

Adult Literacy Policy:

*A Review for the National  
Adult Literacy Agency*

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**NALA**

**National Adult Literacy Agency**  
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established in 1980 and is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA has campaigned for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

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## Abbreviations

ALO	Adult Literacy Organiser
ALS	Adult Literacy Service
AONTAS	National Adult Learning Organisation
AEO	Adult Education Officer
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
DES	Department of Education and Science
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
EGFSN	Expert Group on Future Skills Needs
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
IALS1	International Adult Literacy Survey Level 1
IALS2	International Adult Literacy Survey Level 2
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association
ITABE	Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NALC	National Adult Learning Council
NALP	National Adult Literacy Plan
NAPSINC	National Action Plan for Social Inclusion
NGO	Non Government Organisation
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NDP	National Development Plan
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VTOS	Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme
WBEF	Workplace Basic Education Fund

## Foreword

One of the National Adult Literacy Agency's (NALA) strategic objectives by 2010 is to secure the support of policy makers and politicians for providing increased resources to adult literacy and numeracy services. In support of this, and to compliment existing work, NALA commissioned James Dorgan Associates to carry out a review of adult literacy policy in Ireland. This analysis of the policy response to adult literacy concentrates on the evolution of the main adult literacy policy and budget.

While adult literacy has featured as a policy priority in Ireland since 2000, the typical adult literacy student still only receives two hours per week. There has been progress over the last decade in terms of increased funding from a very low base resulting in 50,000 people engaged in tuition delivered through the VECs in 2008.

I would like to emphasise that the brief for this review did not extend to tracking policy in other domains of further and adult education, or in other settings such as community education. It is recognised that adult literacy development is relevant to policies in these other arenas and that valuable literacy development work continues in families, communities, workplaces and a wide range of further adult education and training programmes. NALA's definition of literacy highlights that 'literacy' is not just a question of 'skills', but is a social practice that is always part of broader contexts, practices and purposes.

As the review identifies, raising literacy and numeracy skills of Irish adults is a priority for our Government, economy and society. What is needed is a clearer sense of how this can be achieved. The review will be very useful in resourcing NALA's work, particularly to support the drive for a refreshed adult literacy and numeracy strategy. It is NALA's view that a world-class economic and social infrastructure is beyond our reach unless there is a clear and measurable strategy that brings new thinking to old problems, and effectively tackles the intolerably low literacy and numeracy levels in Irish society.

I would like to thank all those who contributed to this review and in particular the author for his commitment and his inimitable style in presenting this work.

Inez Bailey

Director

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1 The purpose of this document is to review developments in the field of adult literacy policy in Ireland in recent years and to consider recommendations for the future.

### **Adult Literacy Policy**

2 Since the publication of the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey in 1997, which showed that Ireland had a relatively low standard of literacy, there has been growing public and private interest in the importance of basic skills in the economic and non-economic lives of individuals.

3 This concern was reflected in a substantial increase in funding, at least until recently and from a very low base. This was mainly for adult literacy training particularly in the educational sphere, but also in the area of vocational training, including work-based training.

4 The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) laid out a National Adult Literacy Programme. Continued emphasis on literacy training followed in other official reports including policy documents like the National Development Plans (2000-2006 and 2007-2013), and successive National Partnership Agreements and National Action Plans for Social Inclusion from 2000. The current National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 recognises that “lack of adequate literacy can be a significant barrier to self-esteem, employment and more generally to achieving social inclusion”. It sets out the national target to reduce the proportion of the population with restricted literacy to between 10% and 15% of the population by 2016, being a reduction of about 15% to 10% points on the proportion recorded in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), taken in 1995. (Restricted literacy being defined as Level I on the International Adult Literacy Survey scale or equivalent).

### **Adult Literacy Services**

5 The main element in the Adult Literacy Service is provided by the VECs. They provide training for 49,000 individuals under a number of different schemes. This includes training in VECs, funded by FÁS, for individuals in work-based training. Total funding from the Department of Education and Science in 2008 was €30 million and about 1,500 paid tutors and 3,300 voluntary tutors are now involved.

6 Literacy training is also an element in a number of second chance-type education schemes operated by the Department of Education and Science. The Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment also funds work-based schemes operated mainly through FÁS.

7 Although the stark findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey stimulated a major national effort to combat literacy problems, no clear and compelling objective of policy was adopted. The Survey quantified the extent of the problem but the absence of quantified objectives since then means that policy to address this problem has been without guidance and criteria for assessment.

### **Objectives**

8 This document proposes that the object should be to reduce the proportion of the population aged 16-64 in the lowest category of literacy from an estimated 24% in 1995 to 12.5% in 2020, the proposal made by a report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science in 2006. Some of this decline would be the almost automatic result of rising educational standards including increased proportions of the population in the younger age cohorts with higher standards of literacy compared to older age cohorts with lower standards. But, on the basis of the data available, it could also mean moving up to about 6,250 adults per annum out of the lowest level of literacy through the intervention of adult literacy education. Over the period to 2020, this would require a substantial increase in funding for adult literacy education.

### **Training Programmes**

9 Literacy education programmes are provided by the VECs on the basis of about two hours per week. This represents a slow rate of progress and it is proposed that more emphasis should be given to the intensive 6 hour per week course introduced in 2006, known as ITABE ('Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education'). If the overall financial envelope cannot be expanded, more intensive options, such as the ITABE, should be substituted for the standard course since the ITABE is known to yield good results while the standard course is, as yet, unevaluated. Volunteer support would not be affected by this shift in emphasis.

10 Literacy education is provided in a number of other work place and educational settings, including the Workplace Basic Education Fund, called Skills for Work, operated by FÁS, and second chance-type programmes usually provided in the VECs and funded by the Department of Education and Science. The use of literacy budgets for language development for ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages – is questionable. The absence of an ESOL policy and distinct budget line has had a significant impact on the resources available for core literacy development.

## **Personnel**

11 In the literacy service, only the adult literacy organiser in the VECs is employed on a permanent basis. Literacy tutors are employed on a part-time temporary basis. This does not provide the stability that is required to meet an expansion in demand and an increase in standards. A formal staffing structure is needed for literacy tutors with clear guidance on roles, responsibilities, conditions and contracts.

12 There also needs to be training opportunities for tutors up to and including third level qualifications, such as those developed through the NALA / Waterford Institute of Technology Accreditation Project.

13 One to one literacy support is an essential element of literacy services and voluntary tutors have an important role in providing literacy training. Volunteer tutors receive a basic twenty-to-thirty hour initial training programme and further training is available. It is important that voluntary tutors do their work in a clearly defined structure of obligations, rights and supports.

## **Structures**

14 While the Department of Education and Science is the prime funder of literacy training, several other Departments also have a role, notably, but not exclusively the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. In addition, there are state agencies and NGOs active in the field. The adoption of a national objective for literacy implies a unified entity to define policy and coordinate services. It is proposed that this should be an interdepartmental committee representative of the relevant state agencies as well as the Departments.

