down in part to the changes of personnel.. there’s a sense of nobody being there..”³⁹.

One Project Co-ordinator was of the view that literacy awareness training for the Partnership Facilitator with whom he/she was working would have enabled more effective collaboration on the Return to Learning Initiative, particularly in the earlier stages. There were difficulties because the Partnership Facilitator concerned was fearful and *“at sea about literacy”*.

On NALA’s role, there was an acknowledgement of the experience and expertise the organisation had contributed to the Initiative and for its part in setting a funding framework in place at the national level which spared the need for negotiations at the local level. However one Partnership Facilitator had the following to share:

“NALA are immersed in it. Before they do anything, they should listen first. They’re more or less converting the whole world. They have the good message and they want to tell all. I’ve great admiration for them, but they should listen more and ask us ‘How do you think you should go about it?’.....”

A NALA member, reflecting back on early interactions with Partnership Facilitators, says :

“There was a feeling of ‘we should have been involved sooner’ (on the part of Facilitators), but if we hadn’t taken the bull by the horns, we’d still be talking... We jump-started it ...”

This member was of the view that bringing a baseline document to the initial national meetings was beneficial, *“jump-started”* the Initiative and avoided the difficulties attached to starting from *“a blank page”*. However, it is also evident that there was unease amongst some participants in the earlier national meetings about how their concerns were heard and responded to.

5.4.3 How the VECs were brought into the Initiative

As indicated elsewhere in the report, VECs were notified about the Return to Learning Initiative first by D/ES which wrote to their Chief Executive Officers. NALA then wrote follow-up letters to CEOs, AEOs and ALOs.

VEC staff unanimously welcomed the Return to Learning Initiative and were very satisfied to be involved with and supporting the pilot project. In the words of one: *“It has been a most rewarding experience”*.

One VEC staff member said: *“We probably wouldn’t be where we are but for NALA’s role in negotiating with partners. We wouldn’t be up and running without their support and skill.”* Others also commented favourably on NALA’s support role.

³⁹ There were three changes of relevant staff in LANPAG during the life of the Return to Learning Initiative.

However, there was also a view that consultation and communication between NALA and VECs could be improved. Specific instances given in the course of the evaluation are noted here. One VEC centre learned from another, rather than from NALA, that the Initiative was running in their locality. Staff in another VEC found out, after the event, about meetings on the theme of Workplace Literacy, hosted by NALA, that they would have liked to attend by virtue of their involvement in Return to Learning.

In several VECs, staff would have liked more prior consultation about aspects of the budgets for Return to Learning. This concern arose in relation both to overall budgets for the Initiative and the specific issue of the payment of travel time to Project Co-ordinators. The latter arose particularly in rural settings where Co-ordinators had to cover considerable distances travelling to meet groups⁴⁰. One individual, who otherwise spoke favourably about NALA's role, commented:

"It might have been wise to have a bit more consultation with counties before drawing up county budgets... perhaps call (counties) together and say 'come back to us with a proposal for your county', rather than issuing a standard letter.. if we hadn't been able to negotiate (on the budget), the project would have been a disaster".

5.5 Linkages at the Local Level

5.5.1 Linkages with VECs

In the main, Project Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators were satisfied with the support they had received from VECs at the local level. In the words of one Project Co-ordinator :

"Anything I wanted from the VEC, I got it".

Difficulties that Project Co-ordinator and Facilitator characterised as minor were encountered in one setting. These were dealt with by, for example, using Local Authority rather than VEC premises for classes. The Partnership Facilitator was a little surprised since *"My attitude was 'here are customers for your programmes'..."* The Project Co-ordinator explains it as follows:

"I think it's the mindset. I look for solutions. (x) looks for problems".

One Project Co-ordinator found herself *"under pressure"* when the Return to Learning Initiative was being set-up in her area since both Adult Literacy

⁴⁰ The payment of Co-ordinators' travel time emerged as an issue in the course of the pilot. The need to pay travel time had not been factored into the original budgets for the Initiative. When it became clear that Co-ordinators in rural settings were spending a lot of time travelling to dispersed locations, NALA stated that Co-ordinators' travel time should be paid from revised budgets. At least two VECs had concerns about establishing precedents vis a vis the payment of travel time in their local settings. One did pay when the issue was 'covered' in writing from NALA. The other paid a separate lump sum for travel time to the Co-ordinator and requested that he/she make their own tax arrangements.

Organiser and Partnership Facilitator were ill at the time (LANPAG was eventually able to ease this situation by making alternative Local Authority links for the Co-ordinator in question).

From the VEC perspective, there was one setting in which VEC staff would have liked the Co-ordinator to keep them more fully in touch with the project.

Finally, two points are outstanding. There were different arrangements in relation to the provision of tutors through the VEC network. In one setting, tutors were allocated to Return to Learning by the VEC. In others, Co-ordinators were asked to select tutors for the Initiative. The general view is that it would be good if Co-ordinators at a minimum *“had a say”* in the tutor selection process.

The second point concerns arrangements for the remuneration of Project Co-ordinators. There were suggestions, in the course of the evaluation, that it would be better to provide them with contracts for their work, rather than to pay them on an ‘hours’ basis, as at present⁴¹.

5.5.2 Partnership Facilitators and the Partnership Process

Partnership Facilitators had a pivotal role to play in the Return to Learning Initiative. As stated in a previous section of the report, they acted as a bridge between employees in the workplace and literacy providers from an external organisation.

They saw the Return to Learning Initiative as being consistent with the principles of the partnership process and a way of showing that partnership can result in tangible outcomes:

“It is important that staff see that there is a tangible benefit to partnership.”

“This was an ideal project to bring forward in a spirit of partnership... in terms of the partnership process which is about management, staff and unions reaching consensus on actions for change, there are certain actions that are ideal for an us altogether approach, such as training....”

