

*National Adult Literacy Agency  
(NALA)*

**The Impact of NALA's Student  
Development Work  
2007–2010**

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*Wendy Cox*

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## Executive Summary

**The research:** the central aim of this project was to produce a '*clear and reliable impact study of NALA's student development work from 2007 to 2010*' and '*to make recommendations on ways to gauge the impact...in future*'. In addition, two other topics were identified: first, the pathways by which individual learners became advocates and leaders on the Student Subcommittee, and, second, the ways in which NALA listened to and addressed issues articulated in the course of its student development activities.

The research was carried out through documentary analysis and field work, including interviews, group discussions and two short surveys. It considered six areas of student development work: student representation on NALA's Executive Committee; NALA's Student Subcommittee and its work; NALA Student Development Days and other events for students; NALA's Student Development Fund; and NALA's support for student involvement in Evolving Quality Framework processes at local (literacy service) level.

**Outcomes and findings:** Despite some time constraints and gaps in the documentation, the research succeeded in bringing together for the first time a significant amount of detailed information on most aspects of NALA's crucial student development work. It was also able to show tellingly how the various impacts of this work were perceived and experienced by student participants, by members of NALA's Student Subcommittee, by NALA staff, and by Adult Literacy Organisers in centres around the country.

The overall findings demonstrate the impressive quantity and quality of NALA's student development work during the period. They also show the consistent way NALA has put its guiding principles into practice, particularly in relation to the Student Subcommittee and its responsibilities, where members' individual capacity has been greatly strengthened, and an atmosphere of equality and openness has been achieved.

Following accounts of NALA's development of policy and practice in relation to student development in the opening chapters, the three central chapters of this report cover the impact on students, the impact on adult literacy services and centres, and the impact on NALA itself of the 2007-2010 student development work. They provide evidence for the successful achievement of many of the stated aims of the student development work.

The main impacts on students from literacy services around the country who have participated in NALA activities or become part of the organisation include: increased self-confidence, determination and participation in a range of situations; an increased awareness of their own situation and of issues facing literacy students in general; and a greater willingness to 'talk up' and get involved at local level.

Local literacy services and centres have benefited through: 'spin-off' effects on other students; enhanced relationships among students, tutors and managers; and a clearer articulation of student issues through activities supported by the Student Development Fund, and through NALA's support of student participants in EQF processes.

NALA's credibility is strengthened by the involvement of students at Executive level; the Student Subcommittee has achieved much and has more potential to be developed; and NALA's policy-making and practice have been invigorated and informed through the feedback generated by the different strands of its student development work.

**Recommendations:** The findings highlighted the value of qualitative evidence and indicators of impact, which are the main data NALA gathers in feedback reports and other documents. However, it will be important for NALA to strengthen relevant data-gathering systems, so that it can argue strongly for the validity of these indicators when funders seek evidence for the effectiveness of this work.

The recommendations in this report stress the solid foundation of NALA's regular development-related activities and the related recording/ reporting systems already in place, which can be enhanced and augmented for greater effectiveness, including more rigorous evaluation of outcomes. The main suggestions, arising from the research findings, for gauging the impact of the student development work in future are:

- NALA should undertake further research related to this impact study, especially on the topic of literacy students' developmental 'pathways', and how NALA can best support individuals to progress from consultation to leadership.
- NALA could usefully open up a discussion on its student development work, its aims, and how best to capture its impact in future, by foregrounding it on the agendas of the Executive and the Student Subcommittee, thus drawing on the directly relevant experiences and ideas of the student members of these groups.
- 'Capturing impact' is not an end in itself, but a necessary part of and complement to best practice in student development work, enabling reflection and improvements. So, while important, it should not over-determine the work itself.
- There are straightforward ways to enhance NALA's internal record-keeping, for instance by standardising report formats for easier comparison, and by completing 'feedback loops', especially regarding staff take-up of student issues and views.
- The methods used for capturing student perceptions and views at special events (Student Days, AGMs) could usefully be more varied, and more consistent. There could also be useful learning from documenting and analysing the outcomes of individual students' participation in promotional activities.
- Student Days could allow for more student interaction and participation, with experienced students playing a role in both generating and recording feedback.
- Reporting requirements for the Student Development Fund grants should be further developed and refined, to maximise the value of this student feedback.

Three other recommendations on NALA's role as '*the voice of adult literacy in Ireland*':

- The capacity of Subcommittee members should be developed by providing more support and information for new members, designing agendas to highlight issues as well as practicalities, and assigning more responsibility for student events.
- Outgoing Subcommittee members could play a central role in a pilot project with a small number of adult learning centres in developing a student network and local development activities jointly supported by NALA and local services.
- The potential for student development through individual membership of NALA (particularly as independent on-line learners now feature more prominently) should be built on, for example by offering new members' sessions at AGMs.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Research Aims, Tasks and Challenges

The research which is the basis of this report was commissioned by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), and carried out from October to December 2010.

#### Purpose of the research

Its main purpose was to produce ‘*a clear and reliable impact study of NALA’s student development activities 2007-2010*’, and, based on the findings, make recommendations on ‘*ways to gauge the impact of this aspect of NALA’s work in the future*’.

The first step was to gather as much information as possible about key strands of NALA’s student development work, as identified by NALA’s Director. These strands of activity have tended to be treated slightly differently from each other, with various relationships to the objectives of the current *Strategic Plan*, a number of different staff, and in some cases different funding arrangements and reporting systems.

The intention was that for the first time all available information on student development work over the four-year period would be brought together in one document, for consideration in the short term and for future reference. While gathering the information, the researcher aimed to search out evidence for the impact of these activities, and to consider ways to capture it more effectively in future.

#### Student development activities to be considered

The following activities were identified as the main strands of NALA’s student development work:

- Student representation on NALA’s Executive Committee
- NALA’s Student Subcommittee and its work
- NALA Student Development Days and other special events for students organised at national and regional level
- NALA’s Student Development Fund
- NALA’s support for student involvement in the Evolving Quality Framework at local level
- Student involvement in NALA’s promotion and lobbying work

#### Some specific research questions

First, as part of considering the impact of the student development activities, it was hoped to trace some of NALA’s responses to student issues and student views which were articulated during this period, and provide some answers to the question: *How did NALA listen to students, and what were the outcomes, in terms of policy and practice developments, of that listening?*

Second, NALA was also interested in exploring the pathways by which individual literacy students had progressed from their return to education to their current roles on the Student Subcommittee and Executive Committee.

## The research process

Two methods were used to gather data for the study:

### (i) Documentary analysis

The first method was a consideration and analysis of a wide range of relevant NALA documentation, mainly from the four years 2007-2010. The following were studied:

- NALA's *Annual Reports* for 2007, 2008 and 2009;
- Reports of NALA's Annual General Meetings 2007, 2008 and 2009 (2010 unavailable);
- *Strategic Plan 2007-2010* and *Strategic Plan 2011-2013* (approved December 2010);
- Key policy documents: *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* (2005 edition) and *Literacy and Empowerment: NALA's Policy on Learner Development* (2004);
- NALA Executive Committee minutes 2007-2010;
- Lists of Executive Committee members 2009 and 2010;
- *Functions and Duties of Executive Committee and Officers* (2010 edition);
- NALA Student Subcommittee minutes 2005-2010;
- Student Subcommittee *Terms of Reference* (January 2010);
- *Learners' Development Plan 2005-06* and *Student Development Plan 2007-08*;
- Outline work plan for Student Officer 2010 (April 2010);
- Series of reports on NALA Student Forums/ Student Days;
- Report of 'mini-survey' after NALA Student Days 2010;
- Student Development Fund reports from adult literacy services and reports by NALA staff (including listings of student feedback 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010);
- *Evaluation of the Evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education: Summary Report* (Liz McSkeane, 2005);
- *Revised Evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education: User Guide* (2006);
- *EQF User Plan and Application Form 2006* and *Introduction to and Outline of the Framework*;
- 'Administrative' documentation held by NALA and relating to the EQF process, including: lists of centres receiving NALA funding in 2007, 2008 and 2009, and some general reports from individual centres;
- Selection of reports on NALA conferences and seminars;
- Selected articles in NALA's magazine *Literacy Matters*; recent E-zines; and other materials.

NALA staff assembled most of the relevant documentation at the outset, and additional documents were obtained from the NALA office as the study proceeded.

All of these documents provided useful information on student development work, but a specific focus on impact is mainly to be found in the reports on Student Development Days and the Student Development Fund.

A report on the analysis of all the documentation provided at the start was submitted to NALA after the initial stage of the research process.

## **(ii) Field work**

Two types of field work were used: a series of discussions and interviews, and two questionnaire-based surveys. The discussions and interviews were designed as semi-structured conversations which would complement the documentary information and explore topics that were not fully covered in the written record. Those who contributed information and insights in this way were:

- NALA's Chairperson, Director, and six NALA staff members with relevant responsibilities (all interviewed);
- Twelve members of NALA's Student Subcommittee (group discussion, postal survey, individual interviews);
- Nine Adult Literacy Organisers, mostly from VEC schemes (survey by email).

Since the numbers in each category were small, the analysis of the findings was primarily qualitative and thematic.

### **NALA staff**

Individual meetings were held with the NALA Director and staff based in the Dublin offices, and phone conversations took place with the staff member in Cork. These focused on the particular responsibilities of each staff member, and were the main source of information on a number of areas to be explored, including: the impact of student members of the Executive; the involvement of students in promotional and lobbying work; and how student issues and views contribute to policy and practice.

The Student Officer currently on leave had been responsible during 2007-08 and 2009-10 for NALA's student development work, and so was contacted by phone at an early stage, so that the researcher could become familiar with the different strands of activity.

### **NALA Student Subcommittee**

For familiarisation with the work of the Student Subcommittee, the researcher attended two of its regular meetings. In between, she facilitated a student-only discussion, run on focus group lines, on the role and work of the group, which eight members attended. This meeting included a preliminary exploration of the steps each individual had taken from their own return to education to their current position on the Subcommittee.

The ideas and themes emerging from this group conversation were the basis of the questionnaire, entitled *Charting the Journey*, which was subsequently designed, and sent by post to all 13 active members of the Subcommittee (see *Appendix 2*). Its format was based on the group's expressed preferences for multiple choice questions, but it also included a small number of open questions. Members were invited to respond to



the questionnaire by phone if they preferred, but no-one took up that option, and in the event 11 completed questionnaires were returned.

The results were analysed and collated into a short document which was then presented to the Subcommittee members (and to NALA) at its December meeting. Not all the data were of direct relevance to the research questions, but overall they proved to be of great interest to Subcommittee members and may have some additional usefulness for NALA.

### **VEC Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs)**

The Adult Literacy Organisers working in VEC frameworks were identified as key informants in relation to the impact of NALA's student development work on local services, since NALA's strongest and most consistent links with adult literacy services are with those provided by VECs.

Following a familiarisation meeting with the representative of the Adult Literacy Organisers Association (ALOA) on the Student Subcommittee, a questionnaire was designed to gather relevant information. Nine ALOs from across the country were identified by NALA, and were contacted by the researcher by phone, in order to outline the research project and invite participation. All agreed.

The questionnaire was sent out by email, and completed in electronic form by all but one ALO, who preferred to respond by phone. This phone discussion proved useful, raising new points of interest and allowing a more detailed exploration of some of the questionnaire topics. The results were analysed both in terms of common ground and of divergent views and experiences.

A document summarising the findings was submitted to NALA for the record, as – like the Student Subcommittee survey results – it contained valuable information which was potentially of interest to NALA, but would not all find its way into this report.

### **Some comments on the research process and findings**

While some key elements of the research project were clear from the outset – the range of activities, the time period covered, the main types of documentation to be studied, and the most relevant informants to interview or survey – a number of challenges arose.

#### **Potential quantity and range of findings versus project constraints**

Firstly, as the research proceeded it became clear that there was potentially a very large amount of relevant information and views on the impact of the six areas of student development specified, not all of which could be gathered and analysed in the course of this relatively time-limited study, or by the data-collection methods agreed. For example, a clearer picture of the impact of the student presence on the Executive would have required interviews with most members of the current Committee (and some former members), but this was not in the research brief, and in fact time did not allow for it.

In some instances, the process of arriving at conclusions based on an initial study of the documentation alongside the interviews and short surveys generated further questions, both of fact and interpretation or perception. To answer them with maximum clarity would have required additional time to return to the documents and approach staff

(including some who were not interviewed initially) with more refined questions and a clearer sense of the relative relevance of different types of information.

Also, getting a good grasp of 'what happened' was affected by the fact that, over the four years, three different members of staff had responsibility for student development work at different times (which, despite their best efforts to maintain continuity, had an inevitable impact on reporting processes and on the format and style of documents).

Nevertheless, the research process undoubtedly did allow for the useful bringing together and analysis of a considerable proportion of the potential information and evidence, and for some reflection on the challenges of capturing 'impact', as the following chapters show.

### **Individual student development 'pathways'**

The answers to this research question (see above, p.6) were also affected by time constraints. In practice, the initial group discussion and subsequent survey provided very useful generalisations, but no more. Given more time, a follow-up discussion with the same Subcommittee members, building on the data already gathered, could have provided more detailed and substantial answers. Two case studies were carried out subsequently as a partial way of bridging this information gap.

### **Tracing how feedback on student issues became policy and action**

It was difficult to determine, by means of documentation alone, how effectively, and in what ways, NALA was able to respond to issues articulated in student feedback issue-related and develop them into policy and/ or action. However, searching the documentation with this aim in mind made for a close reading that yielded much valuable descriptive material illustrating many aspects of student development and of NALA's thinking about it.

In addition, while there seem to have been good day-to-day communication systems at staff level for sharing and responding to student feedback, staff naturally found it hard in interviews to recall specific instances and details of this process over the last four years. The findings from staff interviews suggested that, on the whole, small-scale outcomes from student feedback – in terms of actions, further communication or more up to date and informed thinking on a particular issue – were unlikely to have been formally documented in a retrievable way, or to have been 'tagged' as relating to a particular item of student feedback.

### **Student development and 'Voice'**

A fourth challenge for the research was the need to distinguish clearly between the outcomes of NALA's student development work and NALA's 'hearing the voices of students' and employing the 'Voice' strategy more generally. Sometimes, when the notes from an interview were analysed, it became clear that some of NALA's 'listening' that had been described (for example, listening to users' feedback about on-line resources) was not directly related to NALA's student development work as defined for the purposes of this study.

## Documentary issues

Finally, there were some difficulties with the written and published materials assembled for the study, including significant gaps and puzzling dating in the series of Student Subcommittee minutes. Tantalisingly, relevant reports were mentioned as having been circulated to members, but these were not attached, and proved unobtainable.

The fact that the schedules for the Executive and the Subcommittee are so different (with the Executive normally meeting much more frequently) meant that a smooth flow of business and dialogue between them will be problematic at times. So it was not surprising to find that a request, recorded in Executive minutes, for the Subcommittee to consider a specific policy or plan, seems, according to the minutes of subsequent Subcommittee meetings, not to have been followed up.

One factor which affected the identification of 'student issues' and what happened to them, is that the relevant discussion may not have been recorded in formal minutes unless it had led to a concrete decision. In the Executive minutes there may simply be a statement that 'lively debate took place', while the Subcommittee minutes use different formats and styles at different times, with no clear convention evident on the reporting of issue-related discussions. Some of these gaps could possibly have been addressed by further research interviews and discussions, but even so, given the potential time lag of three or four years, the results might not be completely reliable.

Taking all of this into account, it is possible that this research report gives only a partial picture of some activities and their impact. It could be augmented by information on specifics from NALA staff or committee members who have a more detailed knowledge of a particular area than it has been possible to obtain through this research process.

## Structure of the report

**Chapter 2 part 1** looks at NALA's student development work against the background of the organisation's ethos and thinking, and situates the various development activities within the framework of the *Strategic Plan 2007-2010* and its objectives and strategies. It also looks at statements and definitions of student development in NALA's policy documents, as background to the second part of the chapter.

**Chapter 2 part 2** outlines the six main strands of student development work during this period (as identified in the research brief), drawing both on the analysis of NALA documentation and on the results of the field work.

**Chapters 3, 4 and 5** present the findings of the research on the impacts of those student development activities: first on literacy students themselves; then on the local adult literacy services; and finally on NALA itself.

**Chapter 6** offers some conclusions drawn from these findings and from the research process itself, and offers a number of suggestions and recommendations on how NALA can best capture the impact of student development work in future. Some suggestions are also made on other topics which became 'visible' as a result of the close engagement of the research project with a broad range of NALA's work and personnel.

