

What's in it for me?

The benefits of
engaging in adult literacy
learning in Ireland



Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This report presents the findings from a mixed-method research study on the perceived benefits to adults of engaging in lifelong learning – in particular, adult literacy and numeracy tuition.

Traditionally, both nationally and internationally, the majority of studies on adult learning have focused on access, participation and activation. However, there is a growing body of evidence that adult learning also has the potential to create social, personal and economic value (UNESCO, 2016; Manninen & Meriläinen, 2014; Motschilnig, 2012).

Research tells us that engaging in lifelong learning can generate a range of possible benefits to the individual, to society and to the community. These benefits can manifest themselves in increased self-confidence and self-esteem, positive family interactions, improved health and increased wellbeing (UNESCO, 2016). Benefits of learning can also be realised through gaining qualifications and employment skills

The National Adult Literacy Agency's research projects have captured literacy and numeracy practices among practitioners and have recorded views and experiences of adult learners, including older learners and men¹. Our research with tutors convey that learners are reporting major transformation and achievements and attribute this to their participation in adult literacy tuition.

In Ireland, there are gaps in our knowledge base regarding the benefits of adult learning. Most recently, SOLAS commissioned research to examine the barriers to participation in Further Education and Training (FET). The research found that some of the most significant barriers included age, mental health, a lack of basic skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT, learning difficulties, and a lack of confidence and self-esteem (Mooney & O'Rourke, 2017).

¹ Research reports are available to download free from the NALA website www.nala.ie

This research seeks to add to the knowledge base on the benefits of taking part in lifelong learning. The views adult learners hold about returning to education, their educational needs and their expectations are of keen interest to NALA and one of the primary reasons for carrying out this research.

We garnered the views and experiences of adults in a number of settings:

- Adults learning in the distance learning service delivered by NALA
- Adults learning in education programmes delivered by a homeless agency
- Adult learners who are part of the NALA student subcommittee

We explored with them:

The perceived benefits of engaging in adult literacy and numeracy tuition;

Their views on the benefit re-engagement has had on different areas of their lives, including personal development, family, health and wellbeing.

Research methodology

The research adopted a mixed-method approach to the study of the benefits of engaging in literacy and numeracy tuition among adult learners. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques was used. This involved administering an anonymous online survey, carrying out a focus group and interviewing individual adult learners and using a visual as an aid to the learners.

Anonymous online survey

A questionnaire, using Survey Monkey, was administered to adults using the NALA Distance Learning Service (DLS). This method was deemed to be the most appropriate way to garner the views of distance learners, given the requirement for confidentiality and anonymity. The learners completed the questionnaire with the help, where required, of their DLS tutor. The questionnaire included demographic questions and questions about educational attainment. Learners were also asked to identify their reasons for returning to education, the main benefits of returning to education, and to identify the areas in their lives where adult education had the greatest benefit, including personal development, family, health and wellbeing, and their life as a citizen.

Focus group and individual interviews

The focus group and individual interview discussions with adult learners were semi-structured and covered the same topics contained in the online survey questionnaire. The discussions allowed us to explore in detail the learners' views on the benefits of engaging in adult literacy and numeracy tuition, and where in their lives it has had the greatest benefit, including the areas outlined above. Throughout the report the views of the learners are supported by quoted excerpts. In order to maintain confidentiality all major identifiers were removed, and at the end of each excerpt the learner is identified in the following ways:

- Adults learning in the distance learning service (DL learner)
- Adults learning programmes delivered by a homeless agency (HA learner)
- Adult learners who are part of the NALA student subcommittee (SC learner)

Using a visual aid

The learners who took part in the focus group and individual interviews were presented with the visual on the next page and asked to identify the top three areas in their lives where engaging in learning has had the most benefit. In the case of the distance learners they were presented with a drop down list offering the same options listed on the visual. All learners were asked to 'tick' their top three choices in order of benefit.

Realising Potential

Literacy and numeracy: essential lifelong learning throughout life events



Research participants

A total of 32 adult learners took part in the research.

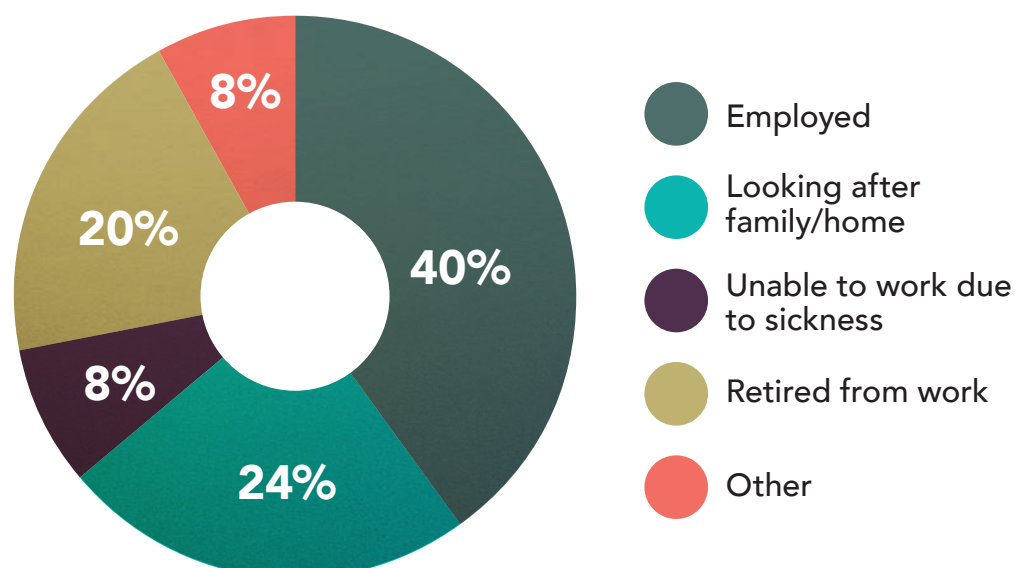
- The online survey was administered to 25 adults using the NALA distance learning service.
- A focus group discussion was carried out with five members of NALA's student subcommittee.
- Individual interviews were conducted with two learners using a programme provided by a homeless agency.

The data and charts below present a brief profile of the learner who participated in the research in terms of gender and age, personal situation and education to date.

Gender and age

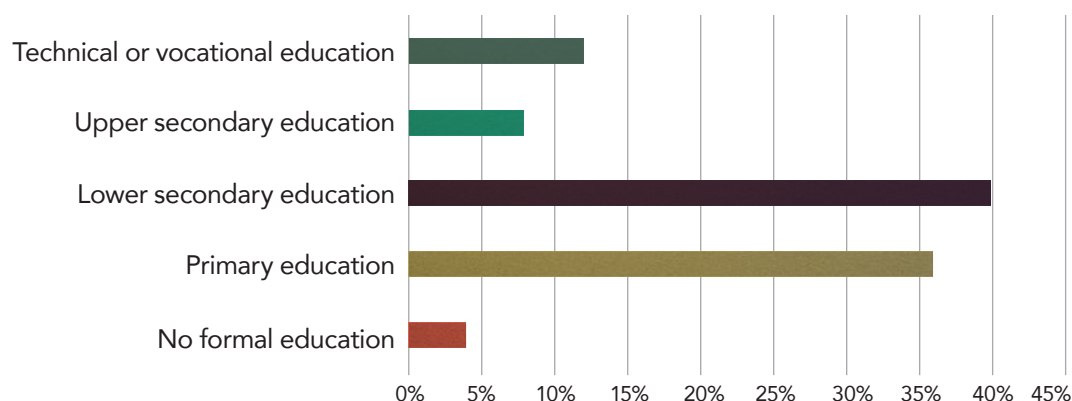
Fourteen women and 18 men took part in the research. The learners ranged in age from 24 – 65+ years. The majority (44%) were in the 35 – 64 age group with the smallest number (4%) in the 24 – 35 age category.

Chart 1: Personal situation



As shown in chart 1, the majority (40%) of the learners described their situation as working for pay, 24% were looking after the family/home, 20% were retired from work. A small proportion (8%) reported that they were unable to work due to sickness or disability. Another 8% described their situation as 'other'.²

Chart 2: Highest level of education to date



As shown in chart 2, 40% of the learners completed lower secondary education, 8% upper secondary schooling and 36% of the learners completed primary school only. Another 12% reported that they took part in technical or vocational education. Overall, 96% of participants completed some form of formal education.

² 'Other' in this case indicates that the learners were homeless

Limitations of the study

This research sought to elicit the views and experiences relevant to this particular group of adult literacy learners. As with any study, care should be taken in generalising the results of this research to all adult literacy learners. The study size is relatively small and there may be bias in the type of learner who was willing to participate in the research. This research is a starting point and we would argue raises the need for further study in this area.

Finally

The adults who took part in the research described the benefits they experienced from returning to education. Their accounts provide an invaluable insight into the benefits that engaging in adult literacy and numeracy tuition has had on all areas of their lives.

As educational, economic and social problems tend to be closely related, it is important that tackling literacy and numeracy difficulties among adults remains a high priority at policy level. NALA continues to work to raise awareness among the general public, employers and policy makers of the benefits of improving basic skills to the individual, society and the economy. By capturing the views and experiences of adult literacy and numeracy learners, we suggest that this research will contribute to this vital and necessary work.