The divide between ‘indoor’ and ‘outdoor staff that worker participants in the Return to Learning Initiative had described was also commented on by some of the Partnership Facilitators.

One said: *“there was an old, traditional differentiation between servants and officials”* and another: *“The perception of an old order and regime was out there and would stem from outdoor workers feeling ‘we’re the bottom of the pile, the last people on training’.. that is something the organisation would have a responsibility to break down”.*

⁴¹ Another issue for VEC personnel – for example Co-ordinators who tutor outside the Initiative - is that there is a twenty two hour limit on the number of hours per week they can work for the organisation.

5.5.3 Linking the Initiative into the Local Authority Workplace

Project Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators worked together to link the Return to Learning Initiative into the Local Authority workplace.

There was general agreement that a two-pronged approach worked well: in the first instance, notifying all staff in writing about the Initiative; in the second, meeting Local Authority staff face-to-face to seek their support for the Initiative. During the pilot, individuals wondered whether all staff should be notified or sectors of staff to whom the Initiative might seem most relevant. In one setting, Partnership Facilitator and Project Co-ordinator were agreed that, when questions were raised about who the Initiative was for, *“it was good to be able to say that everybody had been notified about it”*.

5.5.4 Different Approaches

Different approaches were taken in different places. In one local setting, the Partnership Facilitator worked primarily on an individual basis. The support of the Partnership Committee was sought and given. After that, the Facilitator approached individuals *“whom I knew would be supportive”* and introduced the Co-ordinator to them. The Co-ordinator distributed posters about Return to Learning in depots and work stations and made arrangements, through the Supervisor, to return and speak to the workers in the various locations in groups. Interested individuals were asked to give the Co-ordinator their names and he/she returned to meet the individuals on a one-to-one basis.

In the other settings, Project Co-ordinator and Partnership Facilitator worked on a group basis. Different approaches were taken in configuring those groups. In one setting, the Project Co-ordinator, accompanied by the Facilitator, visited the geographic areas into which the Local Authority was divided and met with specific numbers of engineers, supervisors, overseers and a sample of general operatives in each area to speak about the Initiative. The idea was that the latter in particular would inform their colleagues about the Initiative. If promoting Return to Learning again, the Co-ordinator says that he/she would speak to the general operatives in groups on their own in that they would be *“more comfortable meeting without the engineers”*.

The need to ensure that the audience is comfortable and as relaxed as possible was emphasised. In one instance, a Project Co-ordinator who found him/herself *“up on a podium to talk to two hundred men”* highlighted the importance of the right setting, less formality and smaller numbers.

The importance of informing engineering and supervisory staff about the Initiative and seeking their support for it was stressed by both Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators. As one co-ordinator said: *“Educating the other players is time-consuming, but essential.. you can’t get to the workers unless you go to those above...”*. A Co-ordinator in a different setting emphasised the importance of ensuring that *“overseers are not forgotten”* in the linking process because worker

participation in the Initiative does have direct implications for overseers in terms of time, travel, work. This individual was thinking in particular of the need to stay in touch with overseers throughout the project process and to keep them informed of progress in a general sense.

In a third local setting, Co-ordinator and Facilitator adopted a staggered approach to linking staff into the Initiative. Engineers, Supervisors and Overseers were invited to attend a Literacy Awareness Session. They spoke to men on their teams. Subsequently, the Project Co-ordinator visited the work locations to speak with the men in groups. A card with a mobile number and times of availability was left for all of those present. The men then had the assurance that, if they did make follow-up enquiries, they would be talking to the Co-ordinator and nobody else when they made their telephone calls. They were of the view that this worked well.

5.5.5 Other Reflections

Some Co-ordinators spoke about the central role Partnership Facilitators played in supporting and enabling them during this critical phase of the Initiative. One noted that the Partnership Facilitator working with him/her knew everybody in the Local Authority by name and vice versa. The personal quality of those relationships was a great help in terms of access and support within that Local Authority.

Another commented about the Facilitator with whom s/he was linked: *X “ could negotiate the organisational terrain and politics... ”*. This was experienced as both support and protection by the Co-ordinator who was going into an organisation with an unfamiliar culture and systems.

Where the Partnership Facilitator can act as a bridge between literacy providers and Local Authority personnel, this is an effective form of linkage. However, if the Partnership Facilitator cannot do so, for whatever reason, there is cause for concern because :

“There is a huge reliance on one individual in a local setting.”

5.6 Running a Course in the Workplace

5.6.1 Release of Workers

Co-ordinators spoke of the goodwill and support they experienced from Local Authority staff in respect of the Return to Learning Initiative. For example, the Co-ordinator in one setting recalled how the senior manager had attended an Awareness/Information session *“and talked to the workers and encouraged them and stressed that the management was behind them”*. In another setting, an Overseer said:

“Education is no load to carry. It mightn’t be convenient for us, but I would like it to continue”

That said, there were tensions between the needs of the workplace and the need to be able to release workers from their duties to participate in Return to Learning courses. In one setting, the Co-ordinator said: *“The release of workers is a huge issue because it clashes with work practices”*. He/she gave the example of one work location where all five workers wanted to attend the course, *“but the Supervisor couldn’t let them go”*. In the same setting, the Co-ordinator said that the engineer in a particular location *“wanted the men out on the road because the weather was good.... You have to lay tar when the sun is shining. It won’t stick when the weather is cold”*.

There were also instances of individual engineers, supervisors or overseers complaining about the absence or intended absence of workers at the training course. Co-ordinators liaised with Partnership Facilitators who met with the individuals concerned to discuss the Initiative with them and, in the main, these issues were ironed out for the purposes of the pilot. One Facilitator, asked how s/he handled a particularly *“awkward”* individual in her setting said that s/he responded to every single request for information, staying in touch and supplying absolutely everything that was required.

