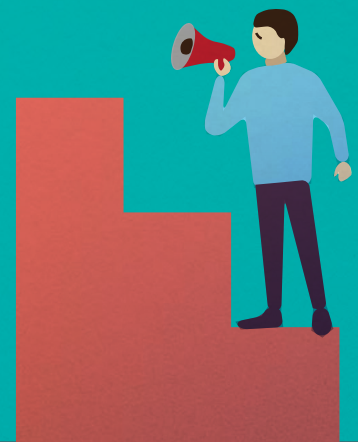


# Literacy Now

The cost of unmet literacy,  
numeracy and digital skills  
needs in Ireland and why  
we need to act now



#LiteracyChangesLives



National Adult Literacy Agency  
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

# About this report

The purpose of this report is to provide evidence to show why we must support unmet adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland.

**Part 1** presents the most recent statistics and research about the cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills to individuals, society and the economy in Ireland. It focuses specifically on the areas of health, families and social and community life.

**Part 2** summarises the current policy and practice to support unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland and identifies gaps.

**Part 3** explains why we need to do more to address this issue.

The report was compiled by the National Adult Literacy Agency using national and international statistics and research.

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# Contents

Summary	4
<b>Part 1 The literacy challenge</b>	<b>7</b>
Introduction	8
Literacy – what is it?	9
Extent of the literacy issue	11
Literacy and equality	13
Literacy and lifelong learning	14
The cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland	15
Literacy for health and wellbeing	22
Literacy and Families: Enabling intergenerational learning	28
Family literacy in Ireland	30
Literacy in social and community life	33
<b>Part 2 Current policy, practice and approach</b>	<b>39</b>
Policy: the Irish context	40
Policy: the European context	46
Practice: current adult literacy provision	49
Approach	50
<b>Part 3 New vision for literacy</b>	<b>53</b>
Introduction	54
Why we need to do more	54
Literacy for the future	56
Next steps: Literacy for life	57
References	58
Glossary of terms	67
<b>Appendix 1</b>	
Map of Government Departments with policies involving literacy	70
Acknowledgements	71



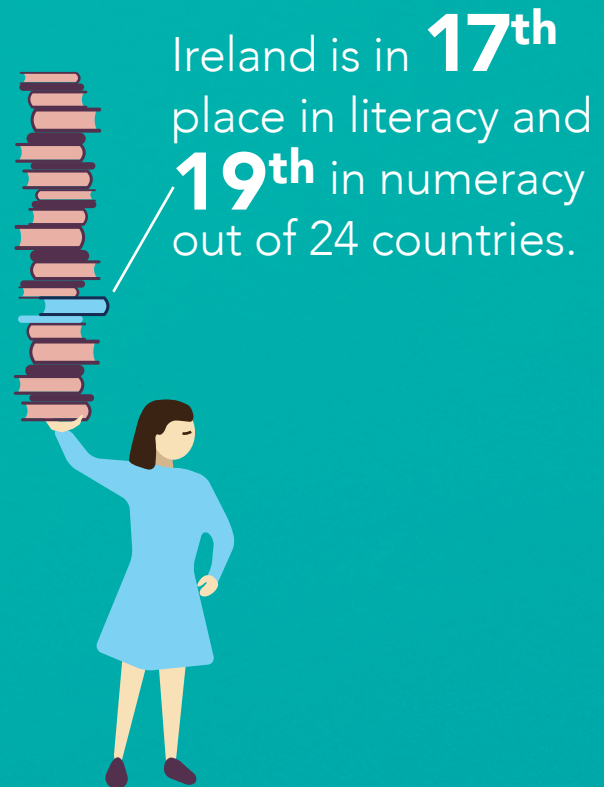
# Summary

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) collated this report, drawing on recent statistics and research, some commissioned by NALA. It aims to:

- introduce the issues involved in addressing unmet adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs, in particular in the areas of health and wellbeing, families, social and community life,
- outline the current policy and practice in this area, and
- make concluding remarks on the next steps towards supporting unmet adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs of the adult population over the next 10 years.