15 At local level, there is also a profusion of statutory and voluntary organisations involved in various ways in literacy. There is a need for local literacy committees to ensure coordination of services at local level.

## **Information**

16 There is an urgent need for a national adult literacy survey. It would be desirable for this to take place in an international context. But this is not essential. Such a survey should be undertaken before the end of next year and every five years thereafter.

17 The absence of evaluation of progress as result of adult literacy interventions remains a significant systemic weakness. An evaluation of the intensive literacy tuition scheme has been undertaken and has shown good results. Progress resulting from mainstream literacy tuition has



never been objectively evaluated to identify its efficacy. This programme should be evaluated within the coming year.

18 A national standard system should be rolled out for the assessment of students at the outset and at the conclusion of their training programmes. This is essential if the literacy training programmes are to be monitored and evaluated.

19 Work has recently been completed on formulating standards for literacy attainment in the lowest three levels of the National Framework of Qualifications. Unfortunately, little access is made to this by literacy students. It is important for the progression of students, and for the assessment of the programme, that the VECs ensure that students are encouraged and facilitated to obtain this accreditation.

### **Supports**

20 An effective literacy strategy needs a number of complementary support activities. These include:

- A programme of education and publicity to alert personnel in health services, social welfare services, workplaces (unions and employers) to recognise literacy difficulties and to know how and where to refer individuals for training.
- Attendance at literacy training involves costs in terms of transport and child care for students. Since people with literacy problems are generally on low incomes, these can be significant barriers to participation. Service providers should be funded to meet at least some of these costs.
- Other areas that need to be supported financially are: research into new pedagogies, national promotion of literacy awareness and evaluation of the effectiveness of literacy programmes.

## I INTRODUCTION

1.1 The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was organised in 1995 within the framework of the OECD and included Ireland and eight other OECD countries. Subsequently surveys were completed in a total of 13 other countries to yield results for twenty-two countries. The combined results were published in 1998 and the headline result for Ireland was that, with the exception of Poland, this country had the poorest results, defined as the proportion of the population in the lowest level of literacy.<sup>i</sup> About one quarter of the population were classed as likely to have difficulty with basic tasks of literacy and numeracy and over half fell below the standard needed for ordinary work and living.

1.2 The survey was the first international assessment of literacy and the first systematic assessment of literacy in Ireland. The absolute and comparative results were highly disturbing. Although those active in the field were aware of problems, few outside adult education suspected that the level of literacy could be one of the worst among developed countries. The official response included an increase in the priority and the budget for adult literacy training. There was a similar reaction in other countries, which figured poorly in the survey results, most relevantly for Ireland, in the UK where basic skills became a major educational priority.

1.3 In the fourteen years that have elapsed there has been a considerable increase in the scale and variety of actions taken to attack the problem of low standards of adult literacy in Ireland. New pedagogies have been implemented, training programmes have been expanded and new official and non-governmental structures have entered the field. There has also been a change in the character of the problem, most notably as a result of the influx of non-English speaking migrants. The outcome of research in Ireland and abroad has also shaped views on the nature, extent and importance of the problem and also on the means to combat it. Although there has been no national study of adult literacy since 1995, surveys of school children indicate that in general literacy levels of young people compare well internationally, though a significant minority continues to encounter problems. This is particularly evident in schools serving educationally disadvantaged communities, where 30% of school children continue to be identified as having significant literacy difficulties.<sup>ii</sup>

1.4 The process of undertaking this review is located in the context of NALA's Strategic Plan 2007-10 and in particular answers to the First Objective of the strategy, which is to attract the support of the political leadership for the development of the scope, quality and coverage of literacy training services. The review outlines the work underway in the field of literacy training, assesses the degree of progress which has been made, considers objectives for policy in terms of numbers of students and of standards to be attained and outlines parallel actions which need to be taken with respect to, amongst other things, training personnel, structures, and monitoring and evaluation.

1.5 The consultant would like to thank the various people who assisted his inquiries through discussion or supply of documentary material. In particular, he would like to acknowledge the

generous assistance of personnel in the Department of Education and Science, the County Dublin VEC, the National Adult Literacy Agency, Forfas and FÁS.

## II CONTEXT

### **Socio Economic Background**

2.1 Starting around 1960 Ireland entered an era of economic growth somewhat similar to that experienced elsewhere in Europe for at least a decade before but commencing at a much lower level. This progress was disrupted during the 1970s and early 1980s due to the oil crises in that period and the fiscal problems that emerged afterwards. By the end of the 1980s, growth resumed on the basis of “high tech” exports and was maintained at a pace which was distinctly faster than the rest of the EU. From the early years of the 2000s, as is now painfully clear, this growth was maintained on an unsustainable basis. Nevertheless, even allowing for some decline in the near term, Irish standards of economic development have approximated or surpassed the average for Europe.

2.2 This account of fifty years of economic growth encompasses periods of alternating growth and stagnation and provides the framework within which the principal educational challenges have played out. These include the educational reforms of the 1960s, partly in response to the escalating demands for a higher skilled workforce to support a modern economy, and which led to near universal participation in education at second level of school. The most recent period encompasses a progressive evolution towards mass third level education with strong demand for computing, scientific, and management skills.

2.3 Cutting across these economic categories are cultural social and political changes including population growth and immigration, the expansion of a rights based society in place of culturally generated norms and some tendency to social polarization with a marginalised minority at the lower end of the socio economic scale. Within this lattice work of forces, human capital - the population’s stock of skills and knowledge - emerges as the prime mover of development resulting in increasing demand for more highly skilled categories of manpower and increasing skill levels within the whole range of occupational categories.

2.4 These influences take a number of specific forms as they converge on the area of adult literacy. People with literacy problems face obstacles moving up the hierarchy of qualifications in line with demands from the labour market. Moreover, the term ‘lowly skilled occupation’ is a relative one and does not mean the absence of skills. What might have been genuinely low skilled work in the past, has, as a result of automation, demand for higher standards of performance, (sometimes imposed by legislation) and changing management practices generated the need for what is termed ‘generic skills’ of which ‘basic skills’, meaning literacy, numeracy and elementary IT operations, are core elements.<sup>iii</sup> Building on the research and recommendations of the EGFSN and advocacy by NALA, a policy was adopted in 2007 that generic skills, in particular literacy, should be embedded into all publicly funded education and training in so far as possible.

2.5 The forces acting in the economic sphere are paralleled in the non-work sphere of life - domestic, leisure and civil society activities. Here too similar challenges confront those with literacy difficulties. Many services can only be accessed by computers, many state services require written communications, schooling is geared to parental involvement, voluntary activities are regulated, increasingly goods and services can be purchased on line and some can only be accessed that way. In the absence of basic skills, individuals can find their lives impoverished through exclusion from a wide range of non-work activities. The benefits of improved adult literacy levels to child literacy levels cannot be discounted. Parental involvement in a child's learning has more impact on a child's educational outcome than any other demographic measure, including social class, level of parental education or income<sup>iv</sup>. Family literacy offers potential opportunities to break inter-generational cycles of under-achievement by working with those families who may not know how to best support their child's learning.