Section 1:

Setting the Context



Setting the context

The past three decades in Ireland have seen a growing political awareness of the need to develop adult literacy policies and initiatives.

Within this context there has been official recognition of the impact of adult literacy on the individual and their families and children. Over the years, the need to address adult literacy in Ireland has continued to come to the fore, leading to:

- Ireland's participation in two major OECD studies. Firstly, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and secondly, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC);
- The publication of the White Paper on Adult Education and Learning for Life 2000;
- The inclusion of adult literacy issues in successive National Development Plans, Social Partnership Agreements, National Skills Strategies and
- Reform of the Further Education and Training Sector.

Below we briefly review some of these developments and publications.

Development of adult literacy: an overview

The publication of the **International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1997** provided Ireland with its first profile of the literacy skills of adults aged 16 – 64 years. The IALS findings showed that more than 55% of those aged 16 – 64 years performed at the lowest end of literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills. Of that population, 25% had scored at level 1³

³ Being at or below the IALS level 1 indicates that a person has profound literacy difficulties. At this level a person may, for example, have difficulty identifying the correct amount of medicine to take from the information found on the package.

and 30% at level 2⁴. The IALS authors concluded that one reason for this discrepancy was the late introduction of free second-level education in Ireland. The IALS data also showed that the people with the most profound literacy difficulties were the least likely to be involved in any education or training.

Following on from the IALS study, the **White Paper Learning for Life (2000)** was published. This document set out a holistic approach to the development of a national programme of adult education. Three core principles underpinned this framework for adult education:

- Lifelong learning as a systematic approach
- Equality
- Inter-culturalism

Learning for Life (2000) also contributed significantly to the National Adult Literacy Programme. This was the first strategy of its kind in Ireland and it was a blueprint for adult literacy development up to 2006. The overall aim of the programme was to increase the number of adult learners in the adult literacy service, prioritise those with the lowest literacy levels, and implement a quality framework to monitor the effectiveness of the service.

Adult literacy provision is provided by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) through their local adult literacy service. The literacy service offers a range of programmes that include family learning, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and workplace basic education. The service also provides Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) that offers the learner the opportunity to access intensive tuition.

Adult literacy services across the country design and deliver a wide range of programmes, accredited at levels 1 – 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), and non-accredited programmes to meet the needs of adult learners. The NFQ is a 10-level framework of standards for accreditation purposes. Levels 1 – 4 are of most relevance to those with basic skills needs, and provide an opportunity for certification, often for the first time.

⁴ Being at IALS level 2 indicates the person can deal with material that is simple, clearly laid out and in which the tasks involved are not too complex.

Learning does not always need to be classroom based. For example, NALA's distance learning service offers adults the opportunity to work over the phone with experienced literacy and numeracy tutors. The online learning website www.writeon.ie offers self-directed and blended learning and accreditation at levels 2 and 3 on the NFQ.

In 2012, the OECD published the findings from the **Survey of Adult Skills**. The survey was conducted in over 40 countries as part of the **Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)**. Some 5,983 Irish adults between the ages of 16 and 65 responded to the survey. The results for Ireland show there is a significant number of people with poor literacy and numeracy skills. Based on estimates from the OECD, the Irish results of PIAAC show that:

- 17% of Irish adults are at or below level 1 on the literacy scale. There is no statistical difference between the scores of males and females. Adults aged 25 – 34 years have the highest literacy score, while adults aged 55 – 65 years have the lowest score.
- About one in four (25%) of Irish adults score at or below level 1 on the numeracy scale. Males score higher than females by 12 points. Adults aged 25 – 34 years have the highest numeracy score, while adults aged 55 – 65 years have the lowest scores.
- 62% of Irish adults scored at or below level 1 on the problem-solving in technology-rich environments (PSTRE) scale. Males scored higher than females⁵.

Table 1: Percentage of adults at each level of literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments level in Ireland

	Below Level 1	At Level 1	At Level 2	At Level 3	At Level 4	At Level 5
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Literacy	4.3	13.2	37.7	36.2	8.1	#
Numeracy	7.1	18.2	38.2	29.0	7.0	0.6
PSTRE	18.7	43.8	32.9	4.7		

Source: OECD (PIAAC), 2012.

⁵ For a more detailed breakdown of the PIAAC results see Appendix 2

These results suggest that 521,550 Irish people between the ages 16 and 64 find everyday texts hard to understand, such as a leaflet or medicine label. The results further suggest that 754,000 people struggle with everyday maths, such as working out a bill or calculating averages. In 2016 figures from the CSO National Quarterly Household Survey showed that 481,100 Irish adults (24-64 years) had less than a Leaving Certificate or equivalent qualification (level 4).

Reform of the Irish education and training sector

Around the same time as the publication of the PIAAC data, Ireland went through the most extensive reform of further education and training in the history of the State. This presented a key opportunity for change and improvement in both practice and policy implementation in the sector. During this period, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published its **Review of ALCES funded Adult Literacy Provision in Ireland**, SOLAS was established, the **Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014 - 2019** was published, and 16 new ETBs were established⁶.

In 2013, the DES published its review of adult literacy provision in Ireland. The objectives of the review were as follows:

- Respond to commitments made in the Programme for Government, recommendations by Oireachtas Joint Committees, and calls from stakeholders for a review – the VEC Adult Literacy programme has never been reviewed.
- Serve as a basis for future policy decisions that might be made by SOLAS.
- Provide a policy link to the forthcoming publication of the results of PIAAC in October 2013.

⁶ 16 ETBs replaced the Vocational and Education Committees which had been the statutory providers of adult literacy and numeracy across the country.

- Prepare for further work around policy development, research and improvements in administration (DES, 2013: p.8).

The Review recommended a renewed emphasis on targeting priority groups, in particular the unemployed and adults at NFQ levels 1 – 3. It also recommended that access to distance and blended learning should be integrated into all service delivery, and these options should be promoted for all students in adult literacy programmes in order to increase access to learning opportunities. Therefore, distance and blended learning options such as www.writeon.ie should be offered to students both as a standalone option, and integrated into mainstream delivery. Following the review, the Government included an adult literacy and numeracy strategy in the Further Education and Training Act.

SOLAS and the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019

SOLAS was established in 2013 with a mandate that was set out in the Further Education and Training Act. One of its primary functions is to co-ordinate FET provision and provide funding for FET programmes. In 2014, SOLAS published the Further Education and Training Strategy (FET) 2014 – 2019. The FET Strategy, presents a roadmap and implementation plans designed to realise the vision of a world-class, integrated system of further education and training in Ireland which will:

- Support economic development;
- Increase social inclusion; and
- Meet the needs of all learners, communities and employers who engage with FET.

The two broad objectives of the FET Strategy are that it will:

- Meet the FET needs of citizens; and
- Promote economic development (SOLAS, 2014).

The FET Strategy includes a Literacy and Numeracy Strategy with 12 elements including:

- Encouraging increased participation, completion and attainment of major awards at levels 1, 2 and 3 by priority target groups in alignment with the existing National Skills Strategy (or with a new National Skills Strategy when published);
- Broadening access routes, including distance learning and blended learning;
- Targeting better outcomes through accredited programmes;
- Facilitating literacy provision for personal, family, social and community contexts, and providing continued funding for non-accredited group provision with emphasis on recruiting specific priority target groups (SOLAS, 2014: p.100).

Section 6 of the FET Strategy on **Active Inclusion** describes the concept as enabling every citizen, particularly those most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society and the economy. The FET Strategy highlights the importance of supporting 'hard to reach' individuals and groups to achieve their potential and reduce the cost to society of exclusion (SOLAS, 2014). It promotes the importance of developing and promoting literacy and numeracy tuition, and encouraging adults to engage in it. The attainment of literacy and numeracy is held to be fundamental to personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability. This is because it enhances participation in personal, social and economic life (SOLAS, 2014). The benefits of participation to the individual can include an increase in self-confidence and in employability as witnessed in:

increased participation and completion and attainment of major awards at levels 1, 2 and 3 with regard to priority target groups in alignment with the existing National Skills Strategy (SOLAS, 2014, p.100).

In 2016, 338,427 Irish adults participated in FET programmes. Of this number over 64,000 availed of the services and learning opportunities on offer through the adult literacy services. This includes adults engaged in adult literacy tuition, ESOL and ITABE. The majority of adults engaging

in adult literacy and numeracy programmes do so by accessing the adult literacy service provided by their local ETB (SOLAS, 2016).

Table 2: Funding Allocations Requests Reporting (FARR) data 2016

Programme	Beneficiaries	NFQ L1	NFQ L2	NFQ L3	NFQ L4	NFQ L5	Unaccredited
Adult literacy	40,186	1,630	8,012	11,672	1,121	0	17,751
ESOL	15,584	3,122	2,407	2,256	558	94	7,147
ITABE	3,327	175	1,509	958	0	0	685
Skills for work	2,958	51	399	1,070	11	0	1,427
Voluntary literacy tuition	2,160	66	104	0	0	0	1,990
Total	64,215	5,044	12,431	15,956	1,690	94	29,000

Table 2 shows that 52% (33,430) of those attending adult literacy programmes were following programmes leading to accreditation at NFQ levels 1 – 3. The majority of learners were on level 2 and level 3 programmes. The data from FARR also shows that a significant number of adults 45% (29,000) took part in unaccredited learning.