**The appendices** list the main participants in and contributors to the research process, and reproduce the questionnaires used in the surveys which formed part of the study.

## Chapter Two, part 1

### The Context: NALA and Student Development Work

#### NALA's history and ethos – the principle of participation

NALA was set up in 1980 as a non-profit, non-governmental, membership organisation to spearhead campaigns to address the significant literacy problems among adults in Ireland. It grew out of a network of existing local literacy groups which often operated on a voluntary basis, and in its early years NALA continued to depend in part on substantial volunteer efforts from both tutors and learners.

Its community base – often in areas characterised by poverty and educational underachievement – the thinking of its founders and its origins in volunteer work all gave it an ethos and set of principles which still underpin its work 30 years later. Literacy is seen as everyone's right and as the key to personal choice and full participation in family, community and society. From early to recent policy documents, NALA has defined literacy as including both numeracy and the basic technological competence required to function in contemporary society, and as:

*More than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.*

Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work (revised edition 2005)

NALA was also influential from the start in disseminating a model of adult education (based on the thinking of prominent contemporary educationalists and social thinkers) which was *learner-centred*, starting from and connecting to the real life experiences of the learner, and – more audaciously – *learner-directed*. This model respects learners and their backgrounds, personal knowledge and lived experience, and transforms the learner-tutor relationship in adult literacy work into one of equality, far removed from the stereotypes of all-knowing teachers imparting knowledge to pupils who are defined by their lack of it.

The organisation's own structures and processes have reflected these core principles. NALA was a membership organisation from the outset and remains so, even as it has expanded, developed its professional expertise, and become the recipient of ongoing government funding, and as its core work has continued to evolve. Its Annual General Meeting is still a key decision-making point, and both its membership and its governing body, the Executive Committee, include adult literacy learners. An advisory forum of learners, known now as the Student Subcommittee, has functioned over a long period, and at the time of writing, an adult literacy student has been NALA's Chairperson for over three years.

There is a formal statement of the principle of learner participation in NALA's current *Constitution*: one of its stated objectives is

*to encourage the involvement of learners in all aspects of planning, organisation and research. (clause 3.11)<sup>1</sup>*

Similarly, NALA has strongly encouraged the inclusion of learners in the running of local literacy schemes and the design of their literacy and basic education programmes.

A NALA policy statement in 1983 stressed the importance of this approach:

*It is recommended that the responsibility and maturity of students be acknowledged by providing them with opportunities for participation in the organisation of basic education programmes and in the development of courses.*

The same principles and values were restated in the *Strategic Plan 2007-2010*:

*Adult literacy work is based on a philosophy of adult education that is concerned with personal development and social action and*  
*Students' knowledge and skills are vital for effectively organising adult literacy work. Students should have the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of provision. (p.6)*

## NALA's 'Voice' strategy 2007-2010

In this *Strategic Plan*, which is the framework for this research project, there was a fresh emphasis on NALA's inclusion of the voices and perspectives of adult learners in every aspect of its work. 'Voice' was named and presented as a key strategy and way of working for achieving the objectives of the *Plan*<sup>2</sup> and carrying out work of the highest quality. NALA states its determination in this way:

*We will make sure the views and experience of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties*

- ⇒ *Give us further insights into adult literacy issues*
- ⇒ *Guide and inform the quality of our work and*
- ⇒ *Are heard and taken into account by politicians and policy makers.* (p.10)

In terms of practical implementation, the staff member responsible for student development activities and for membership also took on responsibility for keeping the idea of the student voice, with its implied emphasis on student participation, at the forefront of NALA's work on a day-to-day basis.

A draft internal discussion paper of 2007<sup>3</sup>, sketching ways of achieving a close alignment of ongoing NALA work with the objectives of the *Strategic Plan*, sets out reasons for the importance of student voices, which include the following:

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<sup>1</sup> Copy of NALA Constitution appended to 2010 document *Functions and Duties of NALA Executive Committee and its Officers*.

<sup>2</sup> The five overall objectives were: increased resources for adult literacy; easier access and more opportunities for adult literacy learners; more effective literacy teaching and learning; increased accessibility of all organisations in society to adults with literacy difficulties; and a more effective organisation.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Murray 2007: *Realising the Voice section of NALA's Strategic Plan 2007-2010*.

*Involving adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties in finding solutions and decision-making is likely to lead to **the most grounded and suitable outcomes.***

*Through literacy awareness training NALA is aware that hearing the views and experiences directly from adults with literacy difficulties often has **the highest impact on policy makers and politicians.***

The paper goes on to outline NALA's various ways of keeping in touch with and listening to students in 2007: through the students elected to the NALA Executive; through the Student Subcommittee and other NALA subcommittees and advisory groups; the AGM and individual student membership (which was strong at the time); Regional Student Forums; links with local student committees (13 of these were identified in 2006); recruitment for NALA's TV programmes; and consultations with students for specific purposes.

It then lists proposals for enhancing this listening and for using the feedback more effectively, including suggestions for staff on '*developing listening methods...collating and sharing feedback from adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties*'. Other proposals, related particularly to NALA's advocacy role, include shaping the Regional Student Forums to 'produce outcomes that reflect the objectives in the Plan' and following these events to '*effectively disseminate findings*'.

Overall, the *Strategic Plan* for 2007–2010 and the action plans based on it put much more emphasis than previously on obtaining, sharing and making use of student feedback. This included setting up systems within NALA to ensure that feedback from student events, Student Development Fund activities etc. was recorded and collated in an efficient way for circulating to relevant NALA staff.

A further proposal in the paper, on NALA's advocacy work in relation to student voice, is important for the current research project. It states that NALA should

***highlight evidence of the importance of student development work...and lobby for it as an integral part of literacy, which needs to be resourced.*** (p.9)

## The concept of student development

Interestingly, while the concept of learner or student development – as distinct from student participation and student 'voice' which may be some of its outcomes – has clearly been fundamental to NALA's thinking and practice from the outset, it is rarely named or defined in formal documents such as NALA's *Annual Reports* and current and forthcoming *Strategic Plans*, and it is not prominent in some key policy documents such as the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*.

However, it is frequently implicit in such documents, perhaps because, for those most involved, and after so many years of practical implementation, it has become an understood dimension of everything that NALA does, and central to NALA's philosophy of adult literacy education.

Within the organisation itself, a staff member has been designated as responsible for learner/ student development, along with membership of the organisation, and the current Student Subcommittee has a history which – with some gaps – goes back to a student committee first set up within NALA in the 1980s.

### **Policy and philosophy of learner/ student development**

NALA's view of student/ learner development is probably most clearly set out in its important policy paper of 2004, designed to guide its responses to the needs of adult literacy learners, and formally adopted by the Agency. *Literacy and Empowerment: NALA's Policy on Learner Development* devotes a chapter to definitions of 'learners' development' and the learner-centred approach. This chapter includes a series of statements of what learners' development is 'about' and what it 'involves', across the whole spectrum from the personal to the social, and including the literacy centre or service:

*Learners' development is about learners taking more control of their own learning and their involvement in the adult literacy service or project. It recognises the parts of literacy work that are concerned with learners' confidence and participation in making decisions and is about learners engaging in wider society.*

*Some of the work of learners' development involves the personal development of the learner. Other parts...are concerned with learners' voices being heard in wider societal issues.*

The concept of individual and collective empowerment is employed here as almost synonymous with development in this wider sense, and development is seen as a process supported both by the literacy tuition itself and by activities and situations beyond the work of the classroom:

*The core ingredient...is empowerment...Learners' development is about empowering learners and recognising what is progressive involvement of learners.*

*Learners' development can happen in literacy tuition or in other situations that allow learners to reflect and organise together based on shared circumstances. When tutors use learner-centred approaches and the Quality Framework guiding principles they can stimulate learners' development...*

*Tutors and Adult Literacy Organisers have a key role to play in promoting learners' development. We in NALA in turn have a role to support these actors in the adult literacy service.*

*(Literacy and Empowerment, p. 13)*

This chapter of the policy document also outlines a series of progressive stages of involvement in decision-making and organising that can grow out of learner/ student

development<sup>4</sup>, and NALA has clearly kept this in mind when undertaking the different strands of its own 'student development work'.

The ladder begins with consultation, in which learners are passive and reactive but able to give their views, and ends with learners in leadership roles, creating the agendas and policies themselves:

- Consulting learners
- Creating communities of learners
- Learners' rights
- Learners as advocates
- Learners as leaders

This outline (quoted in a number of NALA documents) unfortunately does not clarify what an organisation might do, for example, to 'create communities of learners', how it should work on 'learners' rights', or how movement from one to the next stage is to be achieved.

However, it is clear that, through its links with local services, the organisation of Student Days, and in recruiting for some of the TV series in particular, NALA has actively sought to identify adult literacy students who have already progressed as learners and active participants in their own local contexts, and who can be brought into the Student Subcommittee or other roles where they can become effective advocates for adult literacy (and for NALA's work) and ultimately can take on leadership responsibilities. Certainly NALA puts a good deal of effort into ensuring that student representation within the organisation goes well beyond the 'token student' approach and involves people who are well-informed, familiar with the organisation and its aims and activities, and who can function well on the board of management or the Student Subcommittee.

*Literacy and Empowerment* goes on to outline some of the different ways in which NALA has promoted and supported learners' development since its establishment, mainly through holding major events for students. It highlights NALA's hope and intention that holding such events would be devolved to local scheme level, with NALA supporting in three main ways: through 'learner subsidies' aimed at extra-curricular learning; training; and the setting up of local student committees.

It notes that students have been continuously included on the Executive and sub-committees; they were involved in the development of the Quality Framework from the late 1990s; and they took part in literacy training teams visiting companies and government Departments to raise awareness and suggest means of countering the exclusion of those with literacy difficulties. Students were involved as speakers for International Literacy Day and similar public events. They were also consulted about new resources for literacy learning.

This summary shows that many of the strands of student development work that were listed for consideration as part of this research project were already well established in

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the work of Juliet Merrifield published in *Listening to Learners about Adult Literacy Education in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2001).



the years preceding 2007. *Literacy and Empowerment* itself had usefully provided an outline of work that was being done, bringing together a variety of activities and practice and putting them in the context of policy and thinking on student development.

However, the emphasis on ‘voice’ which was prominent from 2007 onwards does not feature strongly in this publication. It appears in relation to NALA’s determination to ‘provid[ing] opportunities for feedback from learners on its work’ (p.15), and in mention of the way that ‘learners’ voices are being heard more strongly’ in the context of the Quality Framework process in local schemes (p.16). It also figures in the focus on sharing experiences and discussing issues at Student Forums (p.18).

In addition, in the last chapter, covering future plans for keeping learner development in the foreground of NALA work, NALA commits itself to ensuring that ‘*learners have the opportunity to comment on NALA’s work*’, both at special events and in an ongoing formal way, and that feedback is documented and shared among staff and others (p.22).

In this context of future plans for student development, there often seems to be an identification of learners’ development with the idea of learners communicating their views, to which NALA aims to listen carefully and responsively. This has been one of the difficult aspects of the research, since ‘voice’ and ‘student development’, while closely related, are not one and the same, although sometimes – and often for good reasons – appear to be treated as if they are!

## Student Development Plan 2007-2008

This work plan was drawn up and approved in autumn 2006, and was based on the principles, overall objectives and strategies of the *Strategic Plan* for the coming four years. It followed an earlier *Learner Development Plan* for 2005-06, and appears to have been influenced by suggestions from the Student Subcommittee at the time. However, no plan of this kind was produced for 2009-2010.<sup>5</sup>

The introduction to the *Student Development Plan 2007-2008* foregrounds the ‘Voice’ strategy, the rationale for it, and the ways NALA intends to implement it, reiterating NALA’s conviction that

*Student Development is about the empowerment of adults with literacy difficulties. That is about building the confidence and participation in wider society of adults with literacy difficulties.*

The introduction goes on to state that progress in implementing the *Student Development Plan* will be monitored by the Student Subcommittee and reported by them to the Executive. The actions planned in outline are organised into four overall areas of activity:

**Consulting students** – through strengthening student membership of NALA, clarifying and publicising the main forms of consultation, and supporting the Student Development Subcommittee. The plan envisages a widening of representation on the Subcommittee,

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<sup>5</sup> Finding out why this was the case is one example of the questions that could be answered if further research time was available, with potential benefits for a greater understanding of the student development work, its aims and its impact.

and that the Subcommittee's role will be to '*identify key issues and meet with other agencies as appropriate to progress issues*'.

**Creating communities of students** – through the Regional Forums and by supporting local and regional development work through the Student Development Fund, and also through specialised workshops for students. A further element envisaged is promotion by NALA in these contexts of the model for student development and progressive involvement set out in *Literacy and Empowerment* (see above, p.16).

**Promoting active citizenship in an election year** (2007) – quite an ambitious programme is outlined here, to bring this theme into NALA work, for example by setting up a student subcommittee on political participation, promoting other organisations' voter education programmes (and incorporating them into student events), and producing information packs on elections, the political process etc.

**Supporting students to take on leadership roles** – implicitly referring to the final 'rung of the ladder' in the model of student development, the stated intention here is to identify leadership programmes already available and support a group of appropriate adult literacy students to attend them.

The *Plan* itself provides a very clear and useful indication of NALA's ambitious thinking, at the start of the four-year period, on both student 'voice' and student development, and the ways in which each can be supported and realised in practice.

Unfortunately there seem to be no reports providing evidence of this process, or specific attention paid to the *Plan* as a whole, in the minutes of either body over the next two years, although the Subcommittee focused on some of its specific elements, such as Student Days, at various meetings during this time.

However, although the Student Subcommittee considered specific elements such as Student Days, there seem to be no monitoring reports or overall reviews of this *Plan*, so parts of the picture are likely to be missing (e.g. leadership training and its impacts).

### NALA in 2010: the *Strategic Plan 2011- 2013*

During the last four years, as a result of its active student development work and its emphasis on hearing and disseminating student voices and views, NALA has come to be seen as the main channel for bringing the views and issues of literacy students across the country to national decision- and policy-makers.

This role will continue to be strengthened in the coming three years, and it is noteworthy that in this new *Strategic Plan*, NALA describes itself as

*An independent organisation that is **the voice of adults wishing to improve their literacy skills***<sup>6</sup>

and states as its overall mission:

*to be the **voice of adult literacy in Ireland**, and, with our partners, influence policy and practice to support people in developing their literacy.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Final but unpublished *Strategic Plan 2011-2013*, p. 4

Meanwhile, student development itself features explicitly in the *Plan* under its second objective: 'Practice'. It is included in a set of actions designed to '*develop better literacy and numeracy learning opportunities*' delivered in a range of different ways. NALA's stated intention is to '*offer professional and student development events linked to the Guidelines on Good Adult Literacy Work*'.

As with previous *Strategic Plans*, the next steps after publication will include the generation of action plans based on its guiding principles and objectives. Hopefully the information gathered in this report will be useful in the process of drawing up detailed student development-related work plans for the coming years.

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<sup>7</sup> Final but unpublished *Strategic Plan 2011-2013*, p. 6

## Chapter Two, part 2

### NALA and Student Development Work: outline of activities 2007-2010

#### (a) Student representation on NALA's Executive Committee

In keeping with its commitment to student involvement and a student voice at all levels of the organisation, NALA has always encouraged a strong student presence on its Executive Committee, which is the organisation's board of management. The purpose is, according to the terms of reference for the research,

*To have effective representation of adult literacy student views at governance level and*

*To model good practice in the meaningful involvement of students at this level.*

The fourteen-person Executive Committee normally meets ten times each year, between September and June.

In 2007, NALA for the second time elected an adult literacy student as its Chairperson (the first was in post in the late 1990s). There is no formal quota system, but in the period 2007–2010 there have generally been four student members at any given time.

Executive members are elected at the Annual General Meeting for a two-year term, and can serve for a second term. They are all directors of the organisation, which is legally constituted as a company limited by guarantee and has charitable status. As a result, student members take equal formal responsibility with the other Committee members for the governance and running of the organisation.

All the student members have strong links with literacy work 'on the ground' in their own localities, and at any given time two or three of them also sit on the Student Subcommittee, so are well-placed to bring a broader student perspective to the Executive's discussions.

It is important to NALA that their involvement is meaningful rather than tokenistic, and induction training is provided for new members, along with a manual on the functions and duties of board members, and governance training takes place from time to time.

As NALA representatives, the student members of the Executive make presentations at NALA events, and the Chairperson may work closely with the Director in NALA's lobbying of government Ministers and senior civil servants.