### **Development of Adult Literacy Training Policy**

2.6 Prior to the publication of the results of the IALS in 1997, that there was a problem with standards of basic skills amongst adults was appreciated only by those involved in education and social service activities, whether voluntary or official. At that time and before, there was virtually no State support for the provision of an adult literacy service. One-to-one tuition was provided almost exclusively by volunteers and community groups around the country, often in the learner's or the tutor's own home. However, by the late 1970s there was enough of a groundswell of activity in literacy tuition at local volunteer level to create the impetus for a representative organisation to be set up. In 1980, AONTAS, (National Adult Learning Organisation), proposed the establishment of an organisation to focus on the specific problem of literacy. This was the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), which came into being in 1980.

2.7 In 1984, the Department of Education made an allocation of £45,000 to enable NALA to establish a national office and a year later, took the significant step of establishing the Adult Literacy and Community Education (ALCE) Budget. With an increase in the numbers coming forward for training, Vocational Education Committees (VECs) appointed Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs) to run training schemes. Literacy training also became available in a range of educational settings, through various initiatives and programmes, which had been developed in the preceding years: Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Youthreach, in FÁS Community Training Centres and in the network of Centres for the Unemployed run by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU).

## The IALS 1995

2.8 As noted in paragraph 1.1, the IALS was an international collaborative effort organised within the framework of the OECD. Over the period 1994 to 1998 a total of 22 countries carried out literacy surveys of their adult populations aged 15-64 (the 'active age groups'). The survey examined literacy under three 'domains': prose, documentary and quantitative. The summary results for Ireland are given in Table 2.1 with some of the participating countries for comparison. About 25% of the Irish population was deemed to have 'very poor skills' (IALS1) while another 30% had 'a weak level of skills' (IALS2) meaning below the level considered the minimum '...for coping with every day life and work in a complex advanced society...' The average score put Ireland second from the bottom among the twenty-two countries. <sup>v</sup>

**Table 2.1 International Adult Literacy Survey:**

### Results for English Speaking Countries: Level 1

	Prose	Document	Quantitative
Canada	16.6	18.2	16.9
USA	20.7	23.7	21.0
UK	21.8	23.3	23.2
Australia	17.0	17.0	16.8
New Zealand	18.4	21.4	20.4
<b>Average*</b>	<b>16.6</b>	<b>16.2</b>	<b>15.0</b>
<b>Ireland**</b>	<b>22.6</b>	<b>25.3</b>	<b>25.0</b>
<b>* Of all 22 participating countries ** Average of three domains is 24.3%</b>			

2.9 The findings had a stimulatory impact on adult education, somewhat similar to the impact on secondary education of the *Investment in Education* report in the 1960s. Allocations for adult literacy education rose to £7.8 million by 2000 with an additional £0.96 million for programme development. The result was an increase in the numbers in training from 5,000 to 17,000 and development of a variety of methods of delivery and other complementary actions in the field of promotion and research.

**Table 2.2 Percentage (%) in each IALS category by Age Category (Ireland)**

	<b>IALS 1</b>	<b>IALS 2</b>	<b>IALS 3</b>	<b>IALS 4</b>	<b>IALS 5</b>	<b>Total</b>
Age 16-24	13.40	32.62	40.78	12.62	0.58	100.0
Age 25-34	18.16	30.71	40.07	9.55	1.50	100.0
Age 35-44	20.75	32.52	32.34	13.46	0.93	100.0
Age 45-54	33.33	30.80	28.05	6.90	0.92	100.0
Age 55-64	43.71	29.14	21.43	5.14	0.57	100.0
All Ages	24.27	31.32	33.52	9.96	0.93	100.0

### **Post IALS Research**

2.10 The IALS questionnaire captured a range of economic and social data about the respondents and consequently provided the basis for extensive research on the impact of literacy on socio-economic outcomes. These tended to show a strong and significant impact of literacy on earnings, which was quite distinct from the effect of educational attainment. The ‘economics of literacy’ thus became an important element in the larger corpus of the economics of education.<sup>vi</sup> In most countries, including Ireland, the IALS results promoted literacy up the policy agenda and this provided a further impetus to research and to policy evaluation and development. An important example was the UK where the IALS findings were also worrisome.<sup>vii</sup> Basic education there became a major part of educational and industrial training policy backed up by research from new data sets. These confirmed the findings from the IALS research and provided empirical additional evidence of impacts on non-economic domains such as health and crime and on the intergenerational effects on education.

### **Post IALS Policy in Ireland**

2.11 In 2000, the Department of Education and Science (DES) published the White Paper on Adult Education.<sup>viii</sup> This highlighted adult literacy as a top priority for government educational policy and focused attention on second chance and further education and on the barriers facing learners. Provision for second chance and further education was founded on a framework of four pillars, of which a national adult literacy programme was identified as being the most important.<sup>ix</sup>

2.12 The White Paper formulated a National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP). The main priorities were the expansion of the client base to circa 113,000 by the end of the National Development Plan (NDP) period (2006), prioritising in particular those with the lowest literacy levels and developing initiatives to encourage the participation of particular disadvantaged sections of the population. Other objectives were the implementation of quality assurance, improvement in referral networks, expansion of literacy inputs in work-based and second chance type education and development of innovative approaches.

### **Quantitative Objectives for Literacy Policy**

2.13 The White Paper effectively mainstreamed literacy as an element in national education and training policy and this has been emphasized in the report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning<sup>x</sup> and, more recently, the Fifth Report of Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN). Also, in 2006 the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science endorsed the priority status of literacy and recommended a target of reducing the numbers with low literacy (deemed to be those in IALS1) by half in fifteen years.<sup>xi</sup> The EGFSN highlighted the importance of ‘generic skills’ in the whole range of occupations. (See paragraph 2.4 above). It recommends a reduction by 2020 of 359,500<sup>xii</sup> in the number of persons in the labour force with less than upper secondary level qualifications i.e. those below level 4 in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This requires moving 259,000 of the current workforce up the NFQ from Levels 1-3 to Levels 4 or 5<sup>xiii</sup>. It emphasizes that the target ‘should be underpinned by strong literacy initiatives’.

2.14 These recommendations have been incorporated into official strategy and planning commitments. Thus, the current National Development Plan (NDP 2007-13) provides a total of €7.7 billion for upskilling the work force outside the formal educational structure and repeats the commitment to literacy in the White Paper and the Report of the Task Force. Within the national partnership process, literacy has attracted support from the union and voluntary pillars. Thus the National Partnership Agreement ‘Towards 2016’<sup>xiv</sup>, endorses the importance of adult training and education and supports a number of remedial actions on literacy within a number of frameworks - school, supports for the unemployed, work-based training and adult education services.