In 2016, NALA's distance learning service helped 1,075 learners to achieve level 2 and level 3 accreditation through the www.writeon.ie website. The distance learning service also enabled 238 learners to improve their basic skills through one to one tuition over the phone. As well as level 2 and level 3 accreditation, distance learners have the option to gain a NALA Certificate of Achievement for learning at level 1.

The National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025 – Ireland's Future

Current Government policy as set out in the NSS 2025 shows how it will support the development of a well-educated, well skilled and adaptable labour force. Lifelong learning will be promoted and supported alongside skills in the workplace, and the primary intent of the strategy is to ensure that Irish people use and develop their skills through civic participation

and sustainable employment. The NSS 2025 recognises the importance of all levels of education and training as integral elements of a framework for lifelong learning and skills development. This starts at early childhood provision, through school years and in learning beyond school (DES, 2016).

The NSS states that Ireland's education and training system will deliver more flexible, innovative and interdisciplinary skills provision. It recognises the important role of learners in realising this vision. For example, progress towards the realisation of the objectives in the NSS will involve systematic evaluation of learner outcomes and the active participation of all.

The NSS 2025 has six key objectives one of which is that more Irish people will engage in lifelong learning and that there will be a focus on active inclusion to support education and training and the labour market.

The NSS 2025 builds on the progress made since the last skills strategy, *Tomorrow's Skills*, which was published in 2007 and has set new indicators of progress between now and 2025. A clear challenge still remains in relation to the share of people with NQF level 3 as the highest level of education attained, which at 15.4% is still nearly double the 2025 target of 7%.

Summary

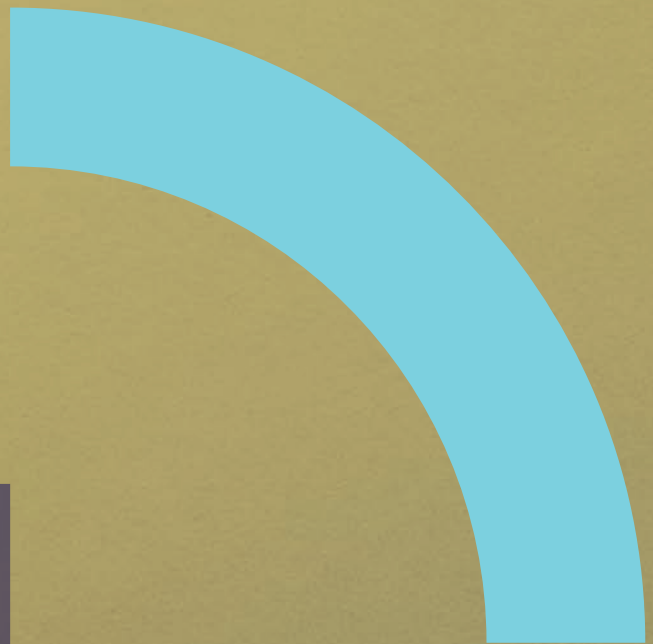
Having literacy skills is fundamental to the individual and benefits both society and the economy. The benefits of participation in adult literacy is acknowledged in the FET Strategy and NSS and each document prioritises priority groups for active inclusion in adult learning. The FET Strategy has as a strategic goal the inclusion of hard to reach individual and groups.

Government policy specifies that the priority target profiles for adult literacy programmes are adults whose literacy and numeracy are below specifies 3 on the NQF. The data from the FARR database shows that in 2016 a significant number of adults attending adult literacy programmes were following programmes leading to accreditation at NQF levels 1-4.

Developments reflected in current policy documents are clear commitments to the continuing development of the FET sector including adult literacy and numeracy provision and the important role played by FET in promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning. This is important if adults with basic skills needs are to participate fully in society and the economy.

Section 2:

Literature review of the benefits of lifelong learning



Literature review of the benefits of lifelong learning

Research suggests that lifelong learning has value for all people, and every individual has their own reasons for taking part in further education after leaving the formal education system (Whitnall, 2006).

Appropriate lifelong learning can play a positive role in promoting active citizenship, it can maintain mental and physical health, increase general wellbeing and self-confidence and help combat feelings of social isolation and exclusion (Tuckett & McAuley, 2005).

Moreover, improving and broadening the range of educational opportunities, including literacy and numeracy services available to adults, can lead to increased self-confidence, a more active social life, improved family interactions and can encourage the promotion of health in later life (Feinstein et al, 2008, Katz, 2000).

Engagement in learning can provide an incentive for further learning, and progression into other learning is an important outcome of engaging in adult education (Manninen, 2010). Research suggests that success in learning reduces the risk of people engaging in criminal activity and of reoffending whereas, failure in learning is strongly related to the propensity to commit crime, (Schuller & Watson, 2009).

Direct and indirect benefits of adult learning

Research has provided evidence of the benefits of learning beyond that which takes place in formal education. Good quality adult learning generates benefits that show up in improved wellbeing, family interactions and in other behaviours and attitudes (Bosche & Brady, 2013; Dolan et al, 2012). Schuller (2017) suggests that there are two key aspects to consider when looking at the benefits of adult learning:

- Direct and indirect benefits; and
- Benefits that vary according to level, individual and overall population.

The most direct benefits are easily measurable and, more often than not, come from programmes that are designed to produce a specific outcome, for example, qualification. Indirect effects are often unintentional, may come from engaging in literacy tuition, and can lead to an increase in confidence, which, therefore, can impact other areas of the learner's life. However, these indirect effects are inherently 'harder to capture' (Schuller, 2017: p.5).

Benefits that vary can overlap across a number of variables including education level, individual, household, community and overall population. This interaction is not necessarily straightforward, can be cumulative and can result in a range of outcomes. For example, what benefits the individual is likely to benefit their family. However, the opposite can also be the case. For example, what benefits the individual may not necessarily benefit the community. Different degrees of benefit may accrue according to an individual's gender, ethnicity or age.

In a paper that reviewed the literature on the benefits of adult education Motschilnig (2012) argues that adult education affects people's lives in ways that go beyond what can be measured by economic growth and labour market earnings. Adult education has a positive correlation with health, and influences attitudes and behaviours that directly affect people's wellbeing. Learners experience 'soft' benefits such as increased self-confidence and self-esteem alongside improved job satisfaction.

However, the paper suggests that the full benefit of adult learning is still 'a poorly understood and emerging area, with a weak basis of theory and evidence' (Motschilnig, 2012: p7). The author makes a number of recommendations for future action. These include further research and data collection, development of indicators which would provide useful information for policy makers, more regional and international comparative studies and more funding for research in this area (Motschilnig, 2012).

Benefits to the family

Participation in lifelong learning can generate benefits for wider society as well as for the individual and lead to positive benefits on immediate social groups, including the family (Manninen, 2014).

The positive benefits of learning within the family can be broken down into four specific areas:

1. Child related: where parents become more aware of how to teach their children, and take the opportunities to do so in everyday life.
2. 'Other' related: where parents gain from meeting and socialising with new people, making friends and developing a new social network.
3. Practical: where parents gain new knowledge and are awarded a certificate which motivates them to want to progress to other courses.
4. Emotional: where parents feel they are discovering their 'old selves' gaining more confidence and reawakening their brains (Bassett-Grundy, 2002).

Research carried out by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) assessed the benefits to families of engaging in family literacy programmes. The findings from the research show that both parents and children make progress in reading and that a majority of parents were able to attain qualifications. Parents reported being more involved with their children's school work, having greater self-confidence and being more willing to enrol in further courses and to seek employment (NRDC, 2009). Research also shows that adults who participate in learning are more likely to engage in their children's education, thereby improving outcomes and tackling intergeneration inequalities (OECD, 2016; NIACE, 2011A; Schuller & Desjardins, 2006).

Benefits to health

Studies have shown that adult learning is linked to healthier lifestyle and choices. The findings from the research suggest that positive mental health fosters a sense of identity and a greater sense of general wellbeing. In recent times, the general understanding of the term health has become broader to include overall wellbeing (Manninen, 2014; Duckworth & Cara, 2012).

The **Marmot Review (2010)** suggests that health can be socially determined, and most outcomes can be put down to the physical environment and socio-economic factors. Marmot also suggested that the key to reducing health inequalities is to empower people, and that one of the established routes to greater empowerment is education. Healthier behaviours and attitudes can lead to:

- Longer life expectancy; and
- A reduction in lifestyle diseases.

General good health and wellbeing translates into better learning outcomes, greater participation in social and community life, and more positive engagement in family life.

Benefits for employment

Research shows a clear link between literacy, numeracy, IT levels and level of qualification and being employed. Many studies show that those with higher level qualifications are more likely to earn more and to access training opportunities in the workplace (Felstead & Green, 2017; Kuczera et al, 2016). Adults with higher literacy, numeracy, and IT levels tend to have better outcomes in the labour market, a greater chance of being employed and of earning higher wages (OECD, 2016). For organisations and economies, this can translate into higher levels of productivity and economic growth. Individuals may see an increase in earnings, greater job satisfaction and commitment at work (Stiglitz & Greenwald, 2015; Jones et al, 2008).