5.6.2 Some Issues

There was widespread agreement that the piloting of the Return to Learning happened at a bad time for the Local Authorities.

In the view of one Co-ordinator: *“NALA got caught up in the Brownie points of being seen to have a Workplace Literacy Project up and running”* without doing sufficient preparation and research about what they wanted to achieve and the workplace settings they were going into.

This Co-ordinator, and other staff, were of the view that the induction period needed further thought in relation to the workplace: *“There was an underestimation of the extent of induction and awareness-raising needed”*. There were suggestions that a longer lead-in time (i.e. the same allocation of hours spread over a longer period of time) was necessary. One Co-ordinator pointed out that this would enable Co-ordinators to visit workplaces and call in more informally over a period of time.

5.6.3 Supporting the Linkage with the Workplace

In terms of the release of workers, individual co-ordinators emphasised key points for the future :

- The need for flexibility in terms of timing of classes for mornings or afternoons to fit local work schedules (something they had all worked on for the pilot);

- the importance of widespread awareness-raising about the Initiative within the local authority setting and over a sufficiently long lead-in period to give overseers, supervisors and others the time to get to grips with the implications of the training course for work practices and to plan accordingly; and
- most critically, the need to conduct the Return to Learning courses during the Winter months, ideally October-March so as not to conflict with Summer roads programmes.

5.7 Summary

At the national level, the linkage between LANPAG and NALA, and the funding from both D/ES and LANPAG enabled an effective combination of knowledge and resources. This resulted in the piloting of the Return to Learning Initiative. With regard to national to local level linkage, there were gaps in terms of consultation and communication. The time-frame within which the Initiative was devised, developed and implemented was tight, just over one year, and this was a factor in the approach to consultation, communication and induction. Those who were concerned about gaps in communication and consultation worked around them, using a combination of their own experience, resources and support networks. However they would hope that those gaps would be closed in the future development of the Initiative. At the local level, the linkages were affected by some of the gaps already noted. However, in each of the settings, the linkages worked sufficiently well to enable the access and participation of employees in Return to Learning courses.

CHAPTER SIX

PARTICIPANT BENEFITS AND QUALITY OF ABE PROVISION

6.1 Introduction

There are two sections to this chapter of the report. The first considers the Return to Learning Initiative in terms of participant benefits. The second considers the Initiative in terms of the quality of the educational experience offered to participants.

6.2 The Criteria of Benefit and Quality

The criterion of benefit is considered from the participant perspective. Workers who attended Return to Learning courses were asked if they had benefited from the experience and in what ways. The quality of ABE offered through the Return to Learning Initiative is considered in light of the principles and standards of the ABE Quality Framework (c.f. paragraph 1.14).

Benefits of Return to Learning

6.3 Participant Benefits

There were clear themes in reports of tangible benefits by participants in five groups in the Return to Learning Initiative. These were (as recorded in greater detail in Chapter Three):

- An increase in self-confidence, with spin-offs in terms of communication and interaction with others.
- Literacy skill development reported in relation to their handling of specific literacy tasks, such as form-filling, letter-writing and newspaper reading.
- Greater familiarity with computers and some development in computer skills.
- The positive influence of their participation in Return to Learning on their home and family lives.
- A re-awakening of an interest in learning and a desire to continue to learn now that this interest had been triggered for them.

6.4 A Positive Learning Experience and a Desire to Learn More

In their feedback, participants have made it clear that they have had a positive learning experience and that this has re-opened a door for them in terms of their own future learning and development. Another striking feature of

participant feedback has been the rounded view they have taken of the Return to Learning experience and its benefits for themselves. They have given many examples of the links between Return to Learning and their activities in the workplace, but they have also spoken more broadly in terms of *“bettering ourselves”* and the links between Return to Learning and their lives outside the workplace.

In each of the groups, there were participants asking if the Initiative would continue and hoping it would do so. Individuals made remarks like *“We all want to go further”*; *“We would like to continue from here, maybe get a Junior Cert., something to aim for”*; *“We’re only beginning to learn again... it would be a total waste of time if it can’t continue.”*

In one group, participants said *“we don’t want to knock the Council, but it’s important to follow through.”* Their concern was that the Return to Learning courses would be run for a few months *“because the Council likes to be seen in a good light”*, but that commitment to the participants’ learning would not be sustained in the long-term.

6.5 Organisational and Strategic Benefits

A thorough consideration of the organisational benefits, or otherwise, of the Return to Learning Initiative, and of the strategic benefits, or otherwise, in terms of the partnership process in Local Authorities, is beyond the terms of reference for this evaluation. However there are some themes in the evaluation data that may be of use in considering the future development of the Return to Learning Initiative. These are discussed briefly here.

In the main, Local Authority staff saw the Return to Learning Initiative as a “personal development” opportunity for the participants. In terms of benefits to the Local Authorities, there were two strands of thought. One of these acknowledged the *“extremely positive reaction of participants and supervisors”*, but was concerned that they were creating expectations amongst participants that could not be met in the future :

“I’m not sure how the benefit to the Local Authority can be measured. It is the Local Authority function to provide services, to have water in the taps, bins collected... I’m not sure about the future, if it can be consolidated... the absolute connections are not there between reading, writing, spelling, numeracy and the tasks people are doing...”

The other, and it has to be said stronger, strand in responses was that there were links between the personal and professional development of individuals and organisational development. Positive staff development experiences were seen to contribute to staff motivation and morale, to strengthen *“the human dimension”* in the organisation and to present the employer in a good light to employees.

In terms of the development of a partnership approach in the Local Authorities, there was a recognition that educational and training opportunities had to be

afforded to all staff in the future, rather than mainly ‘indoor staff’ as in the past if this process was to gain in credibility.