#### (b) NALA's Student Subcommittee

NALA's intended purpose for the Subcommittee is

*To be a respected national adult literacy student forum, where student issues are identified, discussed, responded to, fed back to us and acted on.*

(Research terms of reference)

and NALA's commitment to and rationale for the principle of inclusion of students at this level of the organisation was stated in an internal presentation made in 2007, at the beginning of the current *Strategic Plan* period:

*For Subcommittees of NALA's Executive we will ensure adults with literacy difficulties have the opportunity to feed into work, even if this slows the process down...because we believe we will respond better to issues by having those affected by them participate directly.<sup>8</sup>*

### **Status and remit of the Subcommittee**

The board members' manual, *Functions and Duties of NALA's Executive Committee and Officers*, states that the Executive may set up sub-committees and working groups for which it, as the board of management, is ultimately responsible.

The NALA Student Subcommittee, which in its present form was established in January 2005, 'guides and monitors NALA's work with students, for example student events and the Student Development Fund' (p.13). It has a role in advising the Executive Committee and channelling information to it, and in December 2009 it was agreed to provide a formal 'slot' on the Executive's agenda for any matters the Subcommittee wished to communicate. However, the Subcommittee makes only practical or operational decisions, and is not responsible for a specific budget, although members are kept informed about relevant expenditure.

### **Terms of reference**

The Subcommittee's own *Terms of Reference* have been regularly reviewed and updated (the latest version is January 2010). At the time of writing, the Subcommittee are considering implementing a more formal framework for the group and its work.

At present it is described as a national-level *forum* 'where student issues can be discussed in more detail' than at the Executive, and its responsibilities include 'getting student views and feeding them into NALA staff as they employ the voice strategy'.

In addition, its work 'will involve promoting good practice in the area of student development...and promoting the Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work (2005)'. It is not specified how this promotion work is to be done. (Perhaps the statement should more accurately read 'promoting the principles set out in the Guidelines...', which seems a more feasible task for the group?)

### **Membership and links**

The Subcommittee's size has varied since the start, and it may have up to 15 members. The intention is to have students from different parts of the country, a reasonable gender balance, and students from different types of learning provision, but there are no specific requirements for the make-up of the Subcommittee. In addition, the members do not formally represent their particular services or local students.

Currently (December 2010) there are 13 active student members, of whom nine live in Dublin; a small number of others have recently put their names forward and been accepted, though none has yet attended a meeting.

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<sup>8</sup> Presentation by M.Murray: *The 'Voice' Strategy in NALA's Strategic Plan 2007-2010*.

The NALA Chairperson and one ordinary student member of the Executive are current member of the Subcommittee, while three other current Subcommittee members have recently served on the Executive.

There is no standard application process for membership of the Subcommittee. The current members were generally recruited by NALA staff or put forward by their local adult literacy services, often in the context of a regional Student Forum or national Student Day. Some have already served four years (the maximum term), while others were only recruited in 2010. All current members are following courses in local adult learning centres, the majority of these VEC-run or -supported, and one is an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) student.

A representative of the Adult Literacy Organisers' Association also sits on the Subcommittee, and is an important link and channel of communication with that professional body, and with IVEA, the representative association for VECs nation-wide.

The Subcommittee's work is planned, and meetings convened and supported, by NALA's Student Officer, who has responsibility for relaying specific feedback from the meetings to appropriate staff members, as well as bringing information and requests for responses on particular topics and issues to the Subcommittee from the staff. Chairing is currently the responsibility of the NALA Chairperson, but until recently, meetings were chaired by the Student Officer.

The Subcommittee thus occupies a central position, linking and communicating with a number of local literacy services, with ALOA, with NALA staff and with the NALA Executive Committee.

### **Subcommittee business**

In September 2005, the NALA Student Officer clarified the purpose of Subcommittee meetings: '*Mostly the Subcommittee is about generating ideas about how to go about the activities in the [Learner's Development] Plan*', and a good deal of the business of meetings (to judge from the minutes over the period since then) is concerned with planning Student Days and other events, for which students are partners with NALA staff in designing the format and topics for the day, suggesting keynote speakers etc. Time at meetings is also devoted to informal evaluation of the most recent events and consideration of consequent changes or improvements to those events in future.

When the Student Officer has completed a report on the Student Days or the use of the Student Development Fund, it is brought to the Subcommittee for their consideration and suggestions.

In addition, a good deal of NALA information is presented or circulated at meetings, and new NALA resources are introduced. Feedback is sought from the Subcommittee on all of these, as well as on major policy matters, and in 2010 the group devoted time to contributing to NALA's *Strategic Plan 2011-2013*. Members have also been consulted on new NALA CDs and website content for students, and are often involved in testing the student-friendliness of new NALA documents before their general release. (All of this can potentially make for a very heavy work-load for the Subcommittee.)

Members also receive requests from NALA to disseminate information about events and resources etc. in their own local services and networks.

## Meetings and other work of the Subcommittee

In some years there were as many as six meetings (2007 and 2008), while in 2009 there were only three, and in 2010 four meetings took place.

However, membership of the Subcommittee in any of these years has required a high level of commitment to NALA and its activities. Most members are active as NALA representatives outside the meetings, helping with the annual Student Days, sometimes speaking at NALA events, being part of the student team staffing the NALA stand at the Ploughing Championships, and serving on the selection group which awards the grants from NALA's Student Fund. They have participated in research, been recruited to National Consumer Agency panels, and joined focus groups run by An Post prior to its advertising campaign on literacy services. One member (until recently also on the Executive) was a Ministerial appointee to a national FETAC committee.

## What the members say

In the group discussion, students on the Subcommittee were asked why it is important to have literacy students acting in this capacity within NALA, and they were very clear about the links and benefits:

- *NALA benefits hugely from our experience.*
- *We are bringing word from the ground to the Executive and staff.*
- *We can give NALA student experience to bring to Government.*
- *NALA gives students a voice in the VEC schemes.*

They were generally satisfied with the channels of communication between themselves and the staff and Executive: 'it is followed up and we do hear back from them'. They felt able to suggest things for the Subcommittee agenda (though they rarely did!) and to bring up matters of concern at the meetings.

They defined their role in ways which included being 'ambassadors for our schemes' and 'spokespeople' for NALA, and several of them stressed a more personal aspect: 'we feel passionately about literacy and helping others as we were helped'.

## (c) Student Development Days and other events for students

NALA's Student Development Forums or Student Days (terminology has varied) have been a central part of its student development work since 2002, with almost 1,800 students attending in all since then, according to a draft report compiled in mid-2010.

NALA, in the research terms of reference, describes the purposes of these events:

- *To facilitate engagement with other students, with NALA, other key organisations and influencers;*
- *To heighten awareness, identification and articulation of adult literacy students' issues and rights, particularly in the context of Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work;*
- *To increase confidence and involvement of learners at our student and national events, in their local adult literacy service and beyond;*
- *To promote students as advocates and leaders.*

Students are invited to many NALA conferences and meetings, which often have a 'student strand' but Student Days are events designed specifically for literacy students themselves (and to an extent are also designed by the students on the Subcommittee).

The format for the day-long events (with breaks for coffee and lunch where students can meet and talk informally) has varied, and is kept under review, but has usually involved a 'celebrity' speaker and often one or two other expert speakers on subjects directly relevant to adult literacy students. Information about NALA is presented in various ways, and participants are encouraged to get involved. Small-group workshops are offered on different topics, and the days have usually ended with the small groups reporting on their discussions to a plenary session, followed by on-the-spot evaluations.

For students, the days provide opportunities to move out from their own centres, meet others from around the country or region, share experiences, 'talk up', and – through 'expert' talks, NALA input and workshops – get to see a bigger picture. NALA hopes that the confidence-building that takes place for many participants will encourage students' interest in their local services and in NALA itself.

At each event, some students have become NALA members for the first time, and some have been recruited to the Subcommittee. Others have gone on to initiate local student committees, or take other initiatives within their literacy service and locality.

For NALA, the days give staff (and Subcommittee members) a chance to listen in an open and not predetermined way to students identifying and discussing issues that affect them, which can '*feed into and inform the work of NALA*' (report on 2007 Student Forums). Staff and Subcommittee members can also showcase NALA's work and show the links between it and the individual participant's experience.

In addition to close involvement in the detailed planning work, NALA Student Subcommittee members have responsibilities on the day for the smooth running of the whole event.

Although Adult Literacy Organisers do not attend Student Days, they often seek feedback from students whom they have encouraged to attend. NALA surveyed some ALOs a few weeks after the 2010 Days, to gather their perceptions of the impact of attendance on students from their centres.

During the four-year period, there was a shift from holding four regional meetings (as in 2007) to holding just two, to some extent because of resource constraints but also because of poor attendance at events in some smaller towns.

Venues and themes for all the Student Days held from 2007 to 2010, including the one specialised student day for which information was available, were as follows:



## NALA Student Development Days 2007-2010

| Year                    | Venues                                | Main theme/s  | Number attending |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|------------------|
| <b>2007</b>             | Kerry, Dublin, Letterkenny, Tullamore | How the VEC supports the student-tutor relationship <i>and</i><br>Multiple intelligences/ learning differently    | <b>150</b>       |
| <b>2008</b>             | Dublin and Cork                       | How your literacy work builds on your relationships with family, work and community (Literacy as social practice) | <b>179</b>       |
| <b>2009</b>             | Dublin and Cork                       | Learning and change: sharing experiences <i>and</i><br>'Written Off?' showcased                                   | <b>80</b>        |
| <b>2010</b>             | Dublin and Cork                       | Voter education   | <b>165</b>       |
| OTHER DAYS FOR STUDENTS |                                       |   |                  |
| <b>2008</b>             | National College of Ireland, Dublin   | 'Dyslexia Day'  | <b>75</b>        |

It was noted that the reduction in numbers of participants in 2009 was largely because the Student Days were held after the end of the tuition year in the VEC adult centres.

After each event, the Student Officer has compiled a report which includes summaries of the feedback recorded on the day at workshops and on the evaluation forms. Good judgement is required in relation to some of the feedback, since not all participants will complete evaluation forms – presumably for the same reason that some students prefer not to 'sign in' by writing their names and addresses. To give two examples: in 2009, 80 students participated in the two events, but only 55 evaluation forms were completed. At the Cork Student Day in 2010, approximately half the participants completed an evaluation form.

Some of the reports on Student Days state the numbers of centres participating, a useful indication of NALA's 'outreach effect'. For the meetings in 2007, numbers and locations of learning centres were:

Cork city 3, County Cork 5, County Kerry 4, plus 3 centres in other counties.  
Dublin City and County 14, other counties 7.  
Donegal – 3 from the county, 1 centre from Tullamore.  
Tullamore – 2 centres only (low attendance at this event).

There was no information available for 2008, but in 2009 the two meetings drew students from 24 centres in 9 counties. In 2010, students came from 11 counties.

Registration information from the 2010 Dublin day shows one large group of 24 students from one centre, and 6-8 in smaller groups from another 5 centres, but many students just listed themselves as 'ESOL' or 'ITABE' (which is interesting in itself).

Each year, after the events, the Student Subcommittee has spent a considerable amount of time discussing how well the practical arrangements worked, identifying and evaluating outcomes from their perspective, and considering changes and improvements for the next time. They have also studied and sometimes elaborated the feedback from the Days, to take account of their own experience of it and their own listening to other students. This feedback then goes to relevant staff members. Important issues arising will go from the Student Development Officer and Subcommittee members on the Executive to the Director and Executive Committee respectively, for their consideration and action.

At its meetings in late 2010, the Student Subcommittee has been discussing how to make the days as attractive as possible to students who do not have links with NALA by 'branding' them more clearly as days *for* students organised *by* students, with NALA staff in a supporting role.

#### (d) The Student Development Fund for local literacy services

NALA sees the main purpose of its Student Development Fund (established in 2005) as

*To support work with adults and young people attending literacy tuition or developing their literacy as part of a programme. The aim is to increase students' confidence, awareness of literacy related issues and empower them to take action on these in their own lives and in their local literacy services.. (Research terms of reference)*

In the information sheet for applicants in 2010, NALA outlines two main reasons for its Student Development Fund work:

*One is to actively support learning through non-direct tuition because NALA recognises that literacy is about more than the technical skills of communication.*

*The second reason...is that the Agency wants to hear the views and experiences of adults with literacy difficulties. NALA wants student views to give further insights into adult literacy issues, guide and inform the quality of our work and be heard and taken into account by politicians and policymakers.*

The programme indirectly reaches large numbers of students. In 2010, around 900 students were involved, with over 800 contributing at feedback sessions.

Each year, adult learning services make applications for a grant from the NALA Fund, with the standard amount awarded being €650 (though occasionally larger grants are made), usually channelled through the Adult Literacy Organiser.

The majority of NALA's budget for student development work is dedicated to the grants made from the Fund, and the grants are intended to support special

activities for students, which they themselves plan and organise as far as possible. The activities are frequently linked to a specific theme for the year chosen by NALA, and every participating centre/ service is also required to organise a 'feedback session' where students discuss and give their views on one or more topics specified by NALA. Reporting requirements include detailing this student feedback, and evaluating the various aspects of the day from the perspectives of both the students and the staff involved.

A selection group within NALA, which includes some members of the Student Subcommittee, judges the quality of the applications and selects those to be awarded grants.

According to the overview in NALA's *Annual Reports*, themes and numbers of centres involved in the period 2007-2010 were:

|      |  |
|------|--|
| 2007 | Theme: ' <i>Networking</i> '<br>21 successful applications                               |
| 2008 | Theme: ' <i>Student Networking</i> '<br>49 successful applications                       |
| 2009 | Theme: ' <i>Learning and Change: Sharing Experiences</i> '<br>40 successful applications |
| 2010 | No specific theme<br>38 successful applications  |

[Note: in each year there were a small number of services/ centres which were awarded a grant but for some reason were unable to use it.]

Topics for discussion and feedback are sometimes repeated from one year to another, and they were (with number of centres choosing each in brackets) <sup>9</sup>:

**2007:** How you and your centre can encourage more people to look for help with literacy (17 centres)

Lobbying politicians and the media on literacy (11)

Distance education resources (6)

Positive aspects of NALA membership and how to spread the word (4)

How places and institutions could be improved by using Plain English and offering a more literacy-friendly approach (3)

**2008:** What made it difficult for you to go back to education to improve your literacy? (16 centres)

Name 5 key things that help you keep improving your literacy skills (16)

Name 5 ways information could help you with your learning (9)

Ways your employer has helped or could help you to improve your literacy and numeracy skills (6)

<sup>9</sup> Students could choose to discuss just one, or more than one, topic.

5 ways students could become involved in research with NALA (3)

**2009:** How has your learning programme made a difference to your life individually, in the home, the workplace or in the learning centre?  
Discuss 5 changes that have happened because of learning (30 centres)  
Name 5 things that help you keep improving your literacy skills (23)  
Ways information technology can help with your learning (12)  
Name 5 things that made it difficult to go back to education to improve your literacy skills (8)  
Have a demonstration of one of NALA's online learning resources, and list 5 points about it (3)

**2010:** Discuss how literacy skills can impact on you or your family's health (19)  
What could companies and Government organisations do to make it easier for you to deal with them? (12)  
Discuss students' experience of FETAC accreditation (11)  
Discuss what NALA's Student Subcommittee is about and let NALA know if anyone is interested in joining (7)  
In 2010 NALA will make a plan of work for 2011-2013. Discuss what work you think NALA should do (4)  
What do you know about the NALA Distance Learning Service? (3)

The 'output' from the use of the Student Development Fund grants is a set of detailed reports from the individual adult learning centres, which must be submitted to NALA before the grant is paid over.

From these individual reports, a brief summary might be compiled for the Student Subcommittee, and a longer document for NALA staff, including a selection of the feedback on NALA's chosen topics, as well as highlights and striking information taken from the centres' evaluations of the benefits and outcomes of the activities undertaken.

It is the intention in early 2011 to gather information from staff on their analysis of the feedback relevant to their responsibilities, and on ways in which they put it to practical use. A report incorporating some of this material can then be produced for 'key stakeholders and identified authorities' (see NALA Student Officer's work plan for 2010), and will be valuable for NALA itself as documentary evidence of how student feedback was responded to within the organisation.

### (e) Supporting learners' involvement in the Evolving Quality Framework (EQF) for Adult Basic Education.

One of NALA's major initiatives of the last decade was the devising, in collaboration with the Vocational Education Committees, of a quality assurance system for Adult Basic Education (ABE), known as the Evolving Quality Framework.

It is a system of self-evaluation by an adult literacy or ABE service, and is based on a set of clear guiding principles for good adult education provision (the Framework process, like all good adult literacy work, should be participative, voluntary, responsive to diversity, confidential and informal).