BeLL Survey 2014

The **Benefits of Lifelong Learning (BeLL)** study investigated the benefits to learners of participating in adult education in 10 European countries⁷. The main purpose of the study was to investigate the individual and social benefits perceived by adults who participated in adult education courses. The findings from the study show that adult learners experience a number of benefits including feeling healthier and living healthier lifestyles, building new social networks and experiencing improved wellbeing. The participants reported that they experienced the most positive changes in their learning motivation, life satisfaction, social interaction and general wellbeing. Participants also experienced some positive changes in relation to work and career and to active citizenship (Manninen & Merilaninen, 2014).

The findings show that there were variations in the benefits of learning that were related to the demographic profile of the learners. For example, the study found that participants with primary education, or the first stage of basic education, benefited more from participation. The study shows that these learners attributed the most positive benefits in terms of their motivation to learn, confidence as a learner and a desire to encourage others to participate in learning (Manninen & Merilaninen, 2014).

Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) 2016

The GRALE report presents the latest data on adult learning and education from 139 member states. The reports suggests that adult learning and education promotes sustainable development, healthier societies, better jobs and more active citizenship. The report highlights the positive benefits of engaging in adult learning and the report presents its key findings under three overarching headings that correspond to findings

⁷ The countries that took part in the study were: the Czech Republic; Finland; Germany; Italy; Romania; Serbia; Slovenia; Spain; Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

from other research reports:

- Social and community
- Health
- Employment (UNESCO, 2016)

Engaging in lifelong learning can enable people to become more active citizens and more engaged members of society and of their communities. Participation in lifelong learning not only helps improve basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and IT, but also develops other life skills such as confidence, resilience and problem solving (UNESCO, 2016). Overall, engaging in lifelong learning can help promote social cohesion, and equip people with the competencies and knowledge to participate fully in society and in political life (UNESCO, 2016).

The UNESCO report suggests that the evidence for positive links between health and education is overwhelming. The findings show that the more educated the individual is the more likely they are to have good health.

The findings from the report show that engaging in lifelong learning can help the individual acquire the knowledge and confidence they need to access health facilities. It can also help adults resist advertising for unhealthy foods, and address 'environmental pollution' (UNESCO, 2016: p.12).

UNESCO (2016) suggests that the world of work is becoming more complex and uncertain. It suggests that:

- New technologies are changing the types of skills needed in the workplace; and
- Older people need particular support if they are to remain in the labour market (UNESCO, 2016).

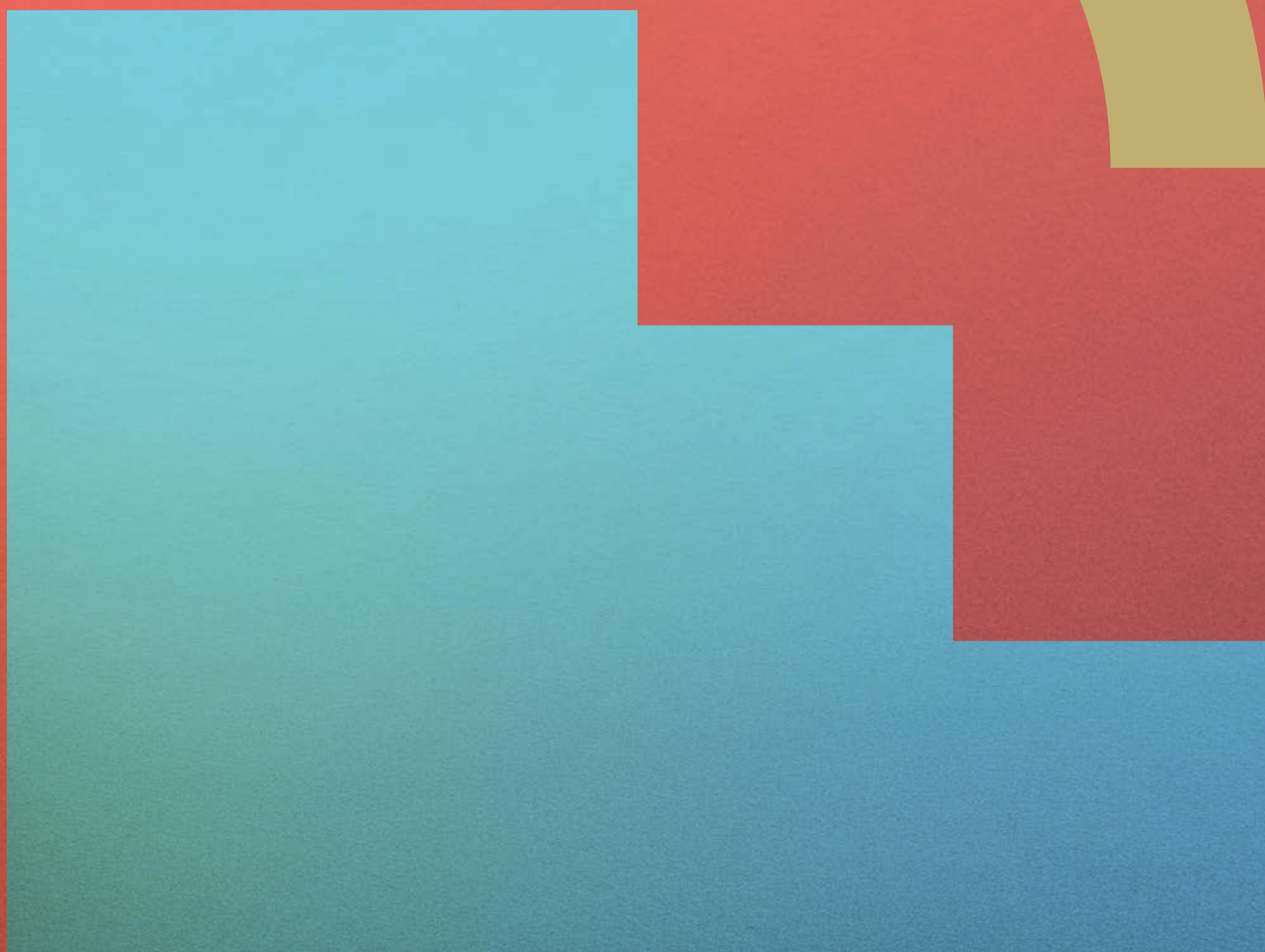
Engaging in lifelong learning can boost skills and enable people to become more employable, successful and flexible in the labour market (UNESCO, 2016).

Summary

The research shows that engaging in lifelong learning has positive benefits for the individual, society and the economy. It demonstrates benefits that positively affect people's health, work and participation in society, community and the economy. What is clear from the research is that engagement in adult education affords the individual an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills that will enhance and inform all areas of their lives, including their family life, their health and their general wellbeing.

Section 3:

Findings from
the research:
Perceived
benefits of
returning to
education



Findings from the research: Perceived benefits of returning to education

This section presents the learners' choices in the areas of their lives where returning to education has had the most benefit.

The learners chose the following areas as having had the most benefit on their lives:

- First choice - personal fulfilment
- Second choice - education
- Third choice - family

Chart 3: Top three areas where learning has had the most benefit

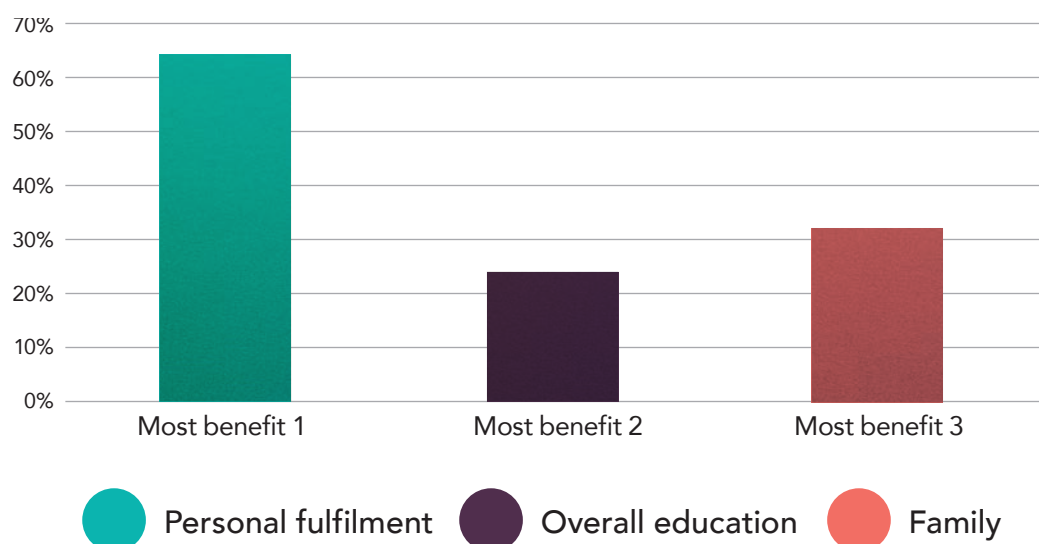


Chart 3 shows the top three areas that learners identified as having had the greatest benefit in their lives. The majority of them (64%) listed personal fulfilment including self-confidence and self-esteem as their first choice. Twenty four percent chose overall education as their second preferred option, with family life their third choice at 32%.

Area 1. Personal fulfilment

The chart on the previous page shows that the majority of all learners chose personal fulfilment as the number one area of greatest benefit. They reported how engaging in learning was generally associated with a more positive view of themselves, particularly in terms of their self-confidence, and an increase in their skills levels.