In four of five Local Authorities, at the time of the fieldwork, there was a view that the Return to Learning Initiative should continue with some level of financial support from the Local Authority itself. What was not clear, at local or national levels in the Initiative, was whether Return to Learning opportunities would be provided to ‘new’ participants only or to existing and ‘new’ participants.

6.6 Stronger Conceptual Foundations

LANPAG has indicated that *“the training scenarios in Local Authorities”* are in a process of change with plans for the appointment of Training Officers to each of the Local Authorities and the conduct of a national Training Needs Analysis. The Return to Learning Initiative would be in a stronger position in terms of its meaningful integration with, and influence on, those training developments, if the conceptual foundations of the Initiative were strengthened. Specifically, the parties to the Initiative could draw on available literature to further explicate the links between literacy development, personal development and human development; and the links between personal development and organisational development⁴².

The Quality of ABE Provision

6.7 Guiding Principles of the Quality Framework

Three of the five guiding principles of the ABE Quality Framework are of relevance with reference to the Return to Learning Initiative. The right of workers to participate in classes on a voluntary basis and to set their own goals for the learning process was accepted by all parties to the pilot project. The need for an ethical code of confidentiality and trust was respected. Workers were enabled to participate in different dimensions of the Initiative, including the evaluation.

Each of these are principles that could come under threat in an ABE Initiative that draws organisations with different missions and goals together; in the case of the Return to Learning Initiative, they did not do so. For example, the parties to this Initiative shared a broadly humanistic approach to the educational experience at the heart of the Return to Learning Initiative. Furthermore, reporting and monitoring requirements in the workplace organisations were not such that the code of confidentiality for participants was undermined.

⁴² See Coleman, U., (2001), Curriculum Matters, KLEAR Curriculum Development Project, Interim Report, Dublin: CDVEC; also Levitt, B. and March, J., Organizational Learning, and Brown, J.S. and Duguid, P., Organizational Learning and Communities of Practice, Towards a unified View of Working, Learning and Innovation, both in Cohen, M.D. and Sproull, L.S. (eds) (1996), Organizational Learning, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage.

6.8 The Quality of ABE Provision

Each of the Project Co-ordinators, in describing the approach they took to working with participants, connected with aspects of the Quality Statements in the Quality Framework. In their comments on the learning process, Project Co-ordinators mirror in many respects the feedback of participants in Chapter Three of this report.

6.9 The Learning Process

6.9.1 Approach to Working with Participants

Co-ordinators emphasised the importance of working alongside participants and of meeting their needs in developing the learning programmes. The following comments illustrate aspects of the approach adopted :

“The key to a lot of this is the build-up of a relationship with them. The rest is manageable. Its not a teacher-student relationship. There’s no difference between us. Okay I have a different job, but each deserves respect and attention... the biggest thing we have here is fun.”

“I said I’m computer illiterate too”.

“There was a very informal assessment, getting to know individuals and find out the needs.. their needs are foremost as in all ABE.”

6.9.2 Course Content

Whilst all of the Co-ordinators sought to respond to participant needs, levels and interests in devising course content, they developed their programmes on an individual basis. It is fair to say that the idea of “*negotiated*” content was important to all of them. Influences on individual Co-ordinators in designing their courses included: Student needs and interests; work-related literacy tasks (with the exception of one Co-ordinator who said that participants were “*working mainly on the roads*”); linkage with the content of NCVA module descriptors; the practices and materials available in the VEC centre from which they worked (for example, one Co-ordinator was drawing on Literacy through the Airwaves course materials); and the NALA course outline for the Return to Learning Initiative⁴³.

⁴³ The flexibility of the curriculum for Return to Learning and the negotiable quality of the course content are clearly important features and should be maintained. However recent research also points to the importance of curriculum in literacy development and, in the researcher’s view, suggests the value of further development of the curriculum for the Return to Learning Initiative. See U.Coleman, op.cit., who explores the relevance of “the thinking curriculum” in terms of the development of higher-order abilities such as problem-solving, thinking and the exercise of personal judgement; and who considers the implications of this research for the Irish setting where ‘a mass system of Adult Basic and Continuing Education’ is now an aspiration, pp. 38 – 42. This form of curriculum development might form one strand of the work of deepening the conceptual foundations of the Return to Learning Initiative, as recommended in paragraph 6.6.

One Co-ordinator put it like this:

“It was a bit hit and miss in the beginning...I handed out general exercises to get a sense of where they were... I will now get more structured and base it on NCVA (Communications and Maths, Foundation Level)... I got work-related material from the Partnership Facilitator, application forms, accident reports...and we’ve done C.V.s so that they realise the skills they have..”

Another: *“We did the Euro because they mentioned it... and they mentioned the Government Savings Scheme and that led into the Bank Statements.”*

A third Co-ordinator described how he/she had *“made deliberate attempts to link the course with the work setting and with NCVA modules.* The view of this Co-ordinator was that it was *“only fair to offer (an accredited option) for those who are able, without being driven by it”*. With respect to the NALA course outline, the Co-ordinator noted that it was the same as for the FAS/VEC Return to Education courses and *“very general”*. The fact that it was *“vague”* was *“both good and bad in that you could pick out of it what you want to pick out of it”*. However, he/she proposed greater *“integration so that what is needed in the workplace is made more explicit in the outline”*.

6.9.3 Guidance and Progression

For all of the Co-ordinators, as for participants, there were concerns about the guidance and progression of participants. Throughout the Initiative, they worked in collaboration with both Partnership Facilitators and Adult Literacy Organisers to *“filter”* the individuals who were making enquiries about Return to Learning: Names of all those who contacted Co-ordinators at the outset of the Initiative with education and training needs were recorded for subsequent follow-up; individuals who needed or wanted one-to-one rather than group provision were connected with tutors through the local VECs.