2.15 Another contribution to policy in the area has come from the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAPSINC) 2007-13<sup>xv</sup>, which proposed targets for training activities and for raising the literacy standards of the population. Specifically the NAPSINC recommended the reduction in the number of adults with ‘restricted literacy’ (meaning IALS1) to between 10% and 15% of the population by 2016.



## Literacy Standards Post IALS

2.16 There has been no nation-wide survey of literacy standards in the adult population since 1995 but the strong cohort effect in the 1995 survey makes it possible to extrapolate the results to later years. As can be seen in Table 2.2, standards, as measured by those in the lowest category, IALS1, are inversely related to age, seemingly the consequence of the superior educational opportunities available to younger people.<sup>xvi</sup> Assuming all those entering the active age groups after 1995, had the same standards as those in the age groups 15-24 in 1995 (i.e. IALS1 = 13.4%), and taking account of the fact that the older cohorts gradually drop out of the active age categories, the result is a steady improvement in national literacy standards. This is shown in Table 2.3 where the proportion of the population in IALS1 drops from 24.3% to 14.9% by 2020. Note, however, that the proportion in IALS2, a level of literacy that implies a lesser, though still appreciable, degree of difficulty, increases slightly. This is because, apparently anomalously, in 1995 the younger cohort had a slightly higher percentage in this category than the population as a whole.

	IALS1	IALS2	IALS3	IALS4	IALS5	
1995	24.3	31.3	33.5	10.0	0.9	100.0
2000	20.5	31.7	36.0	10.9	0.9	100.0
2005	18.5	32.0	37.3	11.4	0.9	100.0
2010	17.1	32.1	38.2	11.8	0.8	100.0
2015	15.5	32.3	39.2	12.2	0.8	100.0
2015 *	14.1	32.8	39.7	12.4	1.0	100.0
2020	14.9	32.3	40.0	12.1	0.8	100.0
2020*	13.5	32.8	40.5	12.3	1.0	100.0
* Assuming 10% of younger cohorts at IALS1.						

2.17 One nation wide literacy survey which has been taken since 1995 but for one age group is the 'PISA' survey for 15 year olds. This shows Ireland performing well by international standards at that age though 10% are revealed to have severe literacy problems (i.e. approximately IALS1). However, using this relatively low figure for those entering the active age

groups after 1995 (rather than 13.4% as revealed by IALS) produces an even better picture. The results are shown in italics in Table 2.3 for 2015 and 2020.

2.18 It must be borne in mind that the projections imply no real improvement in literacy standards, only an increase in the proportion of those with good standards and a decline in those with low standards. On this basis, the figures suggest that the NAPSINC target of 10%-15% of the population in IAS1 by 2016 was destined for attainment without any additional policy action. The Joint Committee proposal, 12.5% by 2020, appears to have more cogency since it is below either of the projected figures for that year. It would involve moving about 1%-2.5% (depending on whether or not allowance should be made for the effects shown in PISA) of the active population (25,000 to 62,500 persons) out of IALS1 in ten years. While this would be an improvement, it would be attenuated by a corresponding increase in the size of the IALS2 category that, as noted above, is still an unsatisfactory standard. Ideally, the object should be to reduce the size of IALS1 without any increase in IALS2 which implies a move also of the target number out of IALS2 from IALS2 to IALS3.

2.19 Though the data in Table 2.3 are the result of a mechanical projection, they have implications for any policy objectives that might be based on them

- The methodology makes some allowance for improvements in education as reflected in the PISA results, but none for the impact to date of adult education programmes established since 1995.
- While it is to be hoped that these programmes have had an impact on measures of literacy there are two factors which weigh in the opposite direction. First, the data are projected from the population of 1995 and some cohorts born subsequently, and therefore take no account of immigrants and the impact that they are likely to have on national standards. The question of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) is dealt with below.

Second, the data make no allowance for deterioration in standards as persons progress through adult age categories. It is recognised that people also lose literacy skills acquired in school depending on their subsequent vocational and general life circumstances.<sup>xvii</sup> This will tend to mitigate, though probably not completely offset, the cohort effect.

- Third, averages conceal concentrations of literacy problems in certain socio economic categories. Reference has already been made to surveys of primary school children in disadvantaged areas that show that 30% of them have severe literacy problems.
- The IALS and Table 2.3 exclude those over the age of 64. Obviously, to the extent that scores are improved by dropping those with low scores, no real improvement is taking place. The improvements in Table 2.3 therefore exaggerate the real gains in the whole population. Without intervention, older age groups will continue to have significant problems.

2.20 These limitations support the case for a new national survey so that progress since 1995 can be assessed and a firm basis provided for future policy. In the mean time, the projections provide what is hopefully a lower limit to the likely actual and future situation.

### **III ADULT LITERACY SERVICES**

3.1 As it has evolved, adult literacy training is now provided by a number of agencies and in a number of different schemes. The largest role is played by the Vocational Education Committees of which there are 33 operating in over 130 centres throughout the country. VECs are under the DES but have a fair amount of autonomy to deal with local needs. This means a considerable amount of heterogeneity in the way they approach adult literacy training. These activities are collectively the Adult Literacy Service (ALS). Training is also provided within the context of 'second chance' type education funded by the DES for those who left school early or with limited attainments. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) funds worked-based basic education activities. The literacy element of these education and training activities is often supplied via the VECs.

#### **Educational Programmes**

3.2 The main form of training provided by the VECs ('mainstream' training) is in groups of 7/8 adults for two hours a week for varying numbers of weeks. Some VECs run courses throughout the year. The timing and location of courses is adapted to local needs. In terms of organisation, literacy training in each VEC is headed by an Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) under the general supervision of the Adult Education Officer (AEO). Adult literacy provision also includes one-to-one tutoring. But these tutors, though often working in close cooperation with the literacy services of the VECs are not paid. Another related element is the activities of the Adult Education Guidance officers who are attached to the VECs and have a role in provision of support to literacy students, especially those in second chance-type education programmes.

## VECs Adult Literacy Services

	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009*</b>
Budget €m	1.10	11.25	13.56	16.49	17.90	18.50	21.00	23.00	30.00	30.0	30.0
Students (000s)	5.00	17.15	22.73	28.36	31.58	33.87	35.55	40.68	45.81	49.35	
Of which ESOL (000s)					5.95	7.80	9.79	12.13	13.17		
Paid Tutors		800	1,200	1,279	1,504	1,375	1,314	1,424	1,492	1,509	
Volunteer Tutors		3,400	4,000	4130	4215	3973	3775	3662	3,599	3,239 **	
Resource Workers					50				93	119**	
* Budgeted											
**Including full time and part-time.											
Source: Department of Education and Science.											