"There's a big difference now, especially, you know ... my personal life has changed so much, the personal fulfilment ... it has really fulfilled my life as a person." (SC learner)

"Personally now, I can get more involved socially and discuss what I read in the papers. Before I was afraid that I had the wrong gist of things." (DL learner)

"I'm getting on really well. Like, I'm only doing it for about three or four months now but it just gives you more confidence ... you're giving yourself more confidence all the time, especially when you're able to do things." (HA learner)

Reports ranged from 'how much they'd changed for the better' to the beneficial impact on, not only their social lives, but their social interactions with others.

"Not having great literacy skills affects your whole life, your social skills and generally talking to others. I became more confident and better informed about what was happening around me and I felt more confident in carrying out my everyday business as well as conversing with others." (DL learner)

"Well, I used to get embarrassed, I still do, and like, me confidence was down. But I have hope now, and a bit more confidence; I have confidence, a bit of hope and a bit of respect." (HA learner)

"I have a better social life now as a result. I'm able to discuss things with others, I can express myself more confidently, I have more confidence in myself and more confidence in my reading and writing." (DL learner)

Health and wellbeing

As discussed above, an increase in self-confidence emerged as the primary area of benefit to the learners. They reported how this increase became 'the engine' that drove them forward, and, according to them, had a knock-on effect on other areas of their lives including their health and wellbeing. The following extract from the focus group with the SC learners captures this point:

SC learner 1: "Education is life; it's a life-learning experience. We keep coming back to this word confidence; if you're more confident, you feel better in yourself and your health improves."

SC learner 2: "While it mightn't necessarily be a depression, like there is a negativity in that space; it mightn't be a depression, but it's like a depression."

SC learner 3: "If they could just get that message out, that people will feel better in themselves. The brain is a great healer, it's a great healer and that's something that should be emphasised, big time, as much as the three R's." [reading, writing, arithmetic]

SC learner 4: "And that'd save the State, like, a huge amount of money because they'd have less people needing help and needing medication, things like that."

The learners also reported how engaging in adult education had helped them be more confident in discussing their health issues with others, and displayed an understanding and improvement in their health literacy – particularly when dealing with medical professionals, for example, general practitioners.

"My health has improved, definitely. I don't feel stressed and I can discuss my problems better with the doctor." (DL learner)

"It takes a toll on your health physically and mentally, when you're carrying such a big secret like having poor literacy skills. But when your self-esteem is high, you're more able to talk about things and it makes you feel better." (HA learner)

"I'm more confident to ask my doctor about my health. I ask questions now that I never really understood before." (DL learner)

Involvement in community life

One of the learners reported how as he grew in confidence he became more involved in community life. He told how through his interaction with a local elderly lady he discovered that she loved to play bingo, but was 'afraid' to go to the local bingo hall because of her literacy and numeracy issues. Her story is captured in the following vignette.

"This lady, she lived in a rural part of the county, there wasn't much going on there, she didn't go out much, but there was a local bingo thing set up in the community hall. She loved to play bingo, and played telly bingo, but she was afraid to go to the bingo hall. She

was afraid of meeting people, but she was really afraid what would happen when she went there. She was scared of going and getting the book, afraid that she wouldn't be able to mark it and just afraid that she wouldn't be up to it. So, over time I talked her into going and one night she decided to go and I brought her to bingo. She couldn't believe it, she couldn't believe how simple and easy it was, and that was her first big step to really integrating in the local community. Now she's part of a group, they call themselves The Wool Pack, and all these ladies do knitting and things like that. I still keep tabs on her but the whole thing has changed her life immensely."

Money issues

Money was a meaningful and useful context in which the learners understood and developed their financial literacy and numeracy. The increase in their financial literacy afforded them an opportunity to question financial matters in a way they might not have done before returning to education.

"I used to, you know, you know, when it came to paying bills and that ... what do you call it when it comes out of the bank? ... oh yeah, direct debt. Well I just got rid of that and now I do it myself over the phone or online. I use the automatic system and I wouldn't have dreamt of using that before. That's a huge step forward for me and I'm not paying anyone else to pay me bill." (SC learner)

Others reported how being in control of their money situation takes the 'stress' out of carrying out every day financial transactions, and, therefore, has a positive effect on overall health and wellbeing.

"Do you know, like, you'd be worrying about bills, going out and trying to get money together to run down to the bank and say 'I hope that goes in on time.' It's great, 'cause you're not only using your literacy, you're using your numeracy and maths as well, you know?" (SC learner)

"But it's health wise too. I mean, I'd have worry issues over that, and it's taking the stress away. Ah sure, I'd be tossing and turning all night because I'd be worried if the mortgage payment was going out on time." (SC learner)

Emotional impact

The sense of empowerment that comes from being in control of different areas of their lives often had a huge emotional impact on the learners. The process of coming to terms with the magnitude of their learning journey was quite often overwhelming. One learner recalled the rollercoaster of emotions involved, and that came to the fore when they were asked to speak at a public forum to share their story with other adults in similar situations. The following vignette shows how the learner was left emotionally drained, elated and empowered by the experience.

"I remember I was asked to go and give a talk somewhere, and it was the first time I did it. I was talking about where I started and where I was now, and it was just like 'wow, I did this.' It's hard to explain, but when I got outside I just cried, it was so emotional. People were asking me if I was all right and I had to tell them 'I'm not depressed.' It was just when I spoke, it was such a release; I thought of where I was and it brought it all back to me. There's people out there and it's like they're in a little box, like they can't fit in, and they can't function as an individual in the community, and it impacts on your life, on everyone's life. I used to be so negative and I'd hide away. I was like a mouse in a room looking for a hole to hide in, and here I was now talking in front of people. Like before I felt inadequate, like I didn't fit in. And now ... well now, I just want to shout it from the top of the highest mountain, do you know? I wasn't able to read or write and there are loads of people like me still out there ... and now I say, come along, get involved, there's plenty of room for everyone, do you understand? That's what literacy is, that's what it's like, you know, it's about learning, it's about learning for life."

The excerpts and vignettes above reflect how an increase in personal development, self-confidence and self-esteem has had a positive benefit on different areas of the learners' lives. This includes having the confidence to take control of their personal finances and has benefited their health and wellbeing and has allowed them to be more active in their communities.

Area 2. Overall education

Learner reasons for returning to education

We explored with all learners their motivations and reasons for returning to education. One of the most consistent findings was that the learners returned to education to improve their literacy skills but also to improve their self-confidence. Many of the learners said that they felt like it was 'their time', they wanted to 'improve' themselves and/or they wanted to work on improving a particular skill, for example, reading or spelling.

"I was 53 years old and I couldn't read or write, so at that stage I said to myself 'I'm going to do this for me'." (SC learner)

"...for me it's the spellings, like even with some simple words like 'there' I'd be thinking is it 'there' or 'their'. There are so many ways of doing words and there are so many big words that I'd say 'I don't know what I'm on about and I'd lose confidence.'" (HA learner)

The learners described how before they made the decision to return to education, they had, at times, a negative perception of themselves. Many described how in some situations they felt 'thick' or stupid.

"I had to go back to education and find out for myself that I wasn't stupid. It drives me spare, you know, that so many people still think that, like, there's people out there who have been told that they're stupid ... that's why they won't walk in the door and do something about it." (SC learner)

However, once they began to engage in learning, they realised they were competent, critical-thinking adults as the following quotes illustrate.

"I always thought it was me. I always thought that I was just thick. Like there are still days now if I get frustrated ... if I'm not getting something ... but now I say to myself 'Keep it cool, you'll get there. You will. You don't want to go back to where you were.' Like, it's one step at time, one thing at a time, that's it." (HA learner)

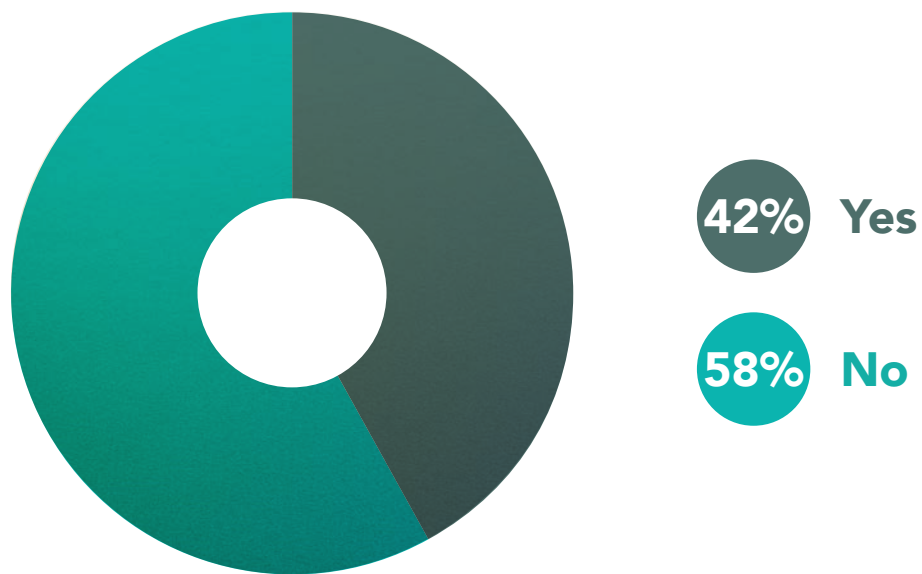
"It's just about feeling better about yourself as a person ... I just feel I'm a better person, more competent; and not just that ... it's more than competence, it's more than asking your doctor about your health, it's the ripple effect, it's hard to find the words, it's about the way it impacts on your life. Do you know what I mean?" (SC learner)

Learning options

Having explored with the learners their reasons for returning to education, we then examined with them their learning journey or learning pathways to date. The majority of the learners were returning to education for the first time and were working on improving their basic skills. In these instances returning to education was about 'just learning', 'learning at my own ease' and 'learning in my own time'. For some, achieving certification was not on their list of priorities for now. However, they reported it was something they would consider 'in time' as their skills level increased.