Another question concerned those participating in the 2000-2001 Initiative now that they had returned to learning and found that, in the main, they enjoyed the process. How were they to continue the process? As one Co-ordinator expressed it: *“This was just a taster”*. Where guidance services were available through local VECs, Co-ordinators were planning to link participants to these. They were also aiming to channel participants into existing VEC services where, geographically, this was possible. However, VEC services did not exist locally in all of the places where participants lived and worked. There was also a hope, on the part of some co-ordinators, that participants would be able to continue within a Return to Learning framework: *“Its important to continue. Its not enough to do a twenty week project”*. An Adult Literacy Organiser said: *“Twenty weeks won’t make up for a twenty year gap in people’s education”⁴⁴*.

⁴⁴ Adult Basic Education provision is unevenly developed throughout the country. Whilst the problem falls outside the remit of the Return to Learning Initiative, the pilot experience highlights the need for systemic development and expansion of ABE provision nationally.

6.9.4 The Connection between Benefit and Quality in the Initiative

It is evident from the feedback of participants that the quality of the learning process they experienced in the Return to Learning Initiative is directly connected with the benefits that have accrued to them from that experience. It is also worth noting that the understanding of quality, as considered by the NALA ABE Framework and developed within an Irish setting, looks quite different to the understanding of quality proposed by Moser for the British setting⁴⁵.

6.10 Some Issues

There were some issues that Project Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators worked around in the course of the piloting of the Return to Learning Initiative. However these same issues do need to be borne in mind in planning future expansion of the Initiative; they bear on the quality of provision that can be made available to potential participants. Further, they are best addressed at the planning stage of any programme, rather than in mid-stream.

6.10.1 Literacy Levels and Assessment

There was a low level of drop-out from the Return to Learning Initiative. However, a proportion of drop-out in all of the settings concerned was related to a mis-match between the needs of those individuals and the working levels of the groups to which they were assigned or the level at which Return to Learning was pitched. The numbers concerned were relatively small, but it is a point to be addressed in the future.

6.10.2 ABE Resources

In some settings, the take-up of the Return to Learning Initiative exceeded expectations. This put pressure on the available resources in terms, for example, of suitably qualified tutors, premises, computer facilities. One Project Co-ordinator, for example, said that he/she in selecting tutors, looked for experienced group tutors but also, of necessity *“for what I could get”*. The same Co-ordinator was satisfied that all arrangements made were working well with the exception of one tutor. The key point here is that, where individuals are taking the significant step of returning to learning, a bad experience can do untold damage. Project Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators need to plan, knowing that they will be able meet emerging needs. Again, this is an issue that merits careful consideration in terms of the future development of the Return to Learning Initiative. The pace of development needs to be matched with the capacity of participating VECs and Local Authorities to provide a high quality service to potential participants.

⁴⁵ Moser , op.cit., states that there are four elements essential for ensuring high quality. These are: Clear, unambiguous national quality standards; a well-defined curriculum; a credible system of qualifications; and a new system of teacher training and inspection.

The fact that ABE is staffed primarily by part-time workers is also an issue in that, as one Co-ordinator said, *“people may not be available when you need them.”* In one setting, participants were very happy with their overall learning experience, but were not focusing on Maths or doing Computer skills because these were not part of the tutor’s repertoire.

6.10.3 Progression Opportunities

Finally, in planning Return to Learning provision, project organisers need to think about how the continuing ABE needs of Return to Learning participants can be met when the twenty week course ends. One Project Co-ordinator, concerned about meeting those needs in rural locations where ABE provision was not well developed wondered if it would be better to specify at the outset the settings in which courses would be established, bearing in mind concerns about resources and progression opportunities.

6.11 Summary

Participants in the Return to Learning Initiative reported tangible benefits as an outcome of the process. The reports of participants and accounts from Co-ordinators indicate that Return to Learning courses are, broadly, being implemented in a manner that is compatible with the principles and standards of the ABE Quality Framework. There is a clear link between the benefits to participants and the quality of the learning process they have experienced. The planning and human resource implications of this need to be borne in mind in planning the future development of the Return to Learning Initiative.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

7.1 Perceptions of the Return to Learning Initiative

Perceptions of the Return to Learning Initiative were extremely positive at the time of the evaluation. This was true of participants at all levels of the Initiative: the workers who had volunteered to participate in pilot Return to Learning courses in five Local Authorities around the country; the Project Co-ordinators employed by VECs and Partnership Facilitators employed by Local Authorities who have supported the implementation of the Initiative at local level; and the organisations which have been key players in developing the Initiative at national level, NALA and LANPAG. At the time of writing the draft evaluation report, the Department of Education and Science which match-funded the pilot project with LANPAG had already committed funding to support the continuation of the Return to Learning Initiative for a second year.

7.2 Literacy in the Workplace

Workplace literacy programmes have been advocated as a mechanism to enable the access and participation in educational provision of employees with literacy difficulties. The experience of the Return to Learning Initiative shows that there are employees with literacy difficulties in the workplace and that, if an educational programme is introduced to them in an appropriate way, they will take-up the opportunity presented. The response of employee participants also shows that, if participants are afforded a good quality and adult-friendly educational experience, they will - in common with many other groups of adult students - derive valued personal outcomes, including a renewed pleasure in learning from that experience.

Crucially, the experience of the Return to Learning Initiative shows that introducing a literacy intervention in the workplace requires a high level of support and commitment on the part of those implementing and supporting the intervention. This is a point that needs to be borne in mind in planning the future development of the Return to Learning Initiative.

In terms of introducing a literacy intervention in the workplace, an emphasis on creating a milieu that is safe and supportive - in the classroom, and even more critically in the workplace itself - is of fundamental importance. In the Return to Learning Initiative, this emphasis was present. Again, in terms of the future development of the Return to Learning Initiative, the maintenance of this emphasis on safety and support will be of core importance. Furthermore, longer-term monitoring is desirable to respond to the concern of some

employees that they will experience negative consequences in the workplace if they openly acknowledge their literacy difficulties. This is a concern that cannot be addressed within the time-frame of a pilot project.