3.3 As can be seen from Table 3.1 the numbers of students, tutors and the budget has expanded rapidly since 1997. As of 2008, there were 49,000 students. However, a large part of the expansion in recent years has been training for speakers of other languages (ESOL). It appears that the policy statement giving VEC ALS responsibility for providing services to asylum seekers, identified in the White Paper in 2000, was extended in practice to include other ESOL learners, such as migrant workers. As of 2007, nearly 30% of the total was ESOL students and their number accounted for about half the expansion since 2003.

<b>Table 3.2 DES Expenditure Per Student by Level and ALS</b>									
<b>(2000=100)</b>									
	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>
Primary	100	114	129	152	175	181	213		
Secondary	100	108	133	151	164	178	194		
Tertiary	100	111	119	123	130	139	149		
ALS	100	91	89	86	83	90	86	100	93

3.4 DES expenditure on adult literacy rose rapidly from 1997, when the ALS was just starting, to 2000. Thereafter, on a per capita basis, it shows no further consistent rise though the main forms of educational expenditure have risen substantially. The extent to which adult literacy training has lagged behind the provision for other levels of education is shown in Table 3.2. Absolute levels of expenditures per student vary widely across the three main branches of education, and adult literacy. But to highlight the change in per capita provision per branch, the outlays per capita are expressed as 100 in 2000. On this basis, it can be seen that while outlays per capita in Primary and Secondary levels approximately doubled by 2006, and third level grew by about 50%, per capita outlays on adult literacy students declined by 14%.

<b>Table 3.3: Students Per Programme 2007</b>		
	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>% Total</b>
Workplace	2432	5.4
Mainstream	27980	51.3
ITABE	2176	4.9
CE/FÁS	1659	3.7
ESOL	13166	29.4
Family	2423	5.4
	44836	100.0
Source: Department of Education and Science.		

3.5 Some other characteristics of literacy students are shown in the tables following. As might be expected literacy students are usually drawn from the ranks of those who left school early and who are not working. But testifying that the problem of low literacy attainment is by no means exclusively the concern of the marginalised, Table 3.4 shows that 30% of students completed or at least participated in senior cycle schooling. Likewise (Table 3.5) over 30% left school at 17 or later. Almost half of students are at work (Table 3.7).

	Numbers	%
No Formal Education	2104	4.9
Primary	14539	34.0
Junior	13164	30.8
Senior	8185	19.1
Leaving Certificate +	4779	11.2
	42771	100.0

	Numbers	%
LT 12	4294	9.6
13-14	10454	23.5
15-16	11243	25.2
17-18	9231	20.7
18 +	5000	11.2
NA	4330	9.7
Total	44552	100.0

I	12783	31.2
II	17022	41.5
III	11215	27.3
	41020	100.0

Employed	19403	44.7
Unemployed	9120	21.0
Not in labour force	10008	23.1
Refugees	2073	4.8
NA	2760	6.4
Total	43364	100.0

Source: Department of Education and Science.

### **Intensive Tuition in Basic Education (ITABE)**

3.6 In 2006, in response to advocacy from NALA the DES introduced a pilot special 'Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education' (ITABE) programme. This programme involves 6 hours tuition per week for 14 weeks. The first pilot scheme covered approximately 1,000 students and cost €1 million of which 10% was for non-personnel costs (overheads, materials etc). Importantly the ITABE incorporates a standard pre- assessment and post-assessment procedure. This showed encouraging results from the pilot scheme and demand for the programme increased. The following year there were 2,176 participants. The results for 2008 are being compiled but there were 448 projects and this is likely to mean a further increase in numbers. The demand in 2009 is for 600 projects, but there may not be budget to accommodate all these.

3.7 In addition to supporting training courses directly, the DES supports a number of complementary literacy training activities via NALA. These include research, promotion, development and publication activities.

### **Distance Learning Services**

3.8 NALA, in conjunction with Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI), RTÉ, DES and DETE, has organised a series of TV programmes with appropriate back up material aimed at literacy training. Other media are also employed in distance training including print, internet, radio and telephone.

### **Other Educational Programmes with Literacy Dimension**

3.9 A major educational need is to reach individuals who for one reason or another dropped out of school at an early age, usually meaning before completion of second level education. There are a number of programmes under the DES which aim to do this, each with its own approach. These include Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Youthreach.

3.10 The **BTEI** started in 2002 and is provided either by the VECs or by Community Education groups. The Initiative embraces a wide range of interventions aimed at facilitating people with variable but generally low standards of education and literacy. The common theme is to help students progress within the NFQ hierarchy and thus advance to alternative and higher educational pathways. There are about 27,000 participants in the scheme and the annual budget covering all forms of intervention is around €19 million.

3.11 **VTOS** is another second chance scheme but specifically for unemployed persons. It is full time and provided by the VECs. Courses are available across a whole range of areas up to



Leaving Certificate. This includes interventions at NFQ level 3 and can include literacy training. The current level of provision is around 5,000 places per annum at an annual cost of €80 million.

3.12 **Youthreach** is an intervention aimed at early school leavers. It is operated mainly by the DES in Youthreach Centres, managed by the VECs and by FÁS and delivered in its Community Training Centres. Programmes are also provided in the Department of Justice Workshops and Senior Traveller Training Centres. The programmes are full or part-time and provide a spread of education, training and work experience. This ranges from basic skills, including personal development, up to the leaving certificate. About 6,000 participate per annum at a cost of €100 million.

### **Work Based Schemes**

3.13 Within its remit to provide skills for the workplace the DETE has funded or provided, usually via FÁS, a number of programmes aimed at providing basic skills or with a basic skills component. These include Return to Education for Community Employment (CE) participants, Work Based Education programmes, Return to Learning (R2L) for local authorities and Skillnets.

3.14 **Return to Education** is a scheme of basic education, funded by FÁS and provided by the VECs, open to part-time participation by persons employed in CE Schemes which are organised by FÁS. In 2008, there were about 800 persons involved in these schemes receiving literacy training on a budget in excess of €1 million.

3.15 **Return to Learning** was the first nation-wide attempt at work-based literacy training. It started in 2000/01 and was targeted at low skilled workers in local authorities. Funding was by the DES and the local authorities' training organisation (LANPAG). NALA was involved in the design and the VECs deliver the training. There were about 600 participants in this programme in 2007 at a budget of about €600,000.

3.16 **Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF)**. The DETE set up the WBEF in 2005 with the specific objective of providing literacy and basic skills training in the workplace. The interventions are managed by FÁS under its 'Skills for Work' programme. NALA and the ICTU worked on the pilot phase of the Fund. The Fund finances the cost of training in basic skills in the workplace. The interventions are specifically aimed at basic literacy and numeracy skills though delivered on a themed basis (e.g. health, safety in the work place, customer care, IT, etc). The target group are workers with less than NFQ level 4 qualifications, i.e. those who typically left school early. The interventions are 'sold' to employers by brokers working to FÁS who also help tailor the intervention to the needs of the enterprise and its employees. The annual budget has increased since introduction from €1 million to €3 million. Capacity is now around 2,000 persons per annum.