The evaluation work is carried out by a team from an individual scheme or group of services/ centres, which includes students, tutors, Adult Literacy Organisers and managers, supported by a NALA-trained facilitator. The team meets a number of times each year to consider various aspects of the service, using a very detailed framework and process for quality assessment.

NALA advised that participating students (and the other team members) should:

- *Have been involved in the centre or service for at least a year;*
- *Have time for the meetings;*
- *[Be] willing to work in a team (where everyone is on an equal basis);*
- *Have sufficient literacy skills to deal with minutes, correspondence etc.(or have help available to do so); and*
- *[Be] interested in contributing to the service by their participation in the EQF.*

(EQF User Guide 2006, p.9)

NALA from the outset has provided funding and relevant training to support the embedding of the system in literacy/ ABE schemes and centres, and in particular has funded the costs of student participation in the assessment teams.

It is this aspect of the EQF which can be considered part of NALA's student development work, although a range of outcomes from the process will undoubtedly also contribute to development for the whole student body. For instance, student committees have been established in some services as a direct result of the EQF process.

Because of NALA's particular responsibilities in relation to funding support for the EQF and student participation in it, NALA has reported regularly to the Department of Education and Skills, but has not produced an overview report for its own internal use nor gathered statistics on student participation levels from the series of reports produced by each centre using the system.

However, it can be seen from the available listings of services involved that 28 services or centres successfully applied for funding in 2008, 20 in 2009 and 20 in 2010. There seems a good deal of continuity, too: a total of 40 services or centres received funding during this period, of which 10 were funded for all three years, and 8 for two years.

NALA's aim in financially supporting the involvement of learners in the EQF process is:

*To promote the active involvement of students in improving the quality of their local literacy service by (1) ensuring a financial contribution towards their participation at meetings is made and (2) supporting the use of our custom-designed, student-centred, QA framework for adult literacy.*

(Research terms of reference)

The application process provides NALA with some valuable data about the effectiveness of the Framework. Centres applying for funding for 2010 were asked to complete an evaluation sheet for 2009, in which they were asked to briefly summarise their team's overall experience in that year, and these were available for the purposes of this study.

#### (f) Involving students in NALA's promotion and lobbying work

NALA considers that involving students in promotion and lobbying work is an important form of student development, enabling the individuals concerned to play an increasingly informed and active role within the organisation and in their local contexts.

##### **Promotional work**

Students have been involved in a variety of NALA activities aiming to raise the profile of the literacy issue nationally and locally, and in initiatives designed to reduce stigma and encourage more people to approach their local literacy services in order to overcome their difficulties.

In the period 2007-2010 these activities, often taking place around the start of the education year, have included work with the media, support to a major national advertising campaign, and a range of face-to-face promotional work, including:

- **Radio and television interviews**, especially during National Adult Literacy Awareness Week, in which individual students talk about the benefits they have derived from their return to learning.
- The two *Written Off?* **television series** of 2008 and 2009, in which 19 students were filmed taking part in an intensive programme of tuition (designed by NALA and delivered by NALA-trained tutors) and reflecting on their progress and the changes in their lives as a result. These programmes attracted large viewing audiences.

In 2009, NALA published an **anthology of student writing**, contributed by participants in *Written Off?*

Following these, *Stuck for Words* (broadcast in 2010) showed a particular student or students in their own learning context, and this series achieved even higher viewing ratings.

All three series have resulted in very large numbers of people making phone contact to NALA and enquiring about services. Another series is being planned, featuring students working with established writers, and aiming to find their own voices and words to express themselves.

- Participation in focus groups organised by An Post, the basis for a series of successful sponsored **TV advertisements** featuring typical situations in which someone might want to improve their literacy and numeracy.
- In 2008 for the first time, NALA took a stand at the **National Ploughing Championships**, a national event attended by well over 200,000 people. NALA leaflets and posters proved attractive to many, and it was noticed that the presence of students who could talk about their own experiences to people looking for advice and information was a particular draw.

Subsequently, in 2009 and 2010, this outreach initiative has been almost entirely run, and has been entirely staffed, by teams of literacy students.

In 2010, the team was very proactive in engaging everyone who came near the NALA stand, and an interview with two of the students, filmed for the Farm TV channel, was broadcast several times on the large screen at the centre of the site, prompting large numbers to seek out the NALA stand.

- Promotional work also includes involving **students as speakers at NALA events**, such as the 2008 National Forum of Adult Literacy Tutors. This event was chaired by the NALA Chairperson, himself a student, as was the conference on *Literacy as Social Action* in 2009.

### Lobbying work

NALA's 'lobbying team' includes the Director and the Chairperson, and is responsible for approaches to government Ministers and high-level public servants, as well as to other well-placed 'influencers'.

At present, both Chair and Director may attend high-level meetings with Ministers, together, and, while the Chair is present by virtue of his status in NALA, he can also use his own student experience persuasively in support of NALA's arguments.

NALA is convinced of the power of personal testimony in these situations, and so in other contexts, such as NALA conferences attended by a government Minister, one of the main speakers will always be a literacy student.

### The role of the Student Development Officer/ Student Officer

While NALA may not explicitly refer to student development in its recent publications and formal documentation, one of its key staff roles is that of Student Development Officer/ Student Officer.

This role normally includes responsibility for NALA membership and related initiatives, showing NALA's awareness of the potential synergy between the two areas of work.

The main responsibilities of this role do not cover all six strands of activity defined for the purposes of this study. In particular, it does not involve supporting students on the Executive, nor does it have an input into NALA's administration of the EQF. Thus the main areas it covers are:

- Working with and supporting the Student Subcommittee
- National Student Days
- The Student Development Fund

This staff role also involves supporting the Public Relations Officer in relation to student involvement in promotional work, and informing relevant staff of student feedback arising from the Student Days, the Student Development Fund and the deliberations of the Student Subcommittee.

## Chapter 3

### The Impact of NALA's Student Development Work on Students Themselves

This chapter considers the evidence for the impact of NALA's student development work on students themselves.

Much of the available evidence is to be found in documentation, particularly in reports on Student Days, on the use of Student Development grants; and on student participation in the Evolving Quality Framework. In addition, a broad reading of Subcommittee minutes over a six-year period suggests the effects on that particular group of students.

NALA staff members provided further evidence by contributing observations from their perspectives on how individual students (mostly those on the Executive and Subcommittee, with whom they worked closely) benefited.

Also, current members of the Student Subcommittee provided useful general information in the group discussion and in their responses to the survey about the effects of student development work as they themselves had experienced it. Their contributions came into sharper focus as a result of two subsequent face-to-face interviews with Subcommittee members, which resulted in the 'case studies' included below.

#### The impact of student development work on Subcommittee members

Participation on the Student Subcommittee was generally acknowledged to be supportive and confidence-building for the student members, and this work can clearly be situated within the 'ladder' of student development that NALA adopted as a useful model in the 2004 policy document, *Literacy and Empowerment* (see p.16 above).

In discussion, members talked about their own 'readiness' for the demands of Subcommittee work, based on previous involvements and support, as well as acquaintance with other Subcommittee members or with NALA staff, all of which made them 'excited' or 'curious', rather than fearful about the new experience. And they almost all expressed interest in going on to join the Executive Committee and take part in the overall decision-making of the organisation.

The members see themselves as ready to '*give back*', '*to help others as we were helped*' and to be advocates for those who are not yet ready to speak for themselves: '*Our voice is their voice!*'

There is clear evidence that these students have made a great deal of personal progress in relation to their overall knowledge of NALA, their ability to function within a semi-formal committee and group setting, to express their views, to handle the often complex matters on the agenda, as well as the sheer amount of written material. Their commitment is striking too: many have been active on the Subcommittee for three or four years, resulting in a strong sense of continuity and of 'old' members supporting those who are new to the group.

They have also achieved excellent results as a group, exemplified by their work at the Ploughing Championships, and some members with experience over several years are



ready to take on more leadership in relation to organising and running NALA's Student Days as 'a day for students run by students', as they put it in discussion.

They are proud of their own 'group process' and commented on the friendliness of the Subcommittee, and its relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, with no sense of competition. One member said '*meetings are a real pleasure!*', while another responded to a question about how disagreements are handled with a statement that '*if we don't agree, we talk it through till we are all happy*'.

The existence of the Subcommittee, and the strong student participation in the Executive Committee, are themselves indications of the impact of carefully-targeted student development work by way of recruiting, supporting, and informing. This has produced a group of individuals who can be spokespeople for NALA and role models for other students, both in their local services and at Student Days and other NALA events.

The minutes of Subcommittee meetings indicate the ongoing effort NALA staff continue to put into support and encouragement for members, as well as into providing clear explanations and information as required on many aspects of the organisation's work. They also show NALA's considerable openness and transparency with regard to the various policy matters it has brought to the Subcommittee for consideration.

### **'Personal journeys' of Subcommittee members**

In discussion, and subsequently through the survey, the topic of each person's journey – from the first step of seeking help for their literacy difficulties to their arrival as Subcommittee members – was explored.

Students described their own starting points and the initial emotions of fear, embarrassment, or helplessness, their strategies for hiding their difficulties, as well as their awareness of what they were missing – whether being able to read with their children, to deal assertively with medical professionals, or to try for promotion at work. Most but not all had received initial information about services available and support from a colleague or family member, and some recalled vividly their first anxious moments of contact with an adult learning centre and its staff, and the vital role played by one welcoming individual who treated them with respect and put them at ease.

In the survey they were asked about their first contacts with NALA, and first impressions of the organisation. For most, contact with NALA came relatively soon but in different forms. Some were encouraged to attend a Student Day, one or two were encouraged to join NALA and stand for the Executive before becoming Subcommittee members, while the first contact for others was with NALA staff recruiting for a television series.

Their first impressions of NALA were all positive (as with their first contacts with their tutor or Adult Literacy Organiser) and their comments included:

- *They have students' interests at heart.*
- *[It was] a bit intimidating at first but I felt very welcome.*
- *I liked everything about it!*

NALA's outreach was clearly carried out in a sensitive, empowering and appealing way, not talking down but encouraging engagement.

These first impressions were important in subsequent decisions to join the Subcommittee or stand for election to the Executive. When asked why they chose to do this, there were a variety of responses, ranging from personal need to a broader focus:

- *To get more education, more ideas.*
- *To have an input into the literacy system.*
- *To be involved with the planning.*
- *A good insight into what's happening.*
- *[I was] asked by other students.*

There was a similar dual focus in their responses on the benefits of Subcommittee meetings:

- *[It] helps me with my education.*
- *To have a direct voice into the larger picture benefits your involvement in your own scheme.*
- *To find out more about NALA.*

It would be useful to research in more depth the role NALA played in each person's development as an individual, as a group member, and as a NALA activist. However, in the space for extra comments at the end of the survey form, several Subcommittee members highlighted the personal impact of NALA's student development work, by mentioning NALA and the Subcommittee together with their individual achievements:

- *My journey – has shown you're never too old to go back to education. I enjoy being part of the Subcommittee.*
- *My journey has been a dream come true, getting better every year...looking forward to more study. [On the Subcommittee] I went from being nervous and quiet to having confidence in myself...Now I would like to go to the Executive.*
- *The Subcommittee...gave me a voice...allowed me to be involved in lots of events and to help other students. Without the support of NALA I wouldn't be doing what I am today.*
- *For someone like me to do what I have done! No other organisation would give the student a voice at all levels. For me and many others it was a life-changing experience.*

### **Personal journeys: two case studies**

The personal stories of two Subcommittee members (names have been changed) were told in face-to-face interviews. The turning points they recount illustrate the vital role of information, and the importance of public awareness of the literacy difficulties people can face and the services available. Their accounts show how crucial it is that services provide a welcoming, supportive and adult-friendly environment to overcome fears about returning to learning. Contacts with NALA were critical in offering new development possibilities, and the results have been huge life changes resulted for both individuals.

## Case study (1): Freddy's story

**Then and now:** Freddy was middle-aged when he went back to education nearly eight years ago, having decided to tackle his life-long difficulties with reading and writing. He had left secondary school early with no qualifications, worked successfully in a series of semi-skilled manual jobs, but then found himself unemployed. A place on a government employment scheme finally opened the door to learning for him.

Now he is a dedicated student who thoroughly enjoys new learning challenges, and has to his credit achievements at Junior and Leaving Certificate levels, as well as FETAC modules. His adult learning centre encouraged students to participate in NALA events, and he has now become an active representative for NALA as a member of its Student Subcommittee, full of ideas and keen to contribute as much as possible, and especially to encourage others to 'take the first step' as he did.

**School and work:** As a child growing up in the city, Freddy often missed school because of chronic ill-health. In a primary class of more than 50 children, his difficulties were not attended to, and so at secondary school, he found he 'loved PT' but 'just couldn't grasp' most other subjects, apart from maths. He left school as soon as possible, walking out on the day he reached the legal age for work. Jobs were easy to get, and he felt competent and much happier at work than at school. His lack of skills meant he had little choice of occupation, but he worked first as a messenger boy then happily enough in the warehouse of one company for over ten years until it closed.

A series of short-term jobs followed, before he took a neighbour's advice and went to FÁS for assistance. Part-time work on a Community Employment (CE) Scheme led to employment on the Jobs Initiative (JI) programme, which has continued ever since.

At work as a caretaker on the JI programme, Freddy was trying to cover up his literacy difficulties, but also beginning to want to tackle them. He felt frustrated but did not know what to do. It was probably the tactful scheme Supervisor who made sure that some posters advertising help with reading and writing were put up where he would see them. He thought the courses must be for 'higher-up people' rather than 'the likes of me', but talked to the Supervisor anyway, and an interview was arranged with a tutor on a local 'Return to Education' course. She reassured him that the course was very suitable, and that everything would be different from his school experience.

He felt very anxious on the first day, and almost gave up at the door of the building – but luckily he met the porter, a man he knew, who was able to calm him down and help him get to the right place. Sitting down in a room full of other mature people in situations very like his own, *'after half an hour I knew it was the place for me'*. He has been studying hard and successfully ever since.

**Contact with NALA:** Students from his centre were advised by their tutor to go to NALA's Student Days, and so, as a new student, he went along.

He has attended every year since, enjoying the learning, meeting new people, and finding he could speak up and give his views. He met NALA staff and Student Subcommittee members at these events, but says he understood very little about the organisation and how it works.

At one of the Student Days, NALA was looking for students to tell their stories for a television series. By now he 'would just try anything', so he phoned up, and was surprised when he was accepted. Soon he was taking part in a 'fantastic experience', and soon afterwards he gave a presentation about it at a NALA Student Day.

Some of the Student Subcommittee members suggested Freddy should join the group. At first he 'bluffed his way', being careful not to show that he didn't know anything about it – he just said he'd think about it! He finally found out what he needed to know by attending NALA's AGM with his local Adult Literacy Organiser. She explained who people were, and how the organisation and its committees worked, and so he confirmed he would be willing to join. A little later, he was invited to his first Subcommittee meeting and has been an enthusiastic contributor since then.

**Working as a NALA representative:** He admits he knew very little about NALA at the start ('I thought it was a sort of union'), but has 'learned by doing', and by listening, on the Subcommittee. He now feels confident enough to see himself as a NALA representative. Being part of the NALA team at the Ploughing Championships has convinced him of the value of 'students speaking to students', offering their own experience as an example of how a person's life can change through education.

Freddy hopes soon to have the opportunity to go and speak to other students in his own and other local centres. He wants to encourage them to become members of NALA and to attend the forthcoming Student Days, which he is helping to plan.

## Case study (2) Ann's story

Ann has been a learner in her local adult education centre for about 10 years, and involved with NALA most of that time. Her life has changed hugely as a result.

**School and work:** Ann was the second-youngest in a large family in the city. She describes herself as being 'a bit of a slow learner'. She had a lot of childhood illness, and at primary school she was shy and nervous. Other girls bullied her, causing her 'mental pain – worse than being hit', while the teachers didn't give her the support she needed to become more confident or to realise her potential.

She started secondary school at 14, but didn't stay long. Bullying continued, and teachers seemed insensitive to her problems. When her mother fell sick a few months later, Ann was asked to look after her at home. Her family expected she'd go back to school but she was glad of a reason to leave, and 'never went back'. She only had basic literacy skills when she left.

Soon she was at work, in a local printing and paper-making company, where she stayed for over 25 years. She enjoyed her work: 'I was good at working with my hands'. But she did not feel accepted by her workmates: 'I was still a quiet person, and the girls in work used to bully me...but I stuck it'.

**Starting back to education:** Years later, this company closed down, making its workforce redundant. Ann went to FÁS for training, and finally found a similar job. Socially, things were difficult there too, but the manager offered her further training in work time, and she opted for literacy help 'because I wasn't a good speller'.