7.3 The Linkages in the Initiative

Overall, the linkages underpinning the Return to Learning Initiative have, at both national and local level, enabled organisations to pool their knowledge and resources and achieve a form of synergy in the implementation of the pilot project.

There have been some gaps in terms of consultation and communication. These have been of most significance at induction points into the Initiative for different groups or organisations. The Return to Learning Initiative was initiated, designed and set-up within a six month time-frame. No doubt this speed of development accounts for some of those gaps. Again, in terms of the future development of the Initiative, the lesson is that earlier gaps in consultation, communication and induction frequently continue to prove problematic throughout the life of a programme.

7.4 The Future Development of the Return to Learning Initiative

The question is not whether the Return to Learning Initiative should continue. All of the parties to the Initiative are in agreement that it should continue and the evaluation findings support this viewpoint. The question is 'How should it continue in the future?'. Bearing in mind, the points made above, the following is recommended :

- That future developments would take account of the developmental needs and expectations of the existing cohort of Return to Learning participants.
- That the development of the Initiative would happen **incrementally**; staggering the involvement of new Local Authorities **to ensure that standards of quality, care, support and safety are maintained** and the educational and partnership processes 'minded' as the Initiative is enlarged.
- That processes of planning, consultation and induction should not be short-circuited to get new local projects up and running; rather the approach to those processes should assimilate the learning gained from the pilot experience.
- That the conceptual foundations of the Initiative would be strengthened; thus contributing to the mainstreaming of Return to Learning in the evolving training systems of Local Authorities in a way that connects the principles of good ABE practice with compatible thinking on organisational learning and development.

- That further development of the curriculum for the Return to Learning Initiative be undertaken.
- That a carefully structured induction process be devised for Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators participating in the Return to Learning Initiative for the first time. Such an induction process would include elements of literacy awareness training for Local Authority staff and briefing on the structures, procedures and culture of the Local Authority workplace for VEC staff.
- That Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators who have contributed to the piloting of Return to Learning be invited to participate in the planning and implementation of such induction and training processes.
- That in planning for the Return to Learning Initiative, those responsible think beyond the twenty week time-frame of an educational programme for participants and consider how best to support their longer term progression, both within and without the work setting.
- That Project Co-ordinators would be employed on a contract rather than an 'hours' basis, as at present; an arrangement which seems more appropriate given the responsibilities attached to their role in the implementation of Return to Learning courses and the degree of flexibility this role requires.
- That Return to Learning courses be conducted during the October-March period to lessen disruption to existing Local Authority work practices.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDELINES FOR 'RETURN TO LEARNING' IN THE FUTURE

8.1 Introduction

The Implementation Guidelines set out in this chapter of the report have been shaped by the experience of the piloting of the Return to Learning Initiative. They are written for consideration by those implementing Return to Learning in the future at both the national and the local levels.

There are three sections to this chapter. The first concerns induction into the Initiative. The second is about designing good quality learning programmes. The third concerns the linkages underpinning the Return to Learning Initiative.

INDUCTION INTO THE INITIATIVE

8.2 Local Authorities and VECs

The selection and induction of Local Authorities and VECs into the Return to Learning Initiative is the responsibility of LANPAG and NALA respectively. The assumption here is, of course, that participation of both sets of organisations is on a voluntary basis and in response to open invitations to participate in the Return to Learning Initiative. The following guidelines are proposed in relation to that process:

- That senior management in participating local authorities will receive face-to-face briefing in relation to the Return to Learning Initiative. This kind of face-to-face briefing happens as a matter of course when senior management are directly involved in LANPAG structures. However, where they are not, arrangements to visit, meet with and brief senior management in local settings would be desirable.
- That the D/ES will write to CEOs in VECs to introduce the Return to Learning Initiative, as happened in the pilot project; and that NALA will subsequently write to CEOs, AEOs and ALOs concerning the Initiative. Again, as in the case of the Local Authorities, face-to-face briefing is desirable. In this case, the ideal would be to bring AEOs and ALOs together for the purposes of both information sharing and consultation about all aspects of the Initiative.

8.3 Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators

In inducting Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators into the Return to Learning Initiative, the following is proposed:

- That the support of Partnership Facilitators for the Initiative be sought by their senior management.
- That Project Co-ordinators, when appointed by VECs, receive an initial briefing from their ALOs.
- That Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators be encouraged to meet together initially on a one-to-one basis in their respective local settings.
- That Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators participate together in a **shared and structured training process** in advance of the promotion and implementation of Return to Learning courses at local level. This shared process would enable Partnership Facilitators to brief Project Co-ordinators about Local Authority culture, structures and systems; and Project Co-ordinators to brief Partnership Facilitators about adult literacy issues, needs and ABE practice. The underlying principle in this training process would be one of **mutuality**.

8.4 The Approach to Introducing 'Return to Learning' in Local Authorities

In introducing the Return to Learning Initiative in Local Authorities, it is proposed that Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators do the following :

- Agree a protocol that will ensure the privacy of all potential participants in Return to Learning and address their concerns about confidentiality.
- Introduce the Return to Learning Initiative to the members of the Partnership Committee and seek their support for the venture.
- Explore with members of Partnership Committees the practical ways in which they can support the Initiative in their local setting. For example, in the Pilot Initiative, the informal encouragement some participants received from their colleagues to come forward for classes was important.
- Work together on the wording of written information about the Return to Learning Initiative for dissemination to all employees in the Local Authorities.
- Ensure that the written information provides accurate information about Return to Learning to potential participants i.e. presenting the course as a Computer skills course would be inaccurate. For example, in the pilot Initiative, participants were clear that they saw the Return to Learning classes as an opportunity to brush up, revise and update learning and skills development that had been interrupted when they left school.