3.17 **Skillnets** is an enterprise-led support body which enables grant aided training for the private sector through sectoral and geographical ‘training networks’. These networks design and organise their own training. Funding is from the DETE and training is provided by independent providers. NALA has assisted Skillnets to develop materials for initiatives in the area of low skills. Under the current National Partnership agreement, it is intended that the emphasis on improving basic skills will be expanded. There are over 100 learning organisations in the Skillnets framework and the budget is around €16 million per annum.

<b>Table 3.8 Educational Programmes with Literacy Component</b>			
<b>Scheme</b>	<b>Target Groups</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Budget €million</b>
	<b>Vocational Programmes with Literacy Component</b>		
<b>Return to Education</b>	Basic education programme for participants in FÁS Community Employment Schemes	800	1.0-1.5
<b>Return to Learning</b>	Basic education for low authority employees run by the local authorities training organisation (LANAPG)	600	0.6
<b>Work Based Education Fund</b>	Basic education programmes in private sector employments.	2,000	3.0
<b>Number of participants and budget figures are approximate</b>			

## IV CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Provision of literacy training has travelled quite a distance in Ireland in the last decade or so. From seemingly a marginal problem, it was propelled to the front by the findings of the IALS. It is obvious that people with low levels of literacy attainments are at greater risk of social exclusion, and face challenges across a range of aspects of life. But the IALS provided the data and the stimulus for research in many of the countries that participated in the IALS, including Ireland. This research showed the impact of low standards of literacy on earnings of individuals and the benefits from investment in literacy training. From the IALS and other sources, there was also empirical evidence that it could be crucial in non-economic domains. Since then provision for literacy training in Ireland has expanded rapidly mainly within the framework of the DES. The principal form has been via courses in the VECs. But literacy training elements have also been introduced to other, rapidly expanding forms of 'second chance' education within the DES sphere. The DES has also supported distance training initiatives.

4.2 The other major direction has been under the aegis of the DETE where work-based training has been organised by FÁS and by industry groups targeted at low skilled workers. This expansion and diversification has been supported by the preparation of materials, research, tutor training, quality assurance and certification and by institutional development.

4.3 The strategic problems with the National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP) as presently constituted are:

- **Overall Objectives:** Although objectives have been adopted, they have been proposed on the basis of the IALS results, now almost fifteen years ago. No data has since been collected which would validate the choice of these objectives or enable an assessment of progress to be made. Periodic 'stock taking' must be possible and must take place if quantified literacy objectives are to be meaningful.
- **Resources:** the scale of the resources available are almost certainly not sufficient to deal with the pool of literacy problems in the population and perhaps not sufficient to deal with the annual inflow, which at least equates to the share of school leavers with significant literacy problems.
- **Management:** The NALP has evolved mainly in the form of an add-on to adult education which itself, though gaining in recognition over the years, is still seen as complementary to the formal education structure. Literacy is delivered by a number of agencies and in a number of different forms and while this has been a pragmatic response to needs as they are perceived, it makes for problems in overall management and direction.
- **Evaluation:** Though the situation is improving, there is no nation wide system for measuring the performance of literacy services either in the aggregate, through national surveys, or at the level of individual programmes. This is why it is not possible to be sure of the current state of the problem and whether the services are making progress. Nor it is possible to identify or to devise interventions that can be demonstrated to be cost effective.

## Objectives

4.4 The absence of an overall objective, which could function as a motivation and a measure of progress, is a major shortcoming of current policy. In terms of stimulus, the IALS results, with their stark simplicity, were very effective in getting literacy policy moving. What are now needed are a destination and a road map.

4.5 As noted in Section II, two official targets for adult literacy have been adopted and a third was recommended by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science in 2006. The first was the target of providing literacy training for 113,000 persons by 2006 set out in the White Paper in 2000. However, this is a measure of activity rather than outcomes and not useful for the purpose in hand. In any case, it has now expired. The other target is in the NAPSINC, and is to reduce the numbers of adult with 'restricted literacy' (meaning IALS1) to between 10% and 15% by 2016. As the discussion in Section II has illustrated this rather broad objective may be destined to be attained simply through the cohort effect.

4.6 The target proposed by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science was to halve the proportion of the population in IALS1 in fifteen years i.e. to reduce the proportion of IALS1 to 12.5% by about 2020. On the basis of the methodology in Section II, and while recognizing its limitation, this would require moving 25,000 to 62,500 persons out of the IALS1 level over ten years or 2,500 to 6,250 per annum, and a similar number out of IALS2 if a significant net improvement is to be realized. The upper target should be adopted but would require a substantial increase in funding in the period to 2020. While difficult to envisage in the present economic climate, a large increase in funding might be feasible in the long run. A possible decline in the number of ESOL students would mean that an increasing proportion of the funds for literacy programmes would be available for genuine literacy needs.

4.7 However before this or any target can be validated as a national objective, there is a critical need for:

1. good base data derived from a national survey;
2. periodic follow up national surveys to trace the progress being made;
3. evaluations of the outcomes of the different types of literacy training currently provided and,
4. arising from the preceding point, a need to focus on the most cost effective pedagogies.

4.8 These requirements are discussed further below.

## **Adult Literacy Programmes**

### ***'Mainstream' Programme***

4.9 In 2008, there were 49,000 students in the ALS. While some of these people were participants in the family and workplace schemes described above, the great majority were students in the 'mainstream' adult literacy service. This consists of either one-to-one or group tuition of a maximum of two hours actual tuition per week, which for the most part runs during the academic year and excludes holiday time.

4.10 Gaining proficiency in any skill requires a considerable and sustained input of teaching and learning. It seems to be accepted that international research<sup>xviii</sup> shows that literacy learners need about 550 hours' input to reach a degree of independence in reading, writing and numeracy. The results of the evaluation of the ITABE pilot study corroborate this approximately - as far as the average literacy student is concerned.<sup>xix</sup> This would represent about six years on the standard ALS course for those on NFQ 2 (somewhat over 40% of students are at this level). Obviously, it would be longer for those starting from lower standards. Of course, these estimates are necessarily rather crude. For example, students' own study must also be counted. On the other hand in such an extended period of learning implied by the mainstream literacy programme, there will be some slippage, for example during the summer, which will have to be regained at the start of each year. In any case, it is clear that many of the individuals whose literacy work is confined to a two-hour class each week will make very slow progress.

### ***Intensive Tuition***

4.11 Since 2006, the ALS has been running the ITABE programme of 6 hours per week for 14-week blocks. The programme started with a pilot scheme of about 1,000 students and rose to 2,100 in 2007. The numbers for 2008 are being assembled at present but it is clear that there has been a further increase in demand. The pilot project was evaluated and showed good results. It therefore should be extended to accommodate all of the demand for it and if resources are limited, that might imply a reduction in the provision of 2-hour courses. However, given that a choice must be made, the intensive programme seems a more productive use of resources.