Achieving accreditation

Chart 4a: Are you working towards a certificate?



Charts 4a shows that less than half of the learners (42%) were working towards achieving accreditation. This is not unexpected as most of the learners were at level 1 and certification is not available at this level.

Chart 4b: Are you interested in getting a certificate?

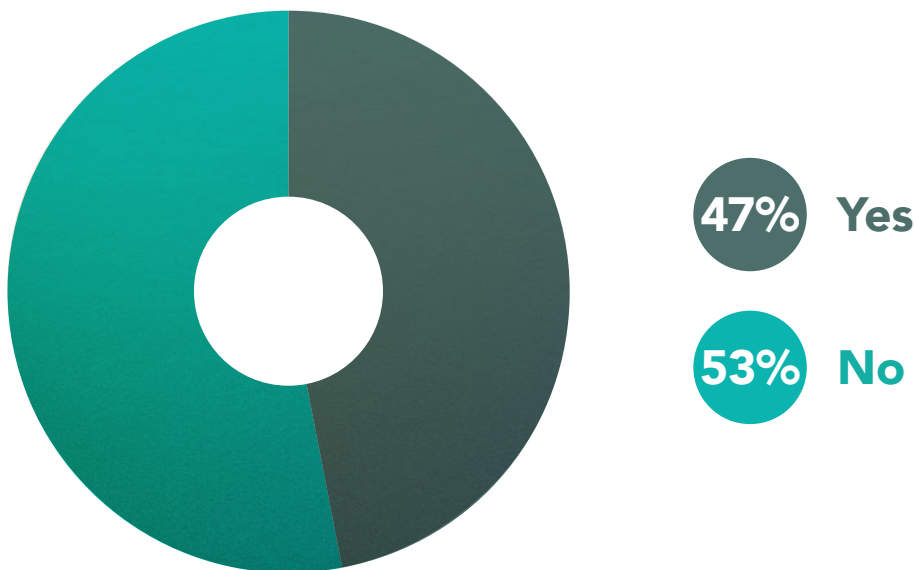


Chart 4b shows slightly more of the learners (47%) reported that they were interested in getting a certificate in the future as their skills increased.

Some of the learners recognised the importance of taking a slow and steady approach to their learning. They were focused on improving their 'basic skills,' be it reading, writing or spelling, and certification is something that 'may happen down the line'. A few learners reported that the last thing they wanted to do is 'set themselves up for failure' and stressed the importance of taking 'small steps' and not jumping ahead too quickly.

"I'm just concentrating on the small things at the moment ... like eventually I'll go on to bigger things, but at the moment it's just the small things ... I don't want to be jumping into things too fast." (HA learner)

"I don't want to get bogged down in that at the moment, like education, it shouldn't be all about certs. At the moment I'm educating myself." (SC learner)

To a large extent, these accounts highlight the nervousness and trepidation that many adults feel about re-engaging in education. For many, the most important thing was making the decision to return, and then making the further decision of staying engaged in the process. For many adults, the process can often be stressful, but they reported how, over time, their attitude towards staying in education and ultimately going for and getting a certificate began to change.

"When I first went back, it was enough just getting myself to the course. I remember when I done my first homework. I didn't do it all and I was worried about getting in trouble. Then I realised I was capable and I started thinking about 'getting the piece of paper'." (SC learner)

The learners told us about the modules they completed to date and the certification they have achieved. Some of the learners reported that they now have certificates in computers, numeracy, communications and general learning at QQI levels 2, 3 and 4. Many have minor awards and were working to achieve a major award.

Many of the learners were early school leavers, or had left school without any formal qualifications. They reported how they 'couldn't read or write' before taking part in adult education and how now their literacy skills were improving and some were achieving certification up to NFQ level 4.

"I had a gap in my education; I wasn't that good in school. I couldn't read very well, and the spellings were always a problem. I would be always nervous about filling forms in front of people. But now I can see myself improving and I'm able to read books and magazines." (DL learner)

"I was well into me 50s and I couldn't read or write, and they spotted this when I went in [to adult literacy service] but I've just blossomed from there. I've gone on to do me Junior Cert and I'm working now on getting level 4." (SC learner).

For others, it was about 'completing' the education they felt they had originally missed out on. They reported that their literacy needs and 'lack of education' held them back and, because of this, they felt they had missed out on so much in their lives. However, having made the decision to return to education, they reported that with every step they took their sense of personal achievement grew.

"I left school at an early age, about 14; I couldn't even write my name on a card, like. Then I went back [to education] and I started progressing ... every award I got I felt like I was going somewhere, it was brilliant." (SC learner)

"It's the fulfilment and the sense of achievement that I'm after getting out of it. I couldn't read or write and now I'm gone to level 3 [QQI]. Now I'm standing up for meself and others ... I'm representing literacy in the community." (SC learner)

"I missed out on so much 'cause of me education and I just kept thinking 'ah it's a bit late now'. But I don't think like that anymore. Like I'm a bit slow with me education and sometimes I forget things, but I'm giving it a go." (HA learner)

"It's the first little step you take and just gently progress, gently moving on...and it helped me, like, until now I have the confidence to stand on my own." (SC learner)

Others learners reported that, once they put their mind to 'doing something', they will complete it successfully. They remarked on the 'other skills' they have acquired alongside developing their literacy skills.

"For me, it's all about the education, you see. Twenty years ago I wouldn't have thought I was capable of doing what I'm doing now. I'm doing so many different things. I'm chairing meetings, I'm giving presentations, I'm giving people information. Years ago, I wouldn't

have dreamt I'd be capable of doing that." (SC learner)

One student in particular told of how he now realises that, in the past, the only barrier stopping him achieving what he needed to achieve was himself.

"You know what, people are capable of anything, and students are capable of anything. The only barrier is themselves, that's all. We build those barriers, we build them high and we shouldn't do that. I know I'll never do that again." (SC learner)

The following vignette expands on this point.

"All around me, all I saw was people that were good with the reading and writing ... and I thought 'hang on a minute ... I want to be able to do that.' I didn't want to be the odd one out anymore, I want to be able to get meself sorted out ... like, write out me own application forms, or CV, and not have to depend on other people to do it for me. That's what I want; that's me goal, that is. Say essay writing and stuff like that; I want to be able to write things down; I want to be able to do a diary and stuff like that. I never knew people had diaries. I'd love to be able to do that, and then just look at it and be able to say 'this is what I done today.' Maybe do a short story about the last few years, like a short story about meself. That's what I'd like to do. It'd be about what I missed out on for the last 30 years, what I missed out on. And I will do that, eventually. It'd be about what happened to me, where I ended up and where I am now. I'd love to do that, I would. I'd be really proud. But this is gonna take time for me, it's gonna take time. But you know, Rome wasn't built in a day. It's about me confidence and me self-esteem and I'll get there one day. I'll get there. Keep the faith."

Many of the learners talked about the importance of building a relationship with the tutor delivering tuition. The learners described how the tutor was instrumental in helping them overcome their initial negative experience of education and any adverse relationship with school teachers.

"It's the tutor that can help turn your life around, and do you know what? Up to that day, I never thought that any teacher could turn my life around, but there was, and that was the maths tutor. He made me realise I wasn't stupid, 'cause I always thought that I was stupid." (SC, Learner)

The accounts provided by the learners help to show that, for many, returning to education was an opportunity to not only improve their literacy skills, but also to complete their education. There was also the additional benefit of instilling in them a sense of optimism and confidence in their ability to succeed. They reveal to some extent how the learners perceived that returning to education was an important, positive and beneficial turning point in their lives. This is reflected throughout their narratives.

Area 3. Family

The third area the learners chose as having the most benefit was their family life. Our data shows that for many of the learners, participating in adult learning helps them to support their children's and grandchildren's education. Below are some of the responses from the DL learners.

"I need to be able to help my kids with their homework."

"To feel more confident to help the kids with their homework."

"I can help my grandkids with their homework."

One learner described engaging in education as having been of benefit regarding the home-school relationship, including parent-teacher meetings.

"I remember we were at a meeting for parents in the school and I'd be down the back of the room in case I'd be spotted or picked out. Now I'm up the front. I'm asking questions about the kids' education and that's a whole big difference that education gave me ...it's opened up the whole world to me." (SC learner)

For some of the other learners it was important to them that family 'feel proud of them'. Looking at the data we can ascertain that there are tangible benefits to taking part in adult learning. Indeed, the learners themselves talked about how their engagement in lifelong learning had had a positive impact on all members of the family. One of the learners told us that she was aware of how returning to education had been of benefit to her in terms of her skills level and her self-confidence. However, she decided to ask her family if it had been of benefit to them. Their response is documented in the vignette below.