- Agree a strategy for introducing the Initiative to Engineering, Supervisory and Overseer staff within the Local Authorities. In the pilot project, two different strategies were used successfully: the individual approach where the Partnership Facilitator identified senior staff likely to be supportive and introduced the Project Co-ordinator to those individuals on a face-to-face basis; and the group approach where engineers, supervisory staff and overseers were invited to an Information/Literacy Awareness session, followed by lunch. The participation of Partnership Facilitator, Project Co-ordinator and Adult Literacy Organiser in those meetings, as in the pilot project, would be beneficial.
- Ensure that staff are aware of management support for the Initiative.
- Follow up with open meetings, handled by Project Co-ordinators, with groups of outdoor staff in their workplaces, having arranged suitable times with Supervisory staff.
- Enable interested staff to speak with the Project Co-ordinator on a one-to-one basis. Three approaches were taken in the pilot project and each worked well: Co-ordinators leaving cards with their names, mobile telephone numbers and times of availability so that individuals could make follow-up calls; a Co-ordinator asking interested individuals to give their names after the group meeting and, from there, arranging follow-up one-to-one meetings and interviews; and a Co-ordinator speaking to workers as a group and indicating that he/she would then be available in a private room in the workplace if individuals wanted to find out more about 'Return to Learning'.

8.5 Practical Considerations in conducting 'Return to Learning' courses in the Workplace

Practical considerations are of critical importance in both introducing and conducting Return to Learning courses in the Workplace. On the basis of the pilot experience, the following is proposed :

- That the optimum time for the conduct of Return to Learning courses is October/November to February/March of each year; this fits best with seasonal work practices in Local Authorities.
- That the minimum lead-in time for the introduction of Return to Learning in a local setting is three months. Ideally, the lead-in time would follow a structured induction process for both Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators and precede the designated start-up time for the conduct of courses.
- That it is better not to schedule classes for Mondays because course-time will be lost due to Bank Holiday Mondays.

- That four hours tuition per week over a twenty week period are required by participants. The inclusion of tea and coffee breaks is of value in contributing to the sense of fun, informality and ease of interaction that are fundamental to the successful conduct of Return to Learning classes⁴⁶. Whether this should take the form of a single four hour class per week or two two-hour classes is a matter for negotiation locally.
- That the key requirement is a tutor who can work with adults in a way that is both effective in terms of their learning needs and respectful in terms of their adult status.
- That, in terms of the allocation of tutors to the Return to Learning Initiative, Project Co-ordinators should, at a minimum, have 'a say' in these decisions within their local settings.
- That classes should be conducted in locations that are accessible and premises that are comfortable and well-heated for participants.
- That participants be provided with basic resources such as Return to Learning folders, dictionaries and calculators.
- That advance consultation about scheduling of classes with overseer/supervisory staff is wise to ensure that the needs of the workplace are taken into account. For example, in the pilot project, there were settings in which afternoon classes worked better than morning classes. There were also cases where the working day finished at 4 p.m. and classes were inadvertently scheduled to finish at 4.30 p.m.
- In enabling the attendance of workers, it may be necessary to limit the number of participants from individual work settings i.e. the participation of several participants from one work setting in the same class at the same time may simply not be sustainable in the workplace. Consultation and negotiation with overseer and supervisory staff about issues such as this is critically important.

Providing Good Quality Learning Programmes

8.6 Planning for the Conduct of Return to Learning Courses

Two guidelines are proposed in relation to the planning of Return to Learning Courses:

- That Adult Literacy Organisers, Project Co-ordinators and Partnership Facilitators would collaborate together in the planning of Return to Learning courses in a local setting.

⁴⁶ In the pilot, participants in some settings participated in a single four hour class per week with two coffee breaks; in others in two two-hour classes per week, with a single coffee break. Both worked, well.

- That decisions about the number of courses offered and the location of those courses would be made in light of the ability of the VEC and the Local Authority, as appropriate, to provide the time, care and resources necessary to run those courses to a good standard. Such resources would include group and one-to-one tuition in literacy, numeracy and computer skills; decent premises; computer facilities; and ABE progression opportunities for participants further to their completion of Return to Learning courses.

8.7 The Learning Process

Project Co-ordinators and tutors will have considerable discretion and autonomy in developing their learning programmes at local level. This will apply, for example, to initial and ongoing assessment of participant ABE needs, course content and tuition methods adopted. The key guideline for Project Co-ordinators and tutors in relation to this process is:

- That the learning programme should be designed and developed to meet the needs of the participants in Return to Learning Courses and to support their participation in a positive, constructive learning process that will enable their ongoing development.
- The principles and quality statements of the NALA ABE Quality Framework would provide a useful reference point for self and organisational reflection as the Return to Learning courses are developed and implemented at local level.

Linkages Underpinning the Return to Learning Initiative

8.8 National Linkages

In terms of linkages at the national level, the following is proposed:

- That, as in the pilot project, opportunities be provided for Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators to meet together with NALA and LANPAG representatives to exchange information about the progress of the Return to Learning Initiative in their own settings.
- That, as in the pilot project, designated contact persons in both NALA and LANPAG remain in contact with each other throughout the implementation period.
- That both LANPAG and NALA contact persons act as sources of advice and support for Partnership Facilitators and Project Co-ordinators respectively at the local level.
- That where local level blockages emerge that cannot be resolved locally, these would be identified and addressed through the national level contact persons.