So Ann began spending two hours each week in the local adult education centre where she still attends. After 18 months she retired early on grounds of disability, and says of that job 'well, I took out the good [the literacy training] and left the bad!'

She was ready to learn now. She had 'hated' not being able to complete forms properly at interviews and the feeling that employers 'wouldn't give you a chance' because of that. Now 'it all just fell together...I wanted to do it for myself, prove it to myself'.

So, although she felt very nervous she continued in the centre as a one-to-one literacy student, moving after two years to group work. Ann was amazed to find that her tutor 'was really nice, talked about you as a person, and was interested in my family and my worries.' She also discovered 'there's no shame in not being able to spell'.

She began taking other courses: an informal 'Know Your World' course on current events and a FETAC Communications module. She is now doing a basic computer course (FETAC-accredited), and has set up a mini-office where she can work at home.

**Contact with NALA:** While still a one-to-one student, Ann became student representative for a year on the EQF team: 'For me to be picked...I was delighted!' She found it 'heavy' but prepared well for each meeting, so that 'I gave them good views'. She helped with registration at the centre's 'summer schools', enjoying the responsibility and the new learning.

Soon afterwards, her class joined NALA as a group, so she began attending workshops and Student Days. She felt so confident by now that she would have gone on her own! The Student Days, she says, 'gave me confidence and ideas...*they give me courage*. I see people who are just like me, we're all together and no-one's better than others'.

She participated actively, and encouraged other women she met to join her adult learning centre. She must have made an impression, because another student in her centre, who was leaving NALA's Student Subcommittee after four years, asked if Ann would be interested in joining. There was a surprise phone call from the Student Officer, whom Ann knew a little. No hesitation: 'I said I'd be delighted...I felt great to be asked'.

Why did she volunteer? Mainly as a challenge to herself, to prove what she could do:

*Well, I didn't really know what it involved! But I often thought,  
looking at people [on Student Days], I wish I had the nerve to be  
one of the people on the top table...to be looking down at you,  
instead of you looking up!*

**Representing NALA:** Through her adult learning centre and involvement with NALA, Ann has found her voice and her self-confidence. She greatly enjoys working on the Subcommittee, and planning the Student Days, and would love to serve on NALA's Executive in future.

## The impact of student development work: Student Days

NALA listed four aims for Student Days, as set out in the research terms of reference:

- (1) to facilitate engagement with other students, NALA and key organisations;
- (2) to increase confidence and involvement at events, local services and beyond;
- (3) To heighten awareness, identification and articulation of adult literacy students' issues and rights, particularly in the context of *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*;
- (4) to promote students as advocates and leaders.

The reports produced by NALA staff after these events, and a small-scale survey following the 2010 Student Days, were the main sources of information on the impact of this facet of NALA's student development work on students themselves. However, it was not always clear whether a report was intended for internal NALA purposes only, or was to be circulated more widely. The available reports from the 2007 and 2008 Days concentrate largely on student responses to speakers and summaries of feedback from workshops, omitting mention of student evaluations of the event, so it is likely that they were intended for wider circulation. Unfortunately, this makes them less useful for assessing the overall impact of these events.

Students' own responses were usually summarised in the reports, which follow different formats and have different emphases. So quotations given below are generally taken from the survey findings. As mentioned earlier (p. 25), only a proportion of participants completed evaluation forms at each event, while feedback on specific issues was gathered by staff members listening to student questions and comments in speaker-led sessions or workshops.

So, although feedback from these events was not mediated through tutors or Adult Literacy Officers, as were some of the Student Fund evaluations, the identification of 'issues' was filtered through the understanding of the NALA staff present on the day. Also, the whole context of these events, with their many aims and priorities other than gathering student feedback, needs to be taken into account when assessing the significance of the learners' views which were recorded.

Also, it would be important, for interpreting the written reports, to know how many participants were first-timers and how many were 'returners' at each event, data which generally was not recorded at these events, probably for good reason.

### Feedback from students

In 2009, reported feedback from Student Days showed that NALA's first two aims in relation to student days (engagement with others, and increased confidence and participation) were certainly fulfilled. Sharing experiences with other students was rated as the most important part of the event, and students reported gaining 'confidence to keep going' from hearing about other students' progress. Students also talked about the 'ripple effect' of their improved ability to communicate – on their families (especially children) their friends, and their work mates.

In 2010, the reports show that all the students whose comments were recorded enjoyed the day and found it worth the effort. They commented on their pleasure in new learning, on finding out about NALA, and on the satisfaction of clarifying their own issues:

*I'm more aware of the questions that matter to me and the importance of my issues.*

Enjoyment and increased personal confidence levels were both highlighted in the 2010 evaluations and in the feedback from the small follow-up survey NALA conducted. Getting to meet and talk with others from different backgrounds but facing similar issues was as important to participants as it was in previous years, and the impact of the social aspect of the Student Days, while difficult to quantify, should not be underestimated:

- *A brilliant day. Made lots of new friends. Can't wait for the next rally!*
- *It's great to see how people have progressed. The mix of people is beneficial and drags people out of themselves.*
- *I enjoyed feeling like I am part of a group.*
- *I feel more confident after being at a student day.*
- *I want to go to more student days!*
- *Student meetings are brilliant and very important...A lot of people were able to talk up. It is good for confidence to have someone listening and to speak to another person discussing each other's problems...It is very encouraging.*

The Adult Literacy Officers surveyed after the events also confirmed these impacts:

*Student Days are the only forum for [students] meeting with others.  
Students like the model of sharing with others.*

They too stressed the confidence-building aspect:

*Making their way to new venues, meeting students from around Ireland and getting involved in discussions on the day has all added to their self-confidence. They are also usually very inspired by the speakers.*

### **Impact of Student Days: fulfilling NALA's four aims?**

Clearly, from all the available evidence, Student Development Days have largely fulfilled the first two of NALA's aims, and it could be said that the involvement of Executive members as speakers and workshop facilitators, and Student Subcommittee members' help with the organisation of the events, to some extent fulfil the fourth aim ('promotion of students as advocates and leaders') by offering role models to new learners.

There is little evidence, though, in the reports in relation to the third aim, that of heightening awareness of issues and rights, if by this is meant *students'* awareness of significant literacy-related issues and of adult learners' rights. However, it can be assumed that the Student Days have gone some way towards achieving this, since participants were certainly exposed to discussion of issues, and the participatory nature of the event embodies students' right to speak and be listened to on an equal basis.

The additional element of students' relationship with and understanding of NALA's *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* appears also in the current *Terms of Reference* for the Student Subcommittee. In both contexts it raises (and leaves unanswered) the same question: since the *Guidelines* are rarely the subject of explicit consideration – and the document as a whole poses obvious difficulties for people with limited literacy skills – how can this aim be fulfilled?

### Other impacts of the Student Days

At the Student Days in 2007 and 2008, there was a significant effect on **student membership of NALA** when quite substantial numbers of participants became individual NALA members – about one-third of all those attending. This effect was not repeated in either 2009 or 2010, however, but the reasons for this are unclear, and further investigation would be required to understand why this happened.

At each of the Student Days, a small number of participants were recruited for the **Student Subcommittee**. Clearly the impact of the Day as a whole had demonstrated to these students the benefits and purpose of closer involvement with NALA.

Adult Literacy Organisers reported on the **local-level 'spin-off'** from the events as a result of new-found confidence of participants, such as the setting up of local student committees, students asking for improvements in their own local services, or requesting local events similar to NALA's regional or national Days.

### The impact of student development work: Student Development Fund

NALA's rationale for supporting local activities through this Fund is that such events have the potential

*to increase students' confidence, awareness of literacy related issues, and empower them to take action on these in their own lives and in their local literacy services.*

(Research terms of reference)

There was no available means of exploring through this research project the question of how students might take action in their own lives as a result of engaging with this aspect of NALA's student development work, but there was a good deal of evidence provided on the other elements in this rationale.

Drawing on the individual reports from all the centres involved each year, NALA has prepared its own summary documents, which, like the reports on Student Days, focus mainly on student feedback, providing a very large amount of relevant material. Some of the important benefits identified, as a result of NALA's grant support, were:

- In many centres, students took most or all of the responsibility for organising an outing or meeting, which was a form of complementary learning in itself, boosting their confidence and increasing their life skills.
- Whether participants were networking with other centres, or bringing together students attending different courses in the same centre, new friendships were formed and links were strengthened among students who had barely known each other before.



- Tutors and Adult Literacy Organisers commented on the students' pride in their 'joint ownership' of the planning process and the event itself, and on how their engagement with making decisions about the event 'built up their self-esteem'. This involvement 'makes the event so meaningful to everyone'.
- For some, the outing became 'so much more than a trip', as it sparked off new interests and generated relevant material for subsequent 'classroom' learning.
- For one ALO, the most important outcome for students of the whole experience was that all those involved decided to stay on for a further year at their centre.
- Student development in action was clearly seen in the reported responses to the request in 2009 to 'name five things that made it difficult to go back to education to improve your literacy skills'. Students who had made personal progress were able to look back and reflect on the barriers they had to overcome at the start.
- One centre provided an impressive listing of what its students had gained from the NALA-supported event:
  - Confidence and self-esteem increased
  - Social interaction
  - Communication skills enhanced
  - Problem solving
  - Being comfortable with a group
  - Taking on role of mentoring
  - Sense of belonging and hope
  - Increases their learning and progression

A number of centres targeted one-to-one learners for their student event, bringing them together with each other and with those working in small groups. Participants found this very beneficial, and were encouraged to progress into different learning situations, with opportunities for accreditation. One ALO in a rural centre said that

*the trip provided an ideal setting to allow students to enhance their social skills...[and] their ongoing development and progression within the scheme...The benefit has been enormous.*

In another case:

*These students have grown in confidence and are more open to play their part in the scheme...some 1:1 students said they felt confident to join a group as a result of meeting the others...Members of the [centre's] Student Committee took responsibility for making sure newcomers were comfortable.*

And when discussion and evaluation of a trip to Dublin took place, one of the outcomes reported was that '*most had a positive reaction, particularly about the other students*'.

In summary, one ALO commented that

*The event did more for **social integration** than any slide-show or lecture could ever hope to achieve!*

The importance of **local student committees** was highlighted in some reports, which recounted how students from the committee had visited different centres within the service, promoting the event and the discussion. One centre said that its Student Committee grew directly out of this NALA financial support.

A few centres used the grant to fund **publications** of students' work, which

*gave testament to the excellent work done by students and an opportunity to celebrate their success and accomplishments. It also allowed some students to read their pieces aloud to an audience. This gave them great confidence and influenced other students by their courage.*

Finally, a number of centres confirmed that this vital source of extra-curricular learning, with all its benefits for individuals, would not have been possible without NALA funding.

### Impact on students involved with the Evolving Quality Framework

As mentioned earlier, NALA's role in relation to the support of the EQF process in local services means that the documentation in NALA's files is largely administrative, and does not provide summaries or an overview of the range of work done in this context, nor statistics on student involvement. So the available written material does not enable generalisations to be made about the impact on individual students who took part.

However, among the documents studied were reports from a number of centres on their involvement. In one, evaluations by students and the Adult Literacy Organiser commented positively on the outcomes for students, especially their new sense of equality, and the satisfaction of combining the resources of all concerned. In another, student team members outlined the personal benefits of involvement:

- *It feels good to be involved in a team.*
- *I like being involved in the decision-making process.*
- *You get more confident after coming here.*
- *It gives you encouragement to become involved in other meetings.*
- *You become better able to say what you want to say.*

Comments gathered from Adult Literacy Organisers and tutors in other centres give an enthusiastic view, from their perspectives, of the impact of involvement on the students, and highlight outcomes such as greater confidence and increased participation in other areas of the service, with students initiating activities:

- *The team worked really well together. Everyone was on an equal footing. Plenty of ideas and much interaction by all.*
- *Students benefited from learning about committee skills and running a meeting.*
- *Personal development and greater confidence for all the students.*
- *Students shared the reading of the minutes...[it was] their suggestion and worked very well.*

## Impact on students involved in promotional and lobbying work

Time constraints gave no opportunity for exploring this aspect of the impact of student development work with students involved in promotion and lobbying. However, comments from NALA staff in interviews threw some light on the outcomes.

Asked whether taking part NALA's TV series constituted student development, the staff member responsible said, '*definitely! It makes a huge difference to those involved*', and NALA's PRO insisted that the tailored training received by these students and others who give media interviews is an important aspect of NALA's student development work:

*they get more confident every time. Some...have more media experience than NALA staff!*

It was noted that, while some 'de-briefing' takes place after media interviews, there have not usually been opportunities for students involved in the TV series to report back in any more formal or extensive way.

After NALA's first year at the Ploughing Championships, when visitors to the NALA stand clearly preferred to interact with the student team rather than with NALA staff, students have basically taken over the running of this event, with great success.

In relation to lobbying work, only the Chairperson (who is a literacy student) has been involved in recent years in attending meetings with Ministers or senior civil servants. Commenting on the importance of including the student perspective in some of NALA's lobbying initiatives, the Director also spoke of the 'transforming effect' of such encounters for a student, and of the new possibilities they suggest, arising from the student's recognition of their personal competence and value in such a situation.

## Impact on students attending other NALA conferences

It is worth noting that the attendance at some NALA conferences often includes a substantial number of literacy students (a figure of around 25% was quoted in relation to the most recent International Literacy Day conference).

No follow-up is done, but the staff responsible often receive feedback from individual students or from Adult Literacy Organisers, which indicates that participation in these events (where there may be workshops specifically geared to students) can result in increased confidence and self-esteem, with students returning to their centres and looking for greater involvement there, or – after events with an emphasis on the political process – becoming involved in local lobbying for enhanced literacy services.

## Impact of student development work: student membership of NALA

Although membership of NALA was not included as an aspect of student development work in the terms of reference for the research, it is worth touching on, as NALA has put some effort into promoting membership in the context of its student development activities such as Student Days and the Student Development Fund.

Adult Literacy Organisers and tutors from a number of centres receiving Student Development Fund grants made sure that participating students were given clear information about NALA (as they were encouraged to do) and the benefits of individual

membership. One centre recounted using their travelling time on a trip to Dublin to make a short presentation about NALA and to distribute membership forms. However, information of outcomes in terms of new members was not provided.

It is not clear why the number of students joining as NALA members on Student Days dropped significantly in 2009 and 2010, compared to the two previous years. Figures quoted in NALA reports are as follows:

|   |
|---|
| 2007 Student Days – 47 students joined as members (150 attending) |
| 2008 Student Days – 64 students joined (179 attending)            |
| 2009 Student Days – 19 joined (80 attending)                      |
| 2010 Student Days – 17 only joined (165 attending)                |

This seems to be a record of the number of those *joining for the first time* in each year. There is no accompanying information in the available reports to indicate whether other students attending were already members of NALA, which would indicate the cumulative effect of promoting membership for students at these events.

However, in terms of overall student membership over the period, there probably was a diminishing effect, since the *Annual Report 2008* quotes a student membership figure of 185, while a NALA report in 2010 gives a figure of only 89.

It would be useful to explore this and other questions relating to membership, and whether it has a potential role to play in student development. The longer-term impact on existing individual members of their association with NALA could also be investigated, and this would be particularly valuable as NALA's role in distance education expands over time, creating a pool of potential new members who are independent learners rather than students in a VEC or similar group framework.

## Chapter 4

# The Impact of NALA's Student Development Work on Local Services and Centres

The findings of this study indicate strongly that adult literacy services and centres which engage with NALA's student development work – whether supporting their students to attend NALA's Student Days, successfully applying for grants from the Student Development Fund, utilising the Evolving Quality Framework, or linking with NALA's Executive Committee or Student Subcommittee through one of their students –can identify a range of benefits in addition to the impact on individual student participants.

### Adult Literacy Organisers' views (1): 2010 survey results

The small-scale survey of Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs), carried out as part of the research project, showed that different services have different levels and patterns of engagement with NALA activities, often related to their geographical proximity to Dublin or Cork. However, all the ALOs said their centres had engaged with most of the student development initiatives, often in two, three or even all four years between 2007 and 2010. Their responses to questions about the impacts on their centre or service as a whole, including the impact on other students, were consistently positive and enthusiastic.

#### 1.1 Impact on other students

One frequent theme was the beneficial effect of word-of-mouth when students who had attended Student Days or been involved in events supported by the Student Development Fund talked about their experiences to others in their different courses and groups, thus stimulating curiosity, and motivating and opening up possibilities for the others. Some ALOs encouraged the participating students to make presentations or set up exhibitions, to make the experience of the Student Days or Development Fund activities more widely available.