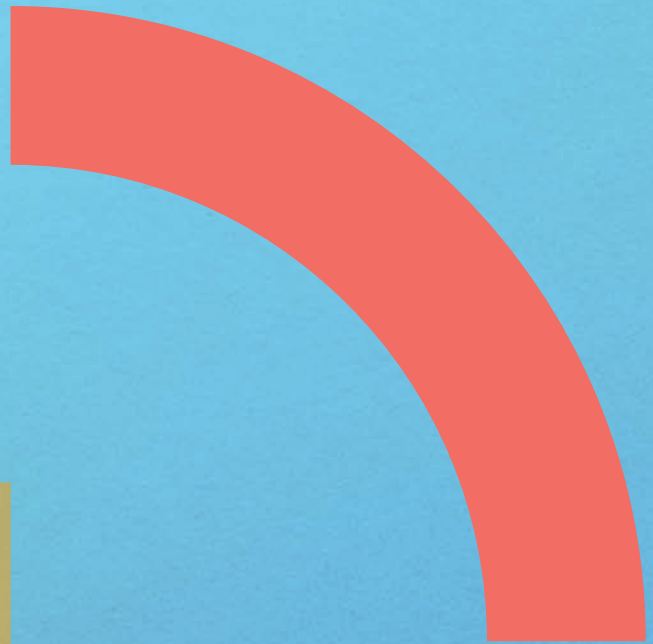
"I know how going back to learning has been good for me, but I thought I'd ask my family what they thought about it. I wanted to get their opinion. So my eldest boy said 'self-assurance and confidence and I think more healthier in mind and soul and a strength in character that I had not seen before. I've seen more of the person my mother is through her eyes and her words since she's taken the journey of education'. My daughter said 'The thing I have noticed over the years since you started your journey back to education is your confidence has gone through straight through the roof. I was so proud of you when you did the programme as I know how nervous you were about what people would think, but you kept up with it, which was the right thing to do. When you wrote my first birthday card to me, I was so proud and it meant the world to me. You getting involved with whatever has been asked of you and with helping others get back to education, it's helped you come out of your shell and you get loads of new friends through it.' And me husband also, he said 'now you see things as challenges instead of obstacles and you like a good challenge.' So that was his synopsis. For me, it was ... I just wanted, I know how much I got out of it, but I wanted to see what people closest to me thought that I got out of it, but I knew I always had their

support, which was great. I know some people don't get the support, of family and that, not just with, like, husband and children, but family where running the house was concerned. If something went wrong in the house, I would often wait till me husband came in and say 'will you make a phone call, the washing machine has broken down'."

This vignette aptly reflects how engaging in adult learning is an important way of recognising and building on the strengths of families. Research shows that adult learning can have be of benefit to the individual and their families, it can provide a low pressure, safe and enjoyable way back into education. It also has an impact on employability and engagement in society (NIACE, 2013).

Section 4:

Discussion



Introduction

In the preceding chapters in this report we presented the design of the study, provided a brief review of national and international literature and presented findings which show the main benefits of engaging in adult learning, in particular, adult literacy and numeracy tuition. In total 32 learners, 14 women and 18 men, aged 24 – 65+ years took part in this research.

The research uncovered great uniformity in the responses of the learners and their accounts suggest many common experiences with regard to returning to education. For the majority of learners, re-engaging with learning has been beneficial to their lives in a number of ways, and has had the greatest benefit in terms of their personal fulfilment, including an increase in their self-confidence and self-esteem.

In keeping with the international literature our findings show that lifelong learning can help increase self-confidence and wellbeing, can help maintain and increase mental and physical health and can play a positive role in promoting active citizenship (Dolan et al, 2012; Feinstein et al, 2008; Whitnall, 2007; Tuckett & McAuley, 2005).

The UNESCO Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (2016), (GRALE) lists the main benefits of engaging in lifelong learning under three overarching headings:

- Social and community
- Health
- Employment

An overview of the findings from this research shows that our learners listed the main benefits to them under the following headings:

- Personal development
- Education
- Family

Overview of the findings

Personal development

The active inclusion section of the FET Strategy 2014-2019 outlines the important role that further education and training has in promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning. The strategy highlights the importance of developing and promoting adult literacy and numeracy tuition and the benefits of participation to the individual. These benefits include an increase in self-confidence. The findings from our research support this statement.

The consensus among our learners was that one of the main benefits of engaging in adult literacy and numeracy tuitions was an increase in self-confidence. Irrespective of age or gender, our learner accounts concentrated on the positive impact and benefits that returning to education has had on their lives. The findings show that a significant number of learners directly attributed a new sense of confidence and wellbeing to taking part in adult learning.

The accounts from the learners provide glimpses of how their increased sense of confidence played out in different areas of their lives. For example, many reported that where before they may have been reluctant to socialise they now have a 'better social life', they tend to get 'more involved' in social activities and community life. This includes encouraging others to 'go out and socialise more'.

The findings demonstrate an increase in health awareness and health literacy among the learners. They reported how they felt more confident discussing their health issues, in particular, with healthcare professionals. Our findings show an increased sense of empowerment among the learners especially when it came to taking control of their financial and money issues. The learner accounts demonstrate how they 'felt more in control' of their finances and were less 'stressed' about carrying out financial transactions.

These findings are in line with international literature, in particular the 2016 UNESCO report. **GRALE** suggests that participation in lifelong

learning not only helps improve basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and IT, but also develops other life skills such as confidence, resilience and problem solving. The development of these 'soft skills' are amply reflected in the accounts provided by the learners who took part in this research and are very much in line with the social and community theme of **GRALE**.

Education

The Irish Government is investing more in education now than they did in previous decades, and this is to be welcomed. The latest developments reflected in current policy documents are clear commitments to the continuing development of the FET sector, including adult literacy and numeracy provision. There is a growing recognition that failure at policy level to address literacy difficulties among the adult population has the potential to damage the economy, increase unemployment and poverty rates, and exclude many groups from participating fully in society.

Our findings show 40% of the learners have less than Leaving Certificate qualification. Their reasons for returning to education varied from 'wanting to complete their education' to wanting to improve a particular skills such as reading or spelling. However, all were in agreement that the 'journey' back into education and the act of engaging in educational programmes had helped develop their sense of personal fulfilment and achievement.

They reported that their pathways back into education varied, however most believed it was 'their time', they wanted to 'improve themselves' and complete the education they felt that they had 'missed out on'.

The learners reported that taking part in adult learning had the additional benefit of affording them an opportunity to socialise in the company of other adults. They described how returning to education had enabled them to understand that in the past the main barrier to returning to education was past negative experiences with the education system.

Many of the learners had achieved accreditation and reported that they were proud of themselves for 'getting the piece of paper'. For the others, progression or achieving accreditation was not a priority for them but was something they might consider in the future as their skills level improved. Many were interested in 'learning for learning sake'.

This finding is in line with international research that shows that progression into other learning is an important outcome of adult education (Manninen, 2010). The **GRALE** report indicates that engaging in lifelong learning has the added benefits of promoting social cohesion and equipping learners with the knowledge and competencies to fully participate in social and political life.

Family

According to the FET Strategy 2014 - 2019 the attainment of literacy and numeracy is held to be fundamental to personal fulfilment, active citizenship, employability and social cohesion. Element 6 of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy contained in the FET Strategy outlines the facilitation of literacy provision for personal, social and community and family contexts.

The Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020 also gives particular attention to the importance of enabling adults to improve their skills in order to support children's literacy and numeracy development. Research shows that adults can be brought back to learning, and encouraged to develop through their participation in family learning programmes (NIACE, 2013).

Our data shows that the benefit of adult learning was felt keenly in the home environment. The personal accounts from our learners attest to the positive impact learning has had on their ability to help their children and grandchildren with their homework. Engaging in adult learning can help to build the literacy strengths of all family members and the findings from this report reflects this in no small measure.

One learner in particular told how her journey back into education inspired other members of her family, and how they supported and encouraged her in that journey. Her family noticed how her 'confidence had gone through the roof', how 'obstacles' had become 'challenges' and how she had become 'healthier in mind and soul'.

This is in line with research that suggests the benefits of engaging in family literacy go way beyond the development of literacy skills. These include social and emotional benefits for parents and children as well as

the development of parents' confidence in their own literacy skills (Morgan & O'Donnell, 2016). The research also suggests that the positive effects of learning within the family can be broken down into specific areas that include, practical, emotional and child related (Bassett & Grundy, 2002).

Further research

This study has gone some way towards exploring the benefits to adults of engaging in adult learning in an Irish context. The findings to a large extent demonstrate the positive benefits on several areas of their lives including improved mental and physical health and improved family interactions. Nonetheless, further research is needed if we are to fully appreciate, understand and respond to the educational needs of adult learners in Ireland.

As a next step, we recommend the development of thematic papers informed by the findings from this research. We suggest that the papers are based on the three overarching themes in the GRALE report.

- Thematic paper 1: Social and community
- Thematic paper 2: Health
- Thematic paper 3: Employment

The thematic papers will build on the findings from this report as well as adding to the knowledge base of existing research at national and international level. We further suggest that the papers pay particular attention to the Active Inclusion section of the FET Strategy and incorporates the relevant elements of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, that focus on 'facilitating literacy provision for personal, family social and community contexts' (SOLAS, 2014:p.100).

