



Introduction

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) welcomes the opportunity to offer our views on the new Pathways to Work strategy.

Unmet adult literacy and numeracy needs have devastating consequences for individuals, communities and the economy¹ and are a factor in social exclusion and inequality. For those without sufficient literacy and numeracy in our society, taking part in work and lifelong learning opportunities is severely restricted. The World Literacy Foundation reported that people with low literacy are:

“trapped in a cycle of poverty with limited opportunities for employment or income generation and higher chances of poor health, turning to crime and dependence on social welfare or charity (if available).”²

Literacy changes lives and benefits everyone – individuals, society and the economy. Literacy, numeracy and digital skills enable people to reach their full potential, be active and critical participants in society and help address poverty and social exclusion. People with higher levels of literacy, numeracy and problem solving using technology skills, are more likely to have better health and a longer life, be employed and earn better incomes.³

¹ OECD (2013) Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills

² World Literacy Foundation (2015) The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy

³ OECD (2013) Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills

Defining literacy

NALA defines literacy as involving:

“listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communications: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals, families and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.”⁴

Literacy is not only a set of technical skills. Rather it is a process that is shaped and influenced by the social context in which it is used. Literacy should be understood as necessary to all domains of people’s lives as there are different literacies associated with different areas of life. For example, the ways we use literacy in technology, at home, in a learning environment, as part of a social or sports club, or in our community life, varies enormously.

Literacy is not about individual intelligence, literacy is about social, economic and cultural opportunity – and having equal access to opportunity is key. In Ireland there is a widening gap between those that have such opportunities and those that do not. In addition it has been shown that those who need the most assistance are the least likely to be assisted (Matthew effect).⁵ The United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda aims to address this through their commitment to reaching the **furthest behind first**.

Literacy and numeracy needs in Ireland

Recent research⁶ shows that one in six Irish adults (521,550 people) find reading and understanding everyday texts difficult: for example, reading a leaflet, bus timetable or medicine instructions. One in four (754,000 people) has difficulties in real world maths, from basic addition/subtraction to calculating averages.

Recent data from the Central Statistics Office⁷ shows us that currently there are 445,800 people (aged 25-64) who have less than a QQI Level 4 qualification. These include:

- 233,300 (52%) employed;
- **24,900 (6%) unemployed** and
- **187,600 (42%) not engaged in the labour force.**

⁴ NALA (2012) Guidelines on good adult literacy work

⁵ Kerckhoff, A. and Glennie, E. (1999), The Matthew Effect in American Education. Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization

⁶ Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2012 Survey Results for Ireland: CSO, Dublin

⁷ CSO (2018) Education Attainment Thematic Report

Low literacy costs, strong literacy pays

Unmet literacy and numeracy needs costs everyone: our society, economy and environment, financially and democratically.

The cost of unmet literacy and numeracy needs to the global economy is estimated at USD \$1.2 trillion.⁸ A **cost benefit analysis** of adult literacy in Ireland concluded that by investing in adult literacy there is a positive and rapid return on investment across the board, for participants, the companies they work for, the Exchequer as well as a significant return to economic development.⁹ The report found that “expenditure on adult literacy training generates high economic returns”. It estimated that the annual income gain per person per level increase on the National Qualifications Framework was €3,810. The gain to the Exchequer, in terms of reduced social welfare transfers and increased tax payments, being €1,531 per annum.

Unmet literacy needs also have a **social cost** – across the domains of health (both physical and mental), crime, welfare and education and family.¹⁰ Unmet literacy needs have also been linked to other social issues such as addiction, homelessness and suicide.

Literacy and work

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills, as part of lifelong learning, are essential in helping to develop the workplace skills of adults in the labour force. The further education and training sector has a vital role to play in the providing these learning opportunities for both unemployed and employed adults.

Investment in supporting unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs among the adult population can help meet these challenges.

We know that people with unmet literacy and numeracy needs are treated less equally in society with less access to services and opportunities. There is often inequality in accessing labour market services. In particular this occurs in labour market activation programmes where for example programmes only catered for higher level qualifications (Level 5 and above).

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research report on Literacy, numeracy and activation among the unemployed¹¹ shows that work specific training for people with literacy and numeracy needs helps enhance employment prospects – up to three times the average.

⁸ World Literacy Foundation (2015) The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy

⁹ NALA (2009) Dorgan, J. A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training Research report

¹⁰ World Literacy Foundation (2015) The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy

¹¹ ESRI (2012) Literacy, numeracy and activation among the unemployed Research series Number 25

In Ireland, the percentage of people living in households where no-one is working or where there is only marginal attachment to the labour force is higher than in most other European countries.¹² A recent NESC report on low work intensity households and the quality of supportive services recommends that:

- The intensity of support available to ensure effective outcomes should increase, particularly for those most distant from the labour market, such as lone parents, people with illness/disability; and **those with literacy difficulties**, poor English, no work experience or contacts, a history of addiction or time in prison.
- More **intensive** literacy and numeracy education is required for those with low literacy levels, as well as vocational literacy supports to ensure better access to employment and training.¹³

Addressing literacy needs in the new Pathways to Work Strategy

NALA proposes a number of actions to be included in the new Strategy:

1. Intreo staff, in particular case officers, should attend **Literacy awareness training** to look at identifying and supporting literacy needs. NALA delivered this half-day training to Intreo in 2015-6.
2. All material (written, oral and online) should be written and produced in **plain English**.
3. Offer **tailored and holistic supports** for adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs, particularly adults who are long-term unemployed. This should include if appropriate career guidance, counselling and mentoring.
4. All adults with literacy, numeracy and digital needs and or less than a QQI Level 4 qualification should have **access to a high quality and relevant learning programme** with a local education and training provider that meets the person's literacy development needs. This would include intensive and flexible options; **appropriate supports** as required (income, transport, child and elder care), work placement where appropriate and progression opportunities.
5. Develop **incentivised work experience programme** for adults with less than a QQI Level 4 qualification. This would include access to a relevant learning programme.

¹² National Economic and Social Council (NESC) (2018) Moving from Welfare to Work

¹³ National Economic and Social Council (NESC) (2018) Moving from Welfare to Work

6. Offer **financial support or incentive** to return to education for QQI levels 1, 2 or 3, for example tax relief if working or additional payment if unemployed. Other supports such as full-time childcare or elder care and transport costs should also be available.
7. Work with **employers to raise awareness of literacy, numeracy and digital skills** needs in the workplace and link them into the Skills for Work programme delivered through their local Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

Conclusion

Every person has a right to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Having these skills enables a person to have agency, to have a voice and participate fully in society; to continue learning and extend their education; and to access the same opportunities as everyone else. By investing in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills, Ireland can be a stronger and more equal society.

NALA is happy to work with the Department to ensure the new Pathways to Work strategy prioritises and supports adults with literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs.

Further information

National Adult Literacy Agency
Sandford Lodge, Sandford Close
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

Web: www.nala.ie

Tel: +353 1 412 7900 Email: info@nala.ie



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