### ***ESOL***

4.12 As noted in paragraph 3.3 about 30% of VEC literacy students are speakers of foreign languages. Their involvement with the VECs stems from the free availability of training and the nominal similarity of aspects of language instruction and literacy training. However, literacy and language training are distinct, particularly because of the psychological aspects of literacy problems. It is therefore something of an accident that ESOL students, apart from asylum seekers, fall within the ambit of the VECs literacy

services. It may be administratively convenient to leave ESOL there, but at the minimum the programme should have its own distinct budget and ESOL activities should not normally be reported as part of literacy training. Making this distinction would highlight the pressure on resources available for adult literacy training. (See Table 3.1).

## **Personnel**

### ***Tutors***

4.13 The development of adult literacy services has been supported by a number of different categories of personnel. As noted in Section III the Adult Literacy Services are organised on a VEC-wide basis by Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs) reporting to the Adult Education Organiser (AEO). Tutors are employed on a temporary, part-time or hourly basis. While all literacy tutors including volunteers undergo an initial 20-30 hour tutor training programme, most paid tutors have further training, and many see themselves as professional adult educators. Optional professional qualifications in the teaching of literacy are available. Tutors come from a variety of background: former volunteer tutors, former teachers in the mainstream system and increasingly, people from different professional backgrounds. As Table 3.1 shows as of 2007, there were about 1,500 paid tutors in the service and 3,600 volunteer tutors who mainly work on a one-to-one basis.

4.14 Because of the variety of standards, courses and delivery methods, adult education does not have the degree of organisational stability to be found in the formal primary, post-primary and tertiary education structures. However, if literacy training is to expand and standards improve, a more professionalised personnel structure will have to be put in place. For example, an expanded adult literacy service will require more teaching hours. Many of the paid tutors are currently employed for a very small number of hours each week, some for as little as just one two-hour class. Therefore, the increased teaching required by the proposed expansion of the service could be accomplished, to a large extent, by increasing the number of hours for which the existing paid tutors are employed, thus pushing them towards full-time status.

4.15 The terms under which staff is employed within the adult literacy service also have a profound effect on its structure and stability. As things stand, the ALOs are now employed on a permanent basis. However, none of the 1,500 adult literacy tutors in the country is in a permanent, full-time position. All are employed on a temporary, part-time basis and many have no contracts, no job security and no career structure.

4.16 This lack of job security and the absence of contracts and a career structure create difficulties for tutors who are increasingly now required to undertake educational support activities. These include all of the training requirements of new quality assurance, assessment and evaluation processes, which are essential to maintain a quality service over a sustained period of time. An effective adult literacy

service needs a stable core of members who have the benefits, rights and responsibilities which job security and a professional career structure provide.

4.17 Therefore, it will be necessary to set up a staffing structure for the adult literacy service, with clear guidelines on roles, responsibilities, pay, conditions and contracts for all practitioners.

### ***Professional Development and Qualifications for Staff***

4.18 A professional career structure requires professionally trained and qualified staff. At the moment, as noted in paragraph 4.3, the basic initial training for adult literacy tutors consists of a twenty to thirty hour programme. Collaboration between NALA and the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), has led to the certification of graduate and postgraduate level qualifications for ALOs and literacy tutors. Initial tutor training modules in VECs can be accredited by WIT and built up to a full award. As the demands made on staff working in the adult literacy service expand to include assessment, evaluation and quality assurances processes, the need for training in these and other functions emerges also. There is therefore a strong case to be made for including participation in top-up training in the job description of adult literacy tutors, this training to be completed after a specified period of service.

4.19 Membership of a profession is usually dependent the achievement of professional qualifications. There is therefore a need to equip personnel with available appropriate third level qualifications which are recognised as professional accreditation for adult literacy practitioners and to incentivize tutors to take these qualifications. The NALA/WIT accreditation referred to above is one such qualification.

### ***Volunteers***

4.20 The ALS in Ireland has its roots in the efforts and commitment of volunteer tutors, who continue to make an invaluable contribution to the delivery of a quality service. The expanded service and the demands of accountability, assessment and accreditation have and will put new demands on all practitioners working with adult students, including volunteers. It is important that those donating their time to the adult literacy effort should be properly supported to absorb new requirements and demands as these emerge. There needs to be agreement by ALS providers and by voluntary tutors on their role, their rights and responsibilities and on supports (e.g. training) available to them.

## **Structures**

### ***National Level***

4.21 As the preceding section has indicated, there is a wide range of services and providers in literacy training. This diversity facilitates access and delivery of training appropriate to different target groups (workers, early school leavers, travellers, women's groups, etc). The DES is the largest actor in the field through the VECs, which are organisationally part of the further education division of the Department. The other major departmental participant is the DETE, which funds training directly or via the National Training Fund. Other Departments involved include Justice and Law Reform, Health, and Social and Family Affairs. All these Departments are involved in literacy training through various state agencies and NGOs such as FÁS, Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA), and NALA.

4.22 However, if literacy objectives are to be attained there is a need for an overall structure capable of planning and coordinating the delivery of the necessarily diverse range of activities and organisations active in the field. The Joint Committee on Education and Science suggested that the National Adult Learning Council (NALC) could perform this function within the context of its intended responsibilities for the whole field of adult education. At the time the NALC had been formally set up but it had not been activated. It has since been disbanded. However, there remains the need for some coordinating structure - though not necessarily as elaborate as a stand alone council. It is proposed that an interdepartmental committee be set up representative of these relevant departments and agencies. This group should have the responsibility for formulating national literacy objectives and coordinating activities.

### ***Local Level***

4.23 The diversity of activities and providers at national level is actually multiplied at local level. For in addition to the state actors there are a large number of local development groups, local authority committees, and voluntary and charitable bodies. It is important that there is communication and coordination between these to ensure effective referral and service delivery. It is recommended that local literacy working groups should be established embracing these contributors.

## **Information for Management of Literacy Strategy**

### ***National Adult Literacy Survey***

4.24 A corollary of the methodology of national targeting is that national survey data should be available on a regular basis. The White Paper on Adult Education proposed that the literacy and



numeracy levels of Ireland's adult population should be explored again through another international adult literacy survey by 2003. This was not done but in order to monitor the ongoing efficiency and impact of the adult literacy service over a period of time, it is necessary to gather information periodically about the key indicators of success. While it is desirable for such a survey to be taken in an international context, the needs of national policy do not permit delays. A national survey should be taken within the next twelve months and every five years thereafter. The cost of national surveys would be small relative to the cost of the adult literacy training. Given their importance in monitoring the progress of adult literacy training services, currently running at around €30 million per annum, the surveys would be a small but highly productive investment.