One saw this as reinforcing important messages about learning:

*It underlined the fact that you can bring learning outside the Centre. It's not about the class, it's about life!*

and was a valuable reminder for all students that

*Second chance learning is not a re-run of school but is happening in the context of adult life experience.*

Another ALO said that, while it is not possible to quantify all the 'hidden or unanticipated outcomes' of positive learning experiences happening outside the local centre, these NALA activities

*give services on the ground the freedom and flexibility to explore learning in the broader sense and take it out of the classroom.*

There were comments too about the effect on other students of seeing the increased confidence of those who had been directly involved:

*The students involved...get a buzz out of being involved, gain confidence and walk taller...this spills over among the other students and creates a good interactive atmosphere...[other] students are more likely to become involved in local scheme activities.*

The positive social effect of much of NALA's development work was recognised as one of its most important aspects. As one ALO put it, the Student Days and Development Fund activities

*support group bonding, which is very important for our work - we try to celebrate things such as passing the driving test, birthdays etc, and it works better as people get to know each other more.*

## **1.2 Impact on the adult literacy service or centre**

The value placed on student participation in NALA activities, and the possibilities of interaction between NALA and adult learning centres were both highlighted in the comment of one ALO that this participation is '*an important part of our service*'.

Others referred to the importance for the centre as a whole that some learners had contact with 'a national representative body which represents their interests as learners', and that they could participate in 'learner-focused' activities that give them the opportunity to influence developments at both local and national levels.

Similarly, one ALO considered that NALA activities supported local student development work by providing a valuable 'external dynamic to the process', including helping students move 'beyond their comfort zone' when they interacted with learners from 'a variety of backgrounds and circumstances' different from their own.

One interesting outcome was that the whole process of planning and carrying out an activity supported by the Development Fund enabled one centre to raise its profile locally, since it helped to

*identify learners who have a willingness and interest in promoting the service, and the benefits of returning to learning...A number of learners are now regular participants in promotional and recruitment activities.*

NALA's advertising and promotional work (especially initiatives involving student speakers) were also mentioned as beneficial to local centres, de-mystifying adult literacy services and making them more accessible to local people:

*Marketing...directly affects our service through referrals.*

There were two interesting responses to a survey question about the ways in which NALA's student development work supports student development work at local level. Both considered that students could derive more benefit from NALA activities if 'barriers to involvement', including 'fears and concerns' about participation in a regional or national event, were overcome in advance.

To address this, one service will hold its own 'mini Student Development Day' in 2011, which will 'inform students as to what they can expect from the NALA Student Forum', while the other service is considering providing 'pre-development activities' that will 'help students prepare for the experiences involved'. This 'spin-off' would not have happened

if the NALA Student Days were not already in place. It is likely that some other centres which recognise the benefits of student participation in NALA events are also providing some form of preparation for them.

### 1.3 Some specific benefits:

#### NALA as support and model

It was clear that for some centres, the Development Fund activities in particular happened mainly because of NALA's 'excellent support, without which these extra-curricular activities might not be possible'. One ALO mentioned that the problem was not always just a lack of funding, there could also be a 'lack of understanding by the funders'.

NALA initiatives were seen by several ALOs to offer models for learning approaches and activities in local services (examples included reading nights, writing weekends, and local Student Development Days), as well as supporting students' more active participation in the life of their adult learning centres:

*The involvement of students in NALA activities has enriched the service as it has provided ideas and suggestions, based on students' own experience, as to how we can encourage students to become more involved in the service.*

In another comment on the ways in which NALA provides useful models for effective work with adult students, one ALO said that

*NALA's student development work supports the work of the Centre in trying to link students' learning to their lives outside,*

while another commented that NALA's strong emphasis on 'letting students do their own talking' strengthens and supports the local service's adherence to this value, and its commitment to

*hearing the truth about living with literacy issues, straight from the people who really understand.*

#### Benefits from student involvement in the EQF process

All but one of the ALOs contacted said their centre or service had been using the Evolving Quality Framework to improve their adult basic education and literacy services.

Connection with NALA through the EQF process was described as a reinforcement of one service's own 'model of democratic and egalitarian learning', because the process provided a specific opportunity and methodology 'to formally consult with students about the Scheme'.

A second centre underlined the importance of this quality assessment system to the relationship between the students and the service:

*[It] provides valuable time to look at the service we are delivering and hear from the stakeholders...It might be difficult to allocate time if the EQF was not in place – it keeps us focused and has facilitated a number of new initiatives over the years.*

Another responded at greater length, saying that student involvement in the process

*has enhanced the service as a whole, as the student voice is very much reflected in the service. [It] has shaped the centres – the adult-friendly and appropriate environment...the provision [and] the range of tutor options available have been developed... in line with needs and views expressed by our student cohort...and the initial tutor training.*

(In this service, one part of the training course is a meeting with students, who share experiences with the new tutors.)

Another more specific outcome was noted by one ALO who said that the EQF process had 'influenced the nature of our provision across the service', in particular

*the development of an individual education plan...a tool to plan learning paths for individual learners.*

Recognising all such benefits, one ALO expressed concern about NALA's intention to withdraw funding from the scheme from 2011 onwards, and hoped that NALA could lobby successfully for continued financial support, because of the very valuable outcomes of the EQF process.

### **Benefits to the centre from student membership of a NALA committee**

In centres where a student had been a member of either the NALA Executive or Student Subcommittee, one outcome identified by ALOs and tutors was the increased willingness of other students to get involved:

*They [NALA Committee members] are so enthused about their own activities and involvement in the Committee that they encourage others to become involved in the Scheme and in national activities.*

One ALO listed this encouragement of other students as one of many benefits of having a local student on a NALA committee, alongside:

- *Dissemination of information*
- *Broader view of Adult Basic Education and what is involved*
- *Stronger student involvement in the scheme*
- *A support to other students*
- *A support to the ALO in reaching out to students.*

### **Benefits for tutors**

Reflecting on the outcomes from visits, short courses and other activities organised with the use of the NALA Student Development Fund, one ALO commented on their direct usefulness to tutors: these events create

*an opportunity to do some prep. work with them...[and to] use it as a framework for general learning alongside literacy.*

### **Benefits for managers**

One comment in relation to student participation in the EQF process was that managers 'gain new insights' as a result of listening to the students on the assessment teams.



### Benefits for Adult Literacy Organisers

Although membership of NALA was not identified in the research terms of reference as one of the strands of student development work, the ALOs generally considered that their own membership, and/ or the NALA membership of the adult literacy service or the local VEC produced definite benefits for the students in their centres, and greatly supported their development.

The communication flow between NALA and its members made for timely receipt of information on student development activities, which could be built into local learning programmes, and it enabled ALOs to stay 'up to date on national and international developments' in adult literacy and Adult Basic Education.

ALOs themselves found NALA meetings valuable for their own development, for exchanging ideas with others and taking back possibilities for learning activities to their own centres. NALA research was valued too, as were the resources made available by NALA, including the on-line and distance learning resources, all of which could contribute to progress for local students both inside and outside the classroom.

This was particularly true for an ALO in a rural-based centre far away from Dublin, where the students felt inhibited from travelling so far for a national event (it was described as a 'psychological distance' for them as well as a geographical one) and where the centre did not have financial resources to support their participation. This person recognised that NALA has its own resource constraints and 'can't be all things to all people', concluding that

*we can do the local stuff locally, but NALA's national status is quite important.*

### 1.4 Future developments – other NALA student development initiatives?

The survey of Adult Literacy Organisers invited suggestions about other ways NALA might support student development at local level in future, and a number of interesting ideas were put forward.

One practical suggestion, which was linked to the notion of 'pre-development work' with students intending to participate in NALA activities, was that NALA could produce a 'pre-development resource pack' for use by tutors with groups of learners. Such a resource would aim to

*develop[ing] the concept of student involvement, representation, national and local involvement and student-led development...Perhaps a focus on developing understanding and building skills related to interacting with national bodies, service staff etc. would result in greater numbers of students participating in student development activities.*

The ALOs' responses to various survey questions implied their willingness to collaborate with NALA on local or regional student development activities, and one proposal was that, instead of 'relying on annual student development activities' it would be more effective to work towards setting up local Learner Forums, jointly supported by NALA and the VEC. These would help strengthen connections for both students and services, and would create

*a local structure that feeds into the national picture.*

Finally, another (potentially related) proposal, which was echoed by some of the Student Subcommittee members during this research process, was that Subcommittee members should visit local services and speak about their own experiences, to motivate the local students. A recent visit from the NALA Chairperson to a local centre was described by the ALO there as ‘inspirational’.

## Adult Literacy Organisers’ views (2): reports on activities supported by the Student Development Fund in 2007 - 2010

These reports indicate a number of different kinds of impact on services and centres, but often without much concrete detail.

The overall theme of networking in 2007 and 2008 encouraged centres to link with each other for activities and discussion. Unfortunately, while these interactions were judged to be very successful at the time, there appear to have been no subsequent evaluations or documenting of any medium or longer-term outcomes.

Some discussion topics set by NALA would clearly have provided valuable feedback to the centres themselves, for example the question of how adult learning centres and their students can encourage more people to look for the help they need with their literacy and numeracy problems.

Asked to comment on benefits arising from the Student Development Fund activities in 2009, the Adult Literacy Organisers completing report and application forms in 2010 made positive comments on how their centres had benefited:

- *It reinforced how positive the consultation process is.*
- *The feedback allows the tutors and managers of the centre and the VEC to be aware of learners’ feelings on various topics, and become more literacy aware themselves.*
- *Families and friends of the students involved all got to hear about it, making for an excellent promotional opportunity for the centre.*
- *It led to other learner groups participating in activities locally, which helps in reducing the stigma associated with “literacy”.*

For tutors and participating students there were new ideas for programmes around ‘themed literacy’, with students discovering new interests for themselves as a result of trip to a place of historical or cultural interest, and both finding new ‘real world’ materials for group tuition after the event. There were specific benefits for some learning programmes:

*It allowed for the development of the visual arts module...which entails planning and arranging a visit to a museum or gallery.*

And more general benefits to the curriculum in another instance:

*The feedback is very valuable for the centre, making it more “literacy aware” – more focus on integrating literacy into everyday teaching.*

Some tutors and ALOs found that feedback from the student discussions revealed gaps in information, or misunderstandings on the part of students, that they were able to address. In one instance, it became clear that some students did not understand the value of FETAC accreditation, so

*we now realise the importance of taking time out to explain to students the value of the accreditation they are working to achieve, at the outset of the training programme.*

Other positive outcomes included an improved atmosphere in the centre as a whole:

- The Fund played a really important role in the spirit and relationships of all involved...even those who were unable to go...The trip...was more than just a day out. It formed new friendships between learners. It enhanced the relationships between learners and their tutors – reinforcing a sense of equality, students being treated as adults.*
- The advertising and talk about the day created a vibe in the centre, and highlights the literacy service within the broader organisation.*

In addition, some centres noted that student committees were created, and others that existing committees were strengthened, as a result of the activities supported by the Student Development Fund.

For one centre, which in 2009 organised a visit to the Dáil, there was a very specific benefit. Students became interested in the political process and invited one of their local TDs to their centre, to inform him about literacy difficulties in the community and the services available, making the case for continued investment in further education. The result was a strong new link between that centre and an influential local politician.

### Adult Literacy Organisers' views (3): EQF applications

Part of the application process for funding in 2010 involved questions about the centres' experiences with the EQF in 2009. Responses show the positive impact on dynamics and interaction within the service, as students began to play an active part in the assessment processes, alongside managers, tutors, and Adult Literacy Organisers:

- *Very beneficial to the scheme as a whole, the service we offer and those involved...The team approach provides a forum for active discussion, debate and participation of all the stakeholders.*
- *An important part of the work of our Learning Centre, as it involves all stakeholders.*
- *All felt that objectives were met and that each meeting was productive.*
- *The meetings included the viewpoints of students, tutors and management, giving all a sense of involvement and of being heard.*

## Impact on local centres: Student Subcommittee's views

The minutes of Student Subcommittee meetings from 2007-2010 provide some confirmation of Adult Literacy Organisers' accounts of NALA activities and channels of communication, but offer very little evidence of the impacts these may have on local centres. These records show the Subcommittee members being asked to take information back to their local centres and services, to promote NALA events and membership and to sound out other students on specific matters – but there appears to be little or no reporting back on relevant outcomes at local level.

From time to time, an issue in a local scheme is brought up at the Subcommittee, where the aim is to see how common a problem it is, and whether it can be addressed by NALA more broadly. Examples include: matters to do with students' rights (e.g. when a student would prefer to return to 1:1 tuition after being placed in group tuition;) difficulties dealing with NALA's membership form; and the possibility of ID cards which students can use to get appropriate assistance from public services and businesses.

In the group discussion which was part of the research project, Subcommittee members listed all the tasks outlined above as part of their responsibilities. One also spoke of visiting local community groups to raise awareness about the extent of literacy problems, and to publicise their local adult learning centre and what it offers.

They certainly see themselves as a strong link between the local service/ centre and NALA structures, and a representative voice - though for most if not all of them any consultation with other students seems to be on an informal basis: *'we bring the word from the ground up'*.

Clearly a local service or centre can benefit significantly from having one of their students on NALA Executive or Subcommittee – if it chooses to make good use of this link. Subcommittee members certainly felt that their close link with NALA benefited their local schemes, and that as role models they could encourage others to be more involved: *'we can let other students know that some day they could get on to the Subcommittee too'*.

## Impact on local centres: NALA reports on Student Days

These reports sometimes note the positive outcomes for centres and services when, after attending a NALA Student Day, students set up their own local committees, planned local development days, started newsletters, or made formal presentations about the Day to fellow students.

NALA recorded the significant numbers of centres which sent students to these events each year (see above, p. 25). All of these would then have received NALA reports on these events, including student feedback and issues emerging, which would be of immediate use to the centres themselves. However, there seems to have been no systematic follow-up contact with centres to ascertain the usefulness of this information, or indeed longer-term benefits from students' attendance.

## Chapter 5

### The Impact of Student Development Work on NALA itself

One of the questions that prompted this research project was about the effects within NALA itself of facilitating and supporting students to find their own voices and name their own issues. Student development work during 2007–2010 was closely aligned with a new emphasis on ‘Voice’ (see *Strategic Plan 2007-2010*) which, as NALA’s Director said, is ‘both a strategy and a value’ for the organisation, giving insights into adult literacy issues, guiding and informing all its work and strengthening approaches to funders and decision-makers.

For the research project, NALA wanted to look at the effects on the organisation as a whole of incorporating a student voice and presence in this way. It was also interested in answering the specific question:

*How does NALA’s listening to students – whether those on the Subcommittee or students attending NALA Student Days or taking part in activities supported by the Student Development Fund – influence what happens in NALA as a whole?*

NALA hoped the research would identify how particular issues, identified in the process of listening to students in these various contexts, were taken up by NALA, and resulted in changed policy and practice during this four-year period, or were elaborated and raised with relevant civil servants and Government Ministers.

As mentioned earlier<sup>10</sup>, the records and publications studied did not readily allow for clear linkages to be made between issues arising (and the student feedback in general) and NALA discussion and subsequent action.

In addition, the scale and timeframe of the study meant that tantalising ‘leads’ in interviews or written materials could not be followed up in further discussions or further search for materials, which might have given a clearer and more detailed picture of some instances of issues being articulated, heard and acted on.

What follows is a compilation of what can be said with reasonable certainty, based on the research so far, about the impact on NALA as a whole of its student development work and the resulting presence and voice of students within the organisation.

It presents research findings in relation to four strands of NALA’s student development: student involvement on NALA’s Executive; the Student Subcommittee; Student Days and other events; and the Student Development Fund. The last section of the chapter includes contributions from NALA staff on how student development activities have impacted on their own work and on NALA more generally.

It needs to be said that in very few of these areas is the ‘impact on NALA itself’ explicitly considered within the documentation or recorded discussions, so the findings below are to some extent a matter of ‘reading between the lines’ or of making intelligent guesses on the basis of the available evidence.

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<sup>10</sup> p.11 above

The question of impact on NALA of all of the various facets of its student development work could only be answered more comprehensively by further, more detailed, discussions with relevant staff and Executive members.

## (1) Students as members of NALA's Executive Committee

While student development as such tends not to be explicitly referred to in the Executive Committee's minutes, its outcomes feature in the two stated purposes of the presence of students on the Committee:

*To have effective representation of student views at governance level;  
To model good practice in the meaningful involvement of students at this level.* (Research terms of reference)

The presence of literacy students at meetings ensures that 'whatever is being discussed, the student perspective is there', according to the current Director.