8.9 Local Linkages

In terms of linkages at the local level, the following is proposed:

- That within each Local Authority, the Partnership Facilitator would remain in contact with Overseers and Supervisors whose staff are participating in Return to Learning Courses; keeping them informed in a general sense about the progress of the courses and identifying any emerging issues.
- That the Partnership Facilitator would brief the Partnership Committee on the progress of the Initiative throughout the project.
- That within each VEC, the Project Co-ordinator would remain in contact with both course tutors and participant groups to listen to experience, identify emerging issues and 'mind' the learning process for all concerned.
- That the Partnership Facilitator and the Project Co-ordinator schedule initial, mid-way and end-of-project meetings to share notes and review progress of the project in their local setting.
- That the local Adult Literacy Organiser be invited to participate in those meetings.
- That the Partnership Facilitator and the Project Co-ordinator meet the Partnership Committee together at least once during the course of the project to provide follow-up information on its progress and to listen to the responses of committee members.

APPENDIX ONE

INITIAL BUDGET FOR WORKPLACE LITERACY PROJECT

The proposed budget was **IR£70,000** (€88,882), funded 50% from LANPAG and 50% from DES. The Budget was broken down into programme costs (see below); Publicity; Research and Evaluation and NALA Management Fee.

Programme costs from mid-January until August 2001

Mayo area	6 groups	IR£14,822
Meath area	2 groups	IR£7,148
Offaly area	2 groups	IR£7,148
South Dublin area	4 groups	IR£10,985
Tipperary SR area	5 groups	IR£12,904

Budget breakdown

Preparation/planning time (prior to programme commencement) including: initial meetings with management, union, employer org. etc.; initial meetings with workers; promotional work; direct recruitment; selection and assessment of group; curriculum development

10 hours x IR£22.90* per hour x 8 weeks IR£1,832

Course Co-ordinator hours over the 20 week programme

2 hours x IR£22.90* per hour x 8 weeks = IR£366.40

2 hours x IR£24.70** x 12 weeks = IR£592.80 IR£959.20

Tutoring hours over the 20 week programme

Each group (1 tutor per group) x 4 hours x IR£22.90* per hour x 8 wks

Each group (1 tutor per group) x 4 hrs x IR£24.70** per hr x 12 wks

Travel for Co-ordinator IR£250

Materials such as books etc. (to buy and customised) IR£270

* This is inclusive of 12% Employer PRSI and 8% Holiday pay

** PPF increase of 5.5% from April 1st 2001

APPENDIX TWO

REVISED BUDGET FOR WORKPLACE LITERACY PROJECT

The total budget was **IR£108,000** (€137,132), funded 50% from LANPAG and 50% from DES.

The area budgets were adjusted for:

1. increased number of participants above the set target
2. travel time for the Co-ordinator and/or tutors who have to travel from their place of work to carry out their work.

The budget was broken down into programme costs (see below); Publicity; Research and Evaluation and NALA Management Fee.

5 Programmes from mid-January until August 2001

Mayo (9 groups, 32 people)	IR£29,500
Meath (1 group, 9 people)	IR£7,148
Offaly (4 groups, 19 people)	IR£7,148
South Dublin (7 groups, 45 people)	IR£20,601
Tipperary South Riding (4 groups, 15 people)	IR£15,035

APPENDIX THREE

COURSE OUTLINE FOR RETURN TO LEARNING INITIATIVE

The following definition of adult literacy underpinned the curriculum: “Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and numeracy. It also encompasses aspects of personal development – social, economic, emotional - and is concerned with improving self-esteem and building confidence. It goes far beyond mere technical skills for communication. The underlying aim of good practice is to enable people to understand and reflect critically on their life circumstances with a view to exploring new possibilities and initiating constructive change.”

In outline, the course content would include the areas of:

- **English:**
Reading - including reading for information, enjoyment, scanning, comprehension and instructions
Writing - including developing and enhancing writing skills such as punctuation, structure and sentence formation, paragraphs, etc.
Spelling - including use of strategies for learning spelling, word building skills, memory aids, spelling rules
- **Communications:** including letter writing, both formal and informal; form filling; note taking and recording of telephone messages; following instructions; giving directions and map reading; listening skills; groupwork and verbal communication skills including discussions and conversations.
- **Computers:** including basic computer skills; understanding computer technology; identifying the different components of a computer; keyboard skills; basic word processing and spreadsheets.
- **Numeracy:** including understanding mathematical signs and terminology; basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division skills; decimalization, percentages, ratios and fractions; measurement; understanding the 24 hour clock, timetables, calendars and temperatures; use of a calculator; budgeting; basic statistics.
- **Personal Development:** including self-awareness; decision making; assertiveness and conflict resolution skills.
- **Job Orientation Skills:** including identifying skills, qualities and interests; relating these skills with possible work placement; CV preparation, completion of job application forms and interview skills.

APPENDIX FOUR

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- How did you hear about the Return to Learning course?
- Why did you decide to do it?
- What are you doing on the course?
- How do you find the classes?
- How does the tutor work with you?
- What is it like doing a course in the workplace?
- Have you done training before in the workplace?
- Do you need to read and write as part of your job in the Council?
- Are there particular tasks – in reading, writing, maths - that you find hard? that you would like to be able to do? that you have got better at since starting the course?
- What have you learned here?
- What next for you in terms of learning?
- Are there any problems with the Return to Learning course?
- Are there any recommendations you would like to make for future Return to Learning courses?

GLOSSARY

ABE	Adult basic education
AEO	Adult Education Organiser
AGM	Annual General Meeting
ALO	Adult Literacy Organiser
CE	Community Employment – supported work programme provided by FÁS
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
D/ES	Department of Education and Science
FÁS	the Irish Training and Employment Authority
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council, formally known as NCVA
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
LANPAG	Local Authorities National Partnership Advisory Group
LGMSB	Local Government Management Services Board
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NCVA	see FETAC
PPF	Programme for Prosperity and Fairness - current national agreement
PRSI	Pay related Social Insurance
Quality Framework	standards of best practice in adult literacy services
Return to Education	a 9 hour a week basic education programme for people on CE
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

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LANPAG



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