### ***Evaluation of VEC Adult Literacy Learning***

4.25 The national survey proposed above will be an important element in the assessment of the aggregate success of the national literacy policy and also of other literacy related training and education as reviewed in Section III. However, a more specific focus is needed on the main plank of the programme which is the 'mainstream' training delivered by the VECs. There must be some doubts about the effectiveness of this element of the programme given that the intensity of the training is low and perhaps insufficient to generate the momentum required to enable students to progress through successive levels of the NFQ. It is important that an assessment of this relatively large programme be completed as soon as possible - preferably during the course of the current year.

### ***Assessment of Students' Progress***

4.26 An integral element in the proper management of literacy training programme is a student assessment system, which can be applied uniformly throughout the country and is calibrated with the NFQ. An assessment system identifies literacy attainments of participants at the outset and at the conclusion and enables an ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of the programme. An assessment procedure has been developed for the ITABE. While it still needs refinement, it should be rolled out by the ALS for all literacy students. This proposal is distinct from the *Mapping the Learning Journey* procedures, developed by NALA, which are currently being implemented and the focus of which is on progressing the individual literacy student.

### ***Certification of Literacy Training***

4.27 It is important for the development of literacy training and the progression of students that appropriate certification is in place. The NFQ describes ten levels of achievement for learning experiences of which the first three, NFQ 1 to 3, provide a framework that may be used to situate certification for progress of adult literacy students. Work on appropriate standards for literacy in these levels has recently been completed - though only after a protracted period of gestation. This is an

example of an area in which decisive leadership, within the context of a fully articulated programme for adult literacy, might have expedited matters. Unfortunately, it would seem that very few literacy students access this accreditation as witness the fact that the NFQ returns show that less than 100 awards at FETAC 1 and less than 500 awards at FETAC 2 were certified in 2008. VECs should be geared up, in terms of information and procedures, to ensure that their students can access this accreditation.

### **Supports for Adult Literacy Learning**

4.28 Attainment of the national adult literacy objectives requires strengthening of a number of ancillary services and supports.

#### ***Referral***

4.29 Adults who would benefit from literacy training face a number of obstacles. Some people do not address their literacy needs because they do not know that the adult literacy service exists; or because they do not perceive that they have literacy needs; or because they would like to address the issue but are prevented from doing so by practical life circumstances. Others are reluctant to admit to others that they have difficulties, which they have managed to conceal, possibly for many years.

4.30 A large proportion of the people who enter literacy training are referred to the ALS by one means or another: employers and trade unions, staff in the health service, social welfare and probation systems and by local community groups, among others. However, not all of these organisations have personnel who are aware of the nature of literacy and numeracy difficulties, how they can be recognised, what services are available to support individuals and how to contact them. Because of the stigma associated with literacy problems raising the issue can be a difficult process.

4.31 The recommendations which emerge from this are first that there needs to be a programme of publicity to raise awareness of the problem in those 'front line' organisations likely to encounter it as suggested above. Second, information has to be provided to these organisations about where and when training and guidance services are available. Thirdly, if a campaign is to be launched, it is essential that the adult literacy service has the staffing, the capacity and the infrastructure to take up such referrals within a reasonable time.

#### ***Additional Costs to the Learner: Transport, Child Care and Care of Elderly***

4.32 It is evident that people with literacy needs are generally on low incomes. The IALS shows that almost half of those in IALS1 are in the lowest quintile (i.e. bottom 20%) of the population in terms of income. For such people taking part in education can be a relatively expensive business. Especially in rural areas, transport costs can prevent individuals from travelling to their place of learning on a regular

basis. Service providers need to have the facility and the funds to assist learners with these incidental, but often relatively substantial, costs.

4.33 Difficulties in covering the cost of care of children and elderly relatives can also be a very significant barrier facing adult students. Service providers need to have the facility and the funds to provide crèches and/or funds to cover the cost of child and elder care, as appropriate.

### ***Research, Innovation, Promotion***

4.34 Under this heading, there are a number of distinct activities important to the national strategy and which need reinforcement and development. Many of these fall within the area of activity of NALA

- ***Promotion:*** There needs to be a much wider understanding of the prevalence of the problem and attenuation of the stigma which attaches to it if people are to come forward, or be referred, and undertake training. There is a need for more national publicity campaigns to complement specific promotion in the 'front line' institutions referred to above.
- ***Evaluation:*** More funds need to be allocated to evaluating the effectiveness of the content and methods of delivery of literacy training. The need for this is rendered more acute by the pressure on public funding.
- ***Research:*** A related area, and a similar rationale, justifies research into innovative methods of literacy training including further development of distance and IT based learning.

## Footnotes and References

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- <sup>i</sup> *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Results of the International Adult Literacy Survey*, (2000) OECD, Statistics Canada
- <sup>ii</sup> *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners*. (2005) Department of Education and Science
- <sup>iii</sup> *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*. Fifth Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, (2007). Forfas
- <sup>iv</sup> Feinstein, L. and Symons, J. (1999), Attainment in secondary school, Oxford Economic Papers, 51, 300-321
- <sup>v</sup> Morgan, M., Hickey, B., Kelleghan, T. *International Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland* (1997) Department of Education and Science, Dublin, Stationery Office.
- <sup>vi</sup> The most important academic use of the IALS for Ireland is to be found in Denny, K.J., Harmon, C.P., O'Sullivan, V. *Education, Earnings and Skills: A Multi-Country Comparison* (2003), Institute of Fiscal Studies
- <sup>vii</sup> *A Fresh Start – Improving Literacy and Numeracy (1999)* (The Moser Report) Department for Education and Skill, London: HMSO.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*, (2000), Department of Education and Science. Dublin: Stationery Office
- <sup>ix</sup> The others were: Back to Education Initiative, ICT programme and new organisational structures for adult education.
- <sup>x</sup> *Report from the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning* (2002) Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment Dublin: Stationery Office.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Report of the Joint Committee on Education and Science on Literacy Levels in Ireland*, (May 2006) Houses of the Oireachtas. Dublin: Stationery Office. .
- <sup>xii</sup> *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*. Fifth Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007). Forfas. See Table A.1 page 12.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid page 94 and 95
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Towards 2016, Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015*. (2006) Dublin, Stationery Office
- <sup>xv</sup> *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-16* (2007), Dublin, Stationery Office
- <sup>xvi</sup> Denny, K., Harmon, C., McMahon, D., Redmond, S. *Literacy and Education in Ireland*. Economic and Social Review, Vol 30, July 1999 pp215-226
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*. (2005) Statistics Canada. OECD, Paris,
- <sup>xviii</sup> Department of Education and Skill (1999) op cit
- <sup>xix</sup> McCann, T. (2006) 'Evaluation Report: Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education Pilot Project'. Co. Dublin VEC. Dorgan Associates. (2009) 'Cost benefit Evaluation of Adult Literacy Training ' NALA. This is on the basis that the average student is half way up NFQ2 and that completion of NFQ3, which is the equivalent of IALS2, represents an acceptable standard of literacy.