A literacy student has been chairing NALA since 2007, and there are currently three students serving as ordinary Executive members, and participating actively in its meetings. It is clear that their involvement at this level is an active and welcome one, consonant with the organisation's ethos of inclusion, and also that these students are those who have already contributed and gained experience in local student committees and/ or on NALA's Student Subcommittee, and who have been required to demonstrate their competence through the election process.

### **Influence on NALA's public profile**

Clearly, the presence of students on public occasions and in its interactions with government Ministers and senior civil servants must have a strong and positive impact on NALA's public image and credibility.

### **Impact on the Executive and its functioning**

The participation of student members on an equal footing on the NALA Executive must influence the way its business is conducted, and the information, training and support required by members<sup>11</sup>. However, the formal documentation cannot reveal the difference made by their presence – what effect it has on the reviewing of practice, the formulation of policy and other such matters. These questions could only be explored adequately through interviews with Executive members, especially the students themselves and other members who have experience of boards of management where the 'clientele' is not included and represented in this way. Carrying out such interviews was not within the scope of this research project.

### **How is the Executive listening to student issues?**

In discussions, members of the Student Subcommittee expressed their confidence that matters they had raised and passed on to the Executive were communicated and

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<sup>11</sup> NALA's 2010 publication *Functions and Duties of NALA's Executive Committee and its Officers*, is exemplary in its use of plain English for the purpose of inclusion, and reflects the care with which student members are supported without being patronised.



addressed, and that the Subcommittee received feedback on any decisions and action taken as a result.

However, the minutes for 2007-2010, and the available accompanying reports from the Director and staff, yielded few examples of specific issues arising at Subcommittee level and then being communicated to and addressed by the Executive. There was in fact just one identifiable instance in these records where the Subcommittee formally asked the Executive to respond on a specific matter they had brought to it (this concerned NALA's communication with people interviewed, but not chosen, for one of NALA's TV series).

In December 2009, an agenda 'slot' for Subcommittee reporting was formally agreed, but Subcommittee reports as such do not feature in the minutes of the subsequent Executive meetings. It may be that the reporting was done in a more informal or *ad hoc* way, or that, if no decisions resulted, it was simply not recorded.

This links with the impression gained from discussions that student members of the Executive, while articulate and often outspoken at meetings, sometimes prefer to wait and raise something with the Director or Chair once the formal part of the meeting is over. In this case, if a response was made or action taken as a result, it would very properly not be included in the formal record of Executive business.

## (2) The Student Subcommittee and its role/s

NALA's stated purpose for the Subcommittee is:

*To be a respected national adult literacy student forum, where student issues are identified, discussed, responded to, fed back to us and acted on.* (Research terms of reference)

It was originally known as the Learner Development Subcommittee, with a brief to assist NALA with organising and running Student Days and providing speakers for other events. This recent statement shows NALA's vision of a more consultative and advisory dimension to the Subcommittee's role, in line with the intention that a student perspective will inform the whole range of NALA's work.

However, the 2010 document, *Functions and Duties of NALA's Executive Committee and its Officers*, re-states the role of the Student Subcommittee in more practical and activity-focused terms:

*The student sub-committee guides and monitors NALA's work with students, for example student events and the Student Development Fund.* (p.13)

Meanwhile, the *Terms of Reference* for the Student Subcommittee (drawn up January 2010, and currently under review) say that it is a forum for discussing student issues 'in more detail' than the Executive can, and that its role

involve(s) promoting good practice in the area of student development...and promoting the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*

as well as 'getting student views and feeding them to the NALA staff as they employ the Voice strategy'.

At present, the Subcommittee mainly functions as a sounding board for the Executive in relation to new plans and policy documents and as a source of fresh ideas and energy in relation to specific activities.

### **Current impact on NALA of the work of the Student Subcommittee**

What does the evidence from the discussions with Subcommittee members and a study of the minutes suggest by way of impact of this group of people on NALA as a whole?

The work and processes of the Subcommittee can be seen as crucial to the internal dynamics of NALA as a whole, since it is here that individuals and the group build their knowledge, competence and capacity for active contribution.

Attendance and ongoing involvement in the business of the Subcommittee helps create a group of literacy students within NALA who are well-informed about the organisation and its work, and about adult literacy issues and services, and who can contribute actively as speakers at NALA events, and as writers for NALA publications. They are a group of role models who can inspire other students and influence decision-makers through 'the power of personal testimony'. They can and do represent NALA on other bodies or at other and international events. If elected to the Executive, they can bring all of this to enrich its work.

There are other obvious benefits for NALA. By supporting the Subcommittee, NALA, through the staff member responsible, can maintain indirect contact with the services of which they are a part, and can thus gain an informal understanding of adult literacy work 'on the ground'. And, as already mentioned, the Subcommittee provides an important strand of NALA's links with Adult Literacy Organisers around the country. Currently, too, the Subcommittee is giving attention to how it might make links with VECs, for the benefit of students. If successful, this could be an important aspect of NALA's outreach.

The system of ensuring feedback from the Subcommittee reaches relevant staff is an effective way to keep staff (especially those who may not have regular communication with literacy students) up to date on issues arising, plans being formulated and, more generally, current student experiences and views. However, it is not easy to pinpoint the impact of this, as there seems no system for recording responses and follow-up.

As well as their practical involvement, Subcommittee members contribute to the development and improvement of student events and learning resources, based on their own and other students' experiences. One striking example was the Subcommittee's contribution in either 2007 or 2008<sup>12</sup> to a NALA information pack for literacy services, outlining what students can expect from participation in Student Days.

### **'Student issues'**

Observation of two meetings and study of Subcommittee minutes suggest that the group is most comfortable discussing 'issues' with a very practical basis, rather than matters of principle – though this may partly due to the emphases in the minutes themselves!

Some Subcommittee discussions are mentioned, however, which obviously contributed to thinking within NALA, both at staff and Executive level. In one instance, the minutes

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<sup>12</sup> The date of the document is unclear.



show the Subcommittee considering the theme of voting and voter education, which arose at Student Days in 2009, and contributing themselves to a letter from NALA to the Minister for Environment and Local Government pointing out the effective disenfranchisement of people with literacy difficulties.

The issues of inequality of provision, the difficulties for students of long summer holidays in VEC adult learning centres, and the problems caused by lack of information on local services, are all reported in the context of a discussion of Student Days in 2008.

However, while these and other important issues are named, the documentary record is less helpful with regard to reporting *how* the Subcommittee discussed them, and how it addressed them. For example, an input from the Subcommittee into a discussion paper about NALA membership is mentioned positively in Executive minutes in 2007, but no information on a prior discussion at Subcommittee level has been recorded.

To give another example: in 2009, the Subcommittee, reviewing student feedback quoted in local services' reports on Student Development Fund activities, identified the crucial issue of 'students not knowing how their service works', and planned to discuss ways of addressing this at their next meeting. However, the next set of minutes does not record any discussion on this topic. Whether it took place or not, an opportunity to reflect and act on valuable first-hand information from those with direct experience of this particular issue may well have been missed.

### **Potential impact of the Student Subcommittee**

The Subcommittee is situated at a key point in NALA's structures and networks (see above, p.22). It has, to greater or lesser extent, the possibility of two-way communication and interaction with: other students (in the services where Subcommittee members study); with ALOA (through its representative on the Subcommittee); with NALA staff (through the Student Officer who to a large extent manages the agenda and both supports and drives the Subcommittee and its work); and with the Executive (through the Chairperson and the other students who sit on both bodies).

It could be argued that, given the experience of some of the current members and this unique position within the organisation, it could now have a more proactive and initiating function, and could assume aspects of the leadership role which is the aim of the student development model outlined in *Literacy and Empowerment*.

### **(3) Student Days and their impact on NALA**

As noted earlier, the reports on NALA's Student Days from 2007 to 2010, based largely on the evaluation forms completed at the end of each event, concentrate on the responses of participants to the keynote speakers and their topics, as well as to the workshops that were provided. Documenting the event in this way enabled NALA to link back with the centres and ALOs who had received advance publicity about the event and whose students had attended – which is in itself a useful benefit for NALA.

Themes and issues arising from these events often have a very practical focus, but are useful in keeping NALA 'up to speed' with what is uppermost in students' minds, or showing how student views might be changing over time.

Some specific outcomes for NALA from student views and requests on Student Days:

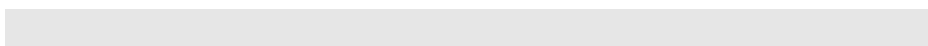
- Several reports include a call for NALA to continue and expand its work promoting plain English with organisations, businesses and the public service, and NALA staff confirmed the effect on them of this emphasis, in relation to their planning and promoting of conferences and other events including students, and their briefing of expert speakers. The need for plain English continues to influence the presentation of NALA's documents and publications, ensuring that NALA's thinking and expertise is available to as many people as possible.
- Another recurring theme in these reports is that participating students are often unclear about '*the difference between what NALA does and what the VEC does*'. This awareness led to the proposal, recorded in the Subcommittee minutes of February 2008, that NALA should produce a short leaflet to clarify this. The December minutes record that the draft was discussed and the leaflet was about to be finalised, but it does not seem to be in current use.
- There may also be specific requests for help which result in NALA action: the request for information on dyslexia at the Student Days in 2007 led to NALA organising a national 'Dyslexia Day' for students the following year.
- Also worth a mention, although it took place before 2007, is the fact that the preferences of participants at NALA student meetings are generally agreed to have initiated the debate which led to the significant change in NALA's standard terminology from 'learner' to 'student'.

#### (4) The Student Development Fund

The discussions linked to activities taking place in local centres and services with the support of NALA's Student Fund are part of a structured feedback 'loop' designed by NALA staff to gather student views and reactions on themes and topics staff are considering and working on. Some topics may be deliberately included to stimulate interest, for example in the Student Subcommittee or new on-line resources.

So the general outcome and benefit for NALA staff is a great deal of fresh information on these topics, generated by a wide range of adult students in centres (both in VEC and several other frameworks) across the country which offer basic education and literacy programmes. The sheer quantity of the responses (around 800 students contributed in 2010) means that the findings are more likely to be representative than those arising from Student Days, but, like survey results, they are only words on paper which cannot be 'interrogated' or probed further, except in the context of Subcommittee discussions, so need to be interpreted with care.

The information sheet produced for applications in 2010 clarifies how NALA intends to use this feedback:



*The student feedback...is shared among NALA staff and used to inform our work...A report ..will be written and circulated to NALA staff, stakeholders and identified authorities. NALA will request a response from authorities where relevant and if any action arises out of that contact we will document it. NALA may use some examples and quotes...for lobbying'*

As noted earlier, NALA's reports on the uses of the Student Fund concentrate, in addition to listings of student feedback, on the impacts for the students involved and for the adult learning centres. To date, they have not recorded the short- and medium-term impacts of this feedback on the work of NALA staff. However, it is intended to gather information from staff in early 2011 on any immediate impacts of the student data.

### **Impact of the Student Development Fund work**

What impact can the feedback on these clearly-defined topics and issues be expected to have on NALA as a whole? The exercise produces a wealth of first-hand material and direct quotations based on personal experience, which can be used to enrich NALA's thinking, and to strengthen its policy positions and its arguments for particular approaches to an adult literacy issue.

It can also have more practical outcomes, and the feedback in 2010 can be taken as an example. First, the responses concerning the Student Subcommittee (it seems to many out of reach, both geographically and organisationally) show the need to support the strengthening of active student participation in local schemes, and to enhance the Subcommittee's role as a link between local and national levels.

The contributions on NALA's distance- and on-line learning programmes confirm their immense value and flexibility for those with young children and/or busy work lives, as well as for those reluctant to be seen to be attending literacy classes. They also show the productive ways on-line resources are being used alongside more traditional methods in a range of programmes in adult learning centres. All the experience summed up in these responses is a valuable resource for NALA in its promotion to government and the public of innovative ways of providing adult literacy and basic education opportunities.

The many responses on literacy and health bring out strongly the theme of unwanted dependency in relation to managing one's own health, and the insights gained into these perceptions and attitudes can undoubtedly enrich and inform NALA's future work in this crucial area.

In addition, it must be useful for NALA's planning to hear, through feedback related to its new *Strategic Plan*, that many students would welcome more student events outside Dublin, as well as more NALA visits to the local learning centres.

### **(5) NALA staff views on the impact of student development work and 'listening to students'**

The discussions that took place with individual NALA staff during the course of the research were useful for familiarisation, and checking of factual matters, but it was difficult in these interviews to elicit information on largely undocumented matters such as

the impact of student development activities on staff with rather different responsibilities within NALA.

In this regard, a number of staff members confirmed what the documentation had indicated about the reporting systems in place for student feedback, and the fact that communication was primarily one way and informal: feedback was communicated in a 'tailored' way by email or note from the Student Officer to the appropriate staff member, who might then make use of it, but would probably not report in return (and was unlikely to do so in writing) unless a resulting action, decision or adjustment to previous ways of doing something was of direct relevance to the Student Subcommittee.

The Policy Officer usefully outlined the ways that feedback from student development activities currently influences policy, but also pointed out that, after 30 years of developing policy and practice in adult literacy, NALA is rarely surprised by what emerges from student development activities. Nevertheless, this 'checking in' is vital: it consolidates NALA's knowledge and keeps it up to date. Student feedback also enables NALA to test new policy and practice proposals, developed from comparative research into adult literacy work in other countries, against the realities on the ground in Ireland. In addition, student feedback on similar topics in successive years can help NALA grasp changes over time.

The Public Relations Officer reflected that the media training provided to students appearing publicly on behalf of NALA should be considered as part of the organisation's student development work, upskilling the individuals themselves and increasing their confidence, while also enhancing NALA's public profile.

Her own work has been affected by the outcomes of student development, and she cited the requests she received from the student team at the Ploughing Championships, based on their dealings with the public, for materials including questionnaires to strengthen their promotional work.

Staff were also asked for their views on how NALA could best capture the impact of its student development work in future, and their responses to this question have been incorporated into the recommendations in the concluding chapter of this report.

## Chapter 6

# Observations, Conclusions and Recommendations

### Introduction: research aims and achievements

This report, and the research on which it is based, has tried to bring together in one place as much reliable information as possible on NALA's student development work over the last four years, along with evidence of its impact. It also set out to find answers to some specific questions about this work, and to provide some practical recommendations for the future. In particular it hoped to make suggestions based on the research findings, for how NALA can best 'capture the impact' of the range of different activities it has categorised as student development work.

In relation to the first aim, the bringing together of relevant information and comment on the six designated strands of work and their impact, it largely succeeded, although not to the same degree in all six areas. There is potentially a very large amount of information available, not all of which was easily accessible for the purposes of this study, and some of which was sketchy and open to different interpretations.

Very little in the first chapters of this report will come as a surprise to NALA. However, by commissioning research into student development from an outside consultant, NALA invited an exploration which was not coloured by prior inside knowledge. And one thing the research process itself has strikingly revealed is – despite the mass of documentation available for study – how much of the relevant information is stored, not in filing cabinets or on computers, but in the heads of those most involved. This has always been a dilemma for busy non-profit organisations, but nevertheless it seems that NALA does relatively well in terms of recording work and its outcomes.

One conclusion to be drawn from this observation is that, if NALA does wish to record and capture the impact of its student development work more comprehensively in future, it needs to look closely at the relevant internal systems for communicating, reporting and record-keeping (see *Recommendations* below). Any changes will of course have resource implications, at least in terms of staff time.

Another is that, to complete the work of this study to date, relevant staff could be given an opportunity to read the sections of the report that deal with their work areas, and invited to contribute updates and amendments to supplement the information that the researcher was able to derive from the study of NALA documentation, along with interviews, group discussion, and the two small-scale surveys.

### Findings on student development work – what happened?

In the end, the study enabled the compilation of much rich descriptive material, covering and commenting on the main strands of student development work of the last few years, and putting them together for reference and consideration.

There is far more high-quality and well-thought-out work represented here than can be outlined in a few pages of an *Annual Report*, and the overall impression is that NALA staff, and those closely involved through the Executive or Student Subcommittee, and

others such as Adult Literacy Organisers working closely with NALA, all deserve congratulations on both its quantity and quality!

## Findings on student development work – what was the impact?

Using the research strategies at its disposal, the study was certainly able to produce useful findings on the impact of the different strands of NALA's student development work in the four-year period, and these are more substantial as a result of being brought together, and categorised according to whether the impact was on students, on adult literacy schemes and services, or on NALA itself.

The difficulties experienced in looking for evidence of impact and outcomes from the various programmes and initiatives were themselves a useful guide to practical recommendations for capturing and recording this impact more effectively in future. This may in any case become more of an organisational obligation, to meet funders' needs for confirmation of the validity and real value of some of these areas of activity.