Conclusion

In its broadest terms, the research set out to capture the views of adult learners on the benefits of engaging in adult learning. Its primary aim was to capture the benefits that engagement has had on them as individuals and on the different areas of their lives including their personal development, their overall health and wellbeing and their family.

Data from FARR shows that over 60,000 adults participated in adult literacy tuition in 2016. Yet, the data from PIAAC indicates that over 500,000, or one in four Irish people, have literacy difficulties. The relatively low participation rate in adult literacy services seems to indicate that the benefits of engaging in adult learning are not fully understood by those most in need of intervention and inclusion.

The report by Mooney & O'Rourke (2017) suggests that the main challenge for FET in Ireland is to encourage a more positive perception of FET and encouraging adults to view it as a high quality visible pathway to work or higher education. The NSS 2025 states that more Irish people will engage in lifelong learning and that there will be a focus on active inclusion to support education and training and the labour market. An effective way to do this is to highlight the benefits of participation to targeted groups in society, particularly those outlined in the Active Inclusion section of the FET Strategy.

NALA aims to improve outcomes for adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties in Ireland by using research to show why literacy matters to Irish society and to campaign for further investment in raising adult literacy levels in Ireland. The findings from this research show that adult learning has demonstrable benefits including increased confidence, health and wellbeing. We believe these findings are of significance to practitioners and policy makers, will inform current debates and strategies on the importance of improving basic skills among the Irish population and highlight the important role that adult learning plays in this.

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Appendix 1

NALA's student development work

Since its establishment in 1980, NALA has been instrumental in promoting and advocating for a model of adult education which is learner centred and learner directed. This student-centred approach was reflected in the publication of NALA's policy document **Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work**. The publication of the Guidelines was an important step towards creating quality adult literacy provision in Ireland. The key principles of good adult literacy work state:

- Adult literacy work is based on a philosophy of adult education which is concerned with personal development and social action.
- Adult literacy is an active and expressive process. Students have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how, where and when they wish to learn.
- Adult literacy work respects different beliefs, cultures and ways of being. An ethical code of trust and confidentiality underpins all aspects of the work.
- Students' knowledge and skills are vital for the effective organisation of adult literacy work. Students should have the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of provision.
- Adults learn best when the decision to return to learning is their own, and the environment is supportive, relaxed and friendly (NALA, 2012: p.7).

The principles reflect the importance of student-centred learning, literacy as a social practice and a humanistic approach to adult learning. The Guidelines also suggest that, ideally, adult literacy learning should not be linked to welfare benefits or employment.

NALA's Strategic Plan 2017 – 2019

NALA's current strategic plan sets out how NALA aims to improve outcomes for adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties in Ireland. The strategic plan has three core objectives:

- To build awareness of the importance of literacy for a more inclusive Ireland;
- To lead innovation in the teaching and learning of adult literacy, numeracy and basic digital skills; and
- To seek further investment in raising adult literacy and numeracy levels in Ireland (NALA, 2016: p.4).

NALA is committed to supporting people with literacy and numeracy difficulties so that they can fully take part in society and have access to the learning opportunities that meet their needs. We remain fully committed to literacy and numeracy development as a human right and to ensuring that no adult is left behind. The key themes that will inform and support the full implementation of the strategic plan outline how NALA will:

Support learners with an emphasis on learning strategies, literacy for employment, health literacy and basic digital skills;

Strengthen the work we do in advocating on behalf of learners and supporting literacy and lifelong learning;

Develop innovative ways of supporting literacy development at all stages of someone's life (NALA, 2016: p.15).

NALA's ongoing commitment to student development work is reflected in the involvement of learners at executive level, the establishment of a student subcommittee, the hosting of two annual student days, and activities supported by the NALA Student Development Fund⁸. These are discussed briefly below.

⁸ Reports from the Student Days and Student Development Fund and evaluations of the distance learning service are available to download free from the NALA website www.nala.ie

NALA student subcommittee

The student subcommittee was set up in 2005 and is made up of current and former literacy and numeracy learners. The work of the subcommittee is supported by the NALA Student and Membership Officer. The main role of the subcommittee is to gather and discuss learners' views and share these with the NALA Board and staff. There are currently 14 members on the subcommittee.

The subcommittee is committed to making sure that the views and experiences of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties:

- Provide NALA with further insights into adult literacy issues;
- Guide and inform the quality of NALA's work; and
- Are heard and taken account of by practitioners and policy makers.

The subcommittee has a role in organising the NALA student days and making decisions about allocating the student development fund. The subcommittee also works with NALA staff to support awareness-raising, building NALA membership and representing student issues at external events.

NALA student days

NALA hosts two annual student days. In 2016, 197 adult learners attended two events in Dublin and Kilkenny. Each student day provides a variety of workshops, and they are an important way for NALA to find out about issues that affect learners. For example, at the student days in 2016, learners said they:

- Want more tuition hours and classes over the summer;
- Did not know enough about adult literacy services before they started a class;
- Had a bad experience at school, but adult education is more positive;

- Would like to get a student card;
- Think that not every learner gets the same information about qualifications; and
- Found that having literacy difficulties was a contributing factor to depression (NALA, 2016, p.62).

NALA publishes annual reports on the student days that include recommendations from students on issues that affect adult learners, and on the adult education service they would like to see provided.

NALA student development fund

The NALA student development fund provides funding to individual centres where literacy and numeracy tuition take place. It is a subsidy towards a non-tuition group event for adult learners. The overall purpose of the fund is to encourage student development, and is concerned with students having a voice and taking part in decision making that significantly affects them.

In 2016, the student development fund provided funding to 68 organisations. In turn, 1,666 were involved in events funded under the development fund. Of this number, 1,284 gave feedback to NALA on the topics outlined below:

1. Barriers to education – what made it difficult for you to go back to education? The **two main issues** for learners were a lack of confidence in their own abilities and feeling embarrassed and fearful of being judged.
2. Using technology – does technology help you learn? Learners said that technology helped them learn by allowing them to search for information on the internet and using what they learnt to find out about and do new things. They also said that technology makes learning in the classroom more interesting and suited adults who have different learning styles.

3. Progression – learners said that, to varying degrees, they have discussed with their tutors where they would like to go next in their learning journey. When asked what might hold them back from achieving their learning goals, the most frequent statement was ‘a lack of confidence’.

When asked about the impact of the fund, four key themes were identified by adult literacy organisers. These were:

- Changing practice in the classroom
- Broadening the experience of learners
- Contributing to a sense of teamwork and community
- Enabling events that may not have happened without the fund

The reports on the fund affords NALA an opportunity to highlight with practitioners and providers issues that are of particular relevance to adult learners.

NALA distance learning service

Since 2000, NALA has been operating a Distance Learning Service (DLS) that uses mass media – including radio and television – to highlight literacy issues and provide individualised learning to those learners not engaging with local services.

The primary aim of NALA's DLS is to provide high-quality, free distance learning opportunities targeted at improving literacy regardless of social, economic and cultural backgrounds, and taking into account all levels of technical ability.

In September 2008, NALA launched **www.writeon.ie**, a website offering learning and national accreditation at level 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications for Ireland. In October 2010, the site was updated to offer Level 3 learning and accreditation. NALA distance learning tutors work with adult learners over the phone, by email or by post. On average, each learning session last thirty minutes. In 2016, the DLS helped 1,075

learners achieve level 2 and level 3 QQI accreditation through the **www.writeon.ie** website. In 2017 NALA unaccredited bridging content was introduced to help learners make the significant move from QQI level 2 to QQI level 3.

NALA aims to improve the outcomes for adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties by building awareness of the importance of literacy and numeracy for a more inclusive Ireland. In order to fully achieve this aim, NALA will continue to carry out research that gathers the views of learners and share these with educators, policy makers and Government.

Appendix 2

PIAAC results for Ireland

Literacy

- More than half (54%) of adults with level 1 or less, and (57%) of adults with level 2 literacy are women.
- The average age of the respondents with level 1 or less is 44 years and that of respondents with level 2 is 41 years.
- Over half (55%) of the sample with level 1 or less has lower secondary education or less.
- About a third (34%) of the sample with level 1 or less have had no paid work in the last five years.

Numeracy

- Over half (60%) of the sample with level 1 or less and (58%) of the sample with level 2 are women.
- The average age of the respondents with level 1 or less is 43 years.
- Almost half (49%) of the sample with level 1 or less have lower secondary education or less.
- Nearly half (48%) of the sample with level 2 have upper secondary education or less.
- Almost one third (31%) of the sample with level 1 or less have had no paid work in the last five years.

Problem solving in technology-rich environments (PSTRE)

- Over half (58%) of the sample with level 1 or less and 51.6% of the sample with level 2 are women.
- The average age of the respondents with level 1 or less is 39 years, and respondents with level 2 is 34 years.
- Over one quarter (26%) of respondents with level 2 have upper secondary education or less.
- Nearly a quarter (22%) have tertiary education (bachelor degree).
- 41% of respondents with level 1 or less have upper secondary education or less, and 22% have post-secondary (non-tertiary) education.

Of the adults surveyed, 10% said they had no computer experience, 5% failed the assessment, and 17% opted not to take a computer-based assessment⁹.

⁹ The OECD has cautioned that the levels of PSTRE are affected by the percentage of respondents who opted out of the computer-based assessment. Therefore, the PSTRE scores are not representative of the full population of computer users across the country.



National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh



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