There were two areas, though, where there was very little concrete evidence available to throw light on the impact of student development work or obvious pointers for the future: the influence of the student presence on NALA's Executive Committee, and the effect of student involvement in the Evolving Quality Framework. Some of the findings in relation to the Executive are, in the absence of substantial additional interview time, reasonable deductions based on the general knowledge built up through the research. On the other hand, those on student involvement in the EQF processes are necessarily extrapolations from a small amount of relevant documentation.

NALA will need to form its own conclusions about the necessity of providing further evidence in these two areas. After 30 years of good practice, it would seem that the presence of students on the Executive speaks for itself (literally!) and the enthusiasm with which adult literacy services have embraced and incorporated the Evolving Quality Framework ought to be sufficient evidence of its worth.

## Findings – quantifiable and otherwise

The requirements of funders can often lead to an emphasis on quantifiable evidence. The difficulty with a concept and process such as 'student development' is that it is, by its very nature, not amenable to measurement in statistical terms<sup>13</sup>. In some areas of NALA's student development work, there is now a body of valuable qualitative findings relating to its impact, and the cumulative validity of this evidence, and of the well-founded generalisations it can generate, should be acknowledged and argued for.

However, the gathering of evidence of this kind could be enhanced in future by, for example, careful preparatory work and assessment or 'filtering' of workshop feedback, as well as clarification, when a report is produced, of the criteria which govern its summarising of themes and issues and its choice of examples.

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<sup>13</sup> Though interesting research in the UK and elsewhere into 'capturing confidence' was noted by the Student Officer in a short report for NALA, *Student Development in an International Context* (2007).

The question of the relative value of different forms of evidence arose in some internal NALA documentation, which makes preliminary comparison of the usefulness of student feedback from different sources, notably the Student Days and the Student Development Fund activities, possibly with a view to the best allocation of financial support to different activities. This needs careful consideration, however, taking into account, among other things, the context in which the feedback is produced.

The findings of this research show that although Student Days, by their very nature, yield a smaller quantity and somewhat less 'tidy' feedback than does the tighter structure of the student Development Fund activities, the Days are clearly extremely valuable from many other points of view, some of which again cannot easily be measured. The Days can, however, be reshaped (in fact the Student Subcommittee has recently been discussing this) to allow students more time for interaction and self-expression, linked to more time for them to give feedback and evaluate their experience. The fact that the feedback is also heard by NALA staff and Subcommittee members involved on the day, as well as by some Adult Literacy Officers, can make it powerful in ways that the more 'arms-length' and mediated feedback in written form from the Student Development Fund cannot be.

They are simply two very different channels and mechanisms to stimulate both student development and student expression, and should be seen as complementary to each other, and equally worthy of support.

### How well did the study answer the specific questions posed?

At the outset, two very interesting and worthwhile questions were posed (see p.6 above), but in the event, neither could be fully answered.

However, a sound beginning was made on exploring the question of 'student pathways' (i.e. individuals' progress from taking part in consultation to becoming advocates and leaders), and the findings to date could usefully be built on by additional research. This exploration would provide valuable information for NALA on how its various interactions with students lead to developmental outcomes and to activism and involvement, and so could inform decision-making, prioritising and targeting.

The hindrance here was simply the time constraints for the study, which were also affected by the necessarily careful pace of work with adult literacy students, albeit experienced and capable ones. It became clear how further research progress could be made, and the current participants (members of the Student Subcommittee) were undoubtedly engaged with and enthusiastic about the research process, so it would be straightforward to take it further, providing the momentum is not lost.

In developing this research, it would be important to try to identify some of the 'critical incidents', particularly those involving NALA, in each person's development. And it would be worthwhile, for comparative purposes, to interview a small number of student 'leaders' in local centres who have few or minimal links with NALA.

In the case of the second question, however, as noticed earlier, some obstacles were faced in the attempt to trace, through the documentation, the trajectories of specific



‘student issues’ from the point where they first arose to a later outcome in the shape of a new NALA project, policy position, or student-related initiative.

There was general agreement that certain prominent issues on which NALA had delivered a response or taken action had originated from student feedback. Examples given by several of those interviewed included: the change of terminology from ‘learner’ to ‘student’; responding to the need for voter education and pressing for adaptations to voting procedures more inclusive of those with literacy problems; the issue of paid learning leave; and the idea of an ID card for literacy students which could be used in dealing with banks, public services etc. So it was frustrating that an accurate history of these developments could not be told.

Probably only certain long-established staff with good memories and a great deal of time to spare could provide accurate and detailed accounts of these processes and specific outcomes. However, in most instances, quite some time has already lapsed, and in the absence of the documentary records, even their accounts might include conjecture, so it is unlikely that this line of retrospective enquiry would be worthwhile. However, the challenges identified underline the need for changes to NALA’s recording systems if the progress of issues arising is to be more reliably traced in future.

### Questions which were not answered

It is worth noting here some pertinent questions which arose in the course of the research, but could not be answered satisfactorily, usually because time was too short, or because of lack of relevant data in the available documentation<sup>14</sup>.

Almost certainly, some of them could be answered in further discussion with NALA staff, including those not previously interviewed, and with Subcommittee members, while others may be illuminated by the forthcoming publication on the history of NALA.

They may not all be considered important by NALA at this time, but they include:

- What methods/ formats are appropriate so that the Student Subcommittee can adequately reflect on and ‘process’ issues arising from student feedback at NALA events or from their own experiences in local literacy schemes?
- How could it do this better, and become more issue-focused generally and more active in relation to this aspect of its work?
- What was the history of the Learner Development Subcommittee before 2005?
- What is meant by the statement in the Subcommittee’s current terms of reference regarding its role in ‘promoting the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work?*’ How do members of the Subcommittee understand this responsibility?

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<sup>14</sup> Two examples: (1) the fact that the minutes of the first meeting of the Student Subcommittee in its present form (January/ February 2005) are missing, probably means the loss of valuable information about NALA’s plans for the group and its work, as well as its previous history. (2) NALA is frequently referred to as a ‘membership organisation’ but the formal records of its AGMs have not included the names of those attending. Thus, useful data on student participation on these important occasions is missing too.



- What is the history of NALA's close links with the VEC adult learning centres and literacy schemes, and what are the barriers to closer involvement with other providers of adult basic education?
- Does NALA – or should it – also try to do 'student development work' with independent learners and with individual student members of NALA? If not, why not?

In addition, as noted in the relevant chapters, there were the outstanding questions where sufficient evidence was not available to this study: (a) the impact of student membership of NALA's Executive Committee, and (b) the effects of student involvement in Evolving Quality Framework assessment processes at local level.

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## Recommendations

On the basis of this study and its findings, a number of recommendations can be offered, which could contribute to NALA's overall effectiveness. They concern both the specific question of how best to capture the impact of student development work in future, and some related aspects of NALA's work with adult literacy students.

These suggestions all emerged strongly in the course of the research process, and are documented here as useful insights focusing on, but looking more broadly at, the questions with which this report is mainly concerned.

At a time of resource constraints and the resulting need for organisations to be as efficient as possible in all aspects of their work, the best strategy is not one of radical change, but rather of building on and enhancing what is already there. NALA can do this by devising straightforward ways to improve existing systems, and through 'add-ons' and adjustments to events which are already established in the NALA calendar. The following suggestions are made with this in mind.

### 1. Further research?

After considering the findings in this report, NALA should identify in which areas of its student development work of the last four years additional information on impact would be valuable, and whether it wishes or needs to explore further some of the questions it specified at the start.

A strong recommendation would be that the topic of individual student pathways should be explored further. This potentially has a lot to offer NALA in relation to prioritising and targeting its student development work; the next research steps are clear; and the key participants are both accessible and likely to be positive about contributing.

## 2. Documentation and record-keeping

If evidence-based policy-making and planning are to be the norm for organisations such as NALA in future, NALA should review aspects of its internal record-keeping in order to support this more consistently.

Comparison of documents such as reports with similar purposes but from different years, or the use of meeting minutes to build up an account of a particular activity over time, would be more straightforward if more standardised formats, styles and dating conventions, or even templates, were adopted for record-keeping.

It would be valuable for several purposes if minutes of Annual General Meetings had an attached list of the names of all those attending.

## 3. Capturing and recording impact

As this study has shown, NALA has initiated and carried out much productive student development work. It is also clear that its commitment to hearing the voices of students in the context of the work may mean that things proceed more slowly (as a statement in a NALA presentation of 2007 on the 'Voice' strategy confirms<sup>15</sup>). The activity of 'capturing impact', while important, will rarely be the top priority in relation to any given student development activity, and so NALA should clarify its relative importance in each case, and design recording systems accordingly, being careful that their requirements do not distort or over-balance the core development work.

However, the question of impact was specifically posed at the outset of the study, and pursuing it has generated a range of suggestions, most of them offered by people who were interviewed, others based on the researcher's reflections as the project proceeded. They include:

- NALA should enhance its internal 'feedback loops' and micro-reporting. Several interviewees suggested that, when staff receive student feedback relating to their area of work, they should always document their response. This should indicate whether this feedback confirms and updates what they already know and put into practice, whether it is new and needs more consideration (and possibly research) by NALA, or whether it can be translated into practical action in a straightforward way. This has of course been done in an *ad hoc* and informal way, but it would be very valuable to have better records of these processes.
- Students reporting on their own progress: NALA could institute more consistent reporting back over the short- and longer terms by students involved in TV series, going beyond the present informal follow-up. It should also aim to document the specific impacts on students involved in media interviews.
- Students attending NALA AGMs could meet together in a focus group to learn and talk about student development work and reflect on their own progress, and the findings could be recorded.
- Students at NALA's Student Days could be asked for information about their own progress. A simple questionnaire (allowing for questions to be read out but answers provided in confidence), could be used in a group setting, or some

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<sup>15</sup> M.Murray and others, 2007

students could participate in a brief face-to-face anonymous survey, administered by trained student volunteers.

- The Student Subcommittee should continue to review the structure of Student Days to maximise student interaction and participation. They could consider ways that feedback can be stimulated and recorded throughout the day, and ensure that experienced students have a specific role in this.
- Evaluations at Student Days could be carried out orally if voice recorders were provided, and the follow-up survey of ALOs used in 2010 could usefully be developed and standardised in coming years.
- NALA should continue to develop and refine the reporting requirements for the Student Development Fund grant applications, as these provide very useful data. To aid NALA's understanding of the feedback submitted, it would be worthwhile to ask for information on how the sessions were organised: how the topic was chosen; who organised and facilitated discussion; who listened and made records; whether students were able to comment on the draft report, etc.
- NALA could open up a discussion by specifically asking the Student Subcommittee and Executive members for practical ideas on capturing impact in future in all areas of its student development work.

## 4. Aspects of student development

### 4.1 Developing the Student Subcommittee

As shown earlier in the report (p.22), this is a key body within NALA in terms of student development, as its original title (Learner Development Subcommittee) indicated. In particular its position at a point of intersection of several communication channels, and the experience of some of its members gives it the potential to move beyond advocacy to a greater leadership role in the organisation. Practical recommendations include:

- The forthcoming revised and updated terms of reference for the Subcommittee should reflect both its formal position and accountability within NALA, and its current and potential roles.
- An induction pack for new Subcommittee members, on similar lines to the Executive's document *Functions and Duties of Executive Members and Officers*, but including explanatory material about NALA as an organisation, should be produced as soon as it is feasible.
- Observation and reading of the minutes suggests that work needs to be done to include more structured discussion at Subcommittee meetings on issues and principles, in addition to the practical planning work that currently dominates. A schedule of well-prepared discussions on specific topics (perhaps with an input by one or two members, supported by staff) would address the need for organisational knowledge that some members expressed, and make them more capable as NALA spokespeople. The Subcommittee would also be better equipped to respond to requests from the Executive to consider and contribute to key organisational policies and documents such as the *Strategic Plan*.

- The capabilities of the current Student Subcommittee suggest it is time to give the group more active involvement and responsibility for planning Subcommittee meetings, linking discussions to ongoing work outside committee time, recruiting and supporting others to attend etc. More input into the agendas of individual meetings, based on an understanding of NALA's frameworks and priorities, would give a greater sense of ownership.

The start of a new *Strategic Plan* period is an ideal time for this, and the resulting capacity building would be a valuable resource for members' local literacy services and for outreach to other groups of students (see below).

- In addition, the successful arrangement for the Ploughing Championships may be a useful model for setting up a team of one or two experienced Subcommittee and Executive student members alongside NALA staff for organising future Student Days.

## **4.2 Begin planning for the creation of a national student network**

There is a good deal of enthusiasm, along with evidence and information, pointing in this direction. Some of the building blocks in the form of existing links with local services are already in place, and the Chairperson of NALA is keen to find a way for students to communicate with each other across the country.

NALA needs to identify the best (most efficient and effective) ways to set up a network of simple links, and to support local development work including student committees, as well as to provide partnership support to local meetings.

The initiative should start small, maybe with two or three centres included in a pilot project, and the Student Subcommittee clearly could play a central role in a new initiative of this kind.

One suggestion is that this network-building could offer a new role for those experienced literacy students who are about to leave the Subcommittee. Clearly, not all can be elected to the Executive, and it would be a major loss for NALA if their competence, enthusiasm and commitment do not find a new outlet.

Rather than simply remaining on a speakers' list for various events and media requirements, they could each 'adopt' (for a specified period) literacy students in an adult learning centre, acting as role model and mentor, supporting and developing the active involvement of those students in their own local scheme. Costs would be small: contact could be maintained by phone and email, which would itself develop skills.

NALA's website could be a useful hub for communications as this develops, and a means for 'students linking with students'.

## **5. Student membership of NALA**

It was intriguing that this area of activity was not specified for the research project, especially when it turned out that numbers of student members have been falling.

If NALA is to be '*the voice of adults wishing to improve their literacy skills*' as the forthcoming *Strategic Plan 2011-2013* states, membership of individual learners as well as organisations and others must surely be one of the ways by which this is activated, and by which NALA sustains this public profile.

Given the likely growth of independent and on-line literacy learning, there could be a strong new group of members in the making, with different profiles, their own specific needs and their own potential contribution to the organisation and to its campaigns for provision and access. (Connecting with them effectively might require the use of social networking channels rather than more traditional means.)

So NALA should consider active encouragement and expansion of student membership, whether in the form of individual membership or of group membership for a local literacy class or other grouping of students. This will involve evaluation of the benefits of membership for those already linked in, and might require research with learners who are not members, as well as with long-standing student members.

More immediately, at its Annual General Meeting, NALA could, as part of its student development work, provide a special meeting for student members, to strengthen their sense of belonging to the 'community of learners' cited in the documentation.

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*It is hoped that these observations and suggestions will be given consideration by NALA as it embarks on a new three-year cycle of activity, and that, whatever is decided, some of the outcomes of the research process, as documented in this report, will prove to be of value to the organisation and to its essential work in adult literacy.*

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## Appendices

### (1) NALA Staff interviewed

Inez Bailey, Director

Margaret Murray, Student Officer (on leave)

Helen Ryan, Policy Officer

Clare McNally, PRO

Fergus Dolan, Literacies Development Worker

Tom O'Mara, Distance Learning Coordinator

Much valuable information was also provided by Jenny Derbyshire, Literacies Development Worker and Claire O'Riordan, Student Officer

### (2) Student Subcommittee members participating in the research

Sheila Brennan

Bridie Daly

Laura Foley

Vincent Gaffney

Patrick Hallinan

Jan Janiszewski

Breda Kavanagh

Mandy Kennedy

Frank Locke

Olive Phelan

Michael Power (NALA Chairperson)

Helen Walsh

### **(3) Adult Literacy Organisers surveyed**

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Pat Ayton       | Adult Literacy Organiser, Coolock/ Darndale Literacy Service  |
| Rose Browne     | Literacy Service Organiser, KLEAR Adult Education Centre  |
| Colin Cummins   | Limerick City Adult Education Service   |
| Marion Cusack   | Adult Literacy Organiser and Back to Education Coordinator,<br>Further Education Centre, Ballina, Co Mayo |
| Siobhan McEntee | Adult Literacy Organiser, Co Cavan VEC Adult Learning Centre  |
| Martina Needham | Basic Education Coordinator, Co Donegal VEC   |
| Joann Power     | Adult Literacy Organiser, City of Waterford VEC   |
| Mary Roche      | South Tipperary VEC Adult Learning Scheme   |
| Frances Ward    | Adult Literacy Organiser, Dublin City S. Reading & Writing<br>Service                                     |