It is not possible in the report to capture all the information and ideas produced by NALA and others, nationally and internationally, over the years. The aim is to combine ideas, information and learning from this rich body of research and stimulate debate and action around **a new vision for adult literacy**.

In 2019 NALA commissioned TASC (an independent think-tank whose core focus is addressing inequality and sustaining democracy) to develop a framework for supporting literacy, numeracy and digital skills. This framework, **Literacy for Life**, suggests a Whole-of-Government approach for investing in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills for an equal and resilient Ireland.



## Part 1

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1. Literacy is an essential life skill that involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate, access services, and make informed choices. The OECD Survey of Adult Skills<sup>1</sup> shows that about 18% of Irish adults (aged 16 to 65) (521,550) are at or below level one on a five level literacy scale. It also shows 25% of Irish adults (754,000) scored at or below level one for numeracy.
2. Unmet adult literacy and numeracy needs have devastating consequences for individuals, communities and the economy. People at the lowest literacy and numeracy levels earn less income, have poorer health and are more likely to be unemployed.<sup>2</sup>
3. In today's world we all need digital skills. A recent Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) report<sup>3</sup> shows that 55% of the adult population in Ireland (25 to 64) has low digital skills.

## Part 2

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1. Ireland's National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025<sup>4</sup> sets out how it will support the development of an educated, skilled and adaptable labour force. The strategy has set a target to reduce the numbers of adults with less than upper secondary to 7% by 2020. This is the same target from Ireland's first National Skills Strategy (2007)<sup>5</sup> and we are not on track to reach it.

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<sup>1</sup> CSO (2013). [PIAAC 2012](#) - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cedefop (2020). [Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways](#). Volume 1: adult population with potential for upskilling and reskilling. Luxembourg: Publications of the European Union. Cedefop reference series; No 112.

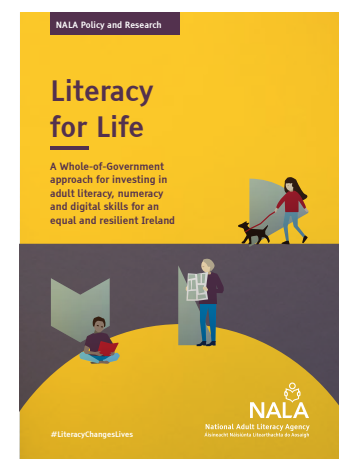
<sup>4</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2016). [Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025](#).

<sup>5</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Need (2007). [Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy](#).

2. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) budget for adult literacy for 2019 was €35 million.<sup>6</sup> This supports 65,000 adults attending adult literacy services<sup>7</sup> in the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Currently adults can access on average between 2 and 6 hours adult literacy tuition per week. This is 12.5% of those with literacy needs costing €540 per person per year. There has been no substantial increase in budget allocation, services or participation in recent years.
3. Currently NALA is working bi-laterally with nine government departments and their agencies on policies aimed at building literacy and numeracy competence across a number of areas including health, community and finance (see appendix 1). However, there is no coordination or alignment of this work, which often depends on the knowledge and goodwill of people working in these different sectors.

## Part 3

1. Adult literacy is a relatively neglected issue. In comparison to investment in other areas of education, the current government response offers limited literacy tuition and supports only 12.5% of those with needs. This is inadequate to redress educational and wider inequalities and meet current government and international targets.
2. NALA believes Ireland needs a **new vision and strategy** for the next decade to support adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs and prioritise those **furthest behind first**.
3. Adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills are part of the solution to creating a more equal society and changing lives for the better. In 2019 NALA commissioned TASC (an independent think-tank whose core focus is addressing inequality and sustaining democracy) to develop a framework for supporting literacy, numeracy and digital skills. This framework, **Literacy for Life**, suggests a Whole-of-Government approach for investing in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills for an equal and resilient Ireland.



<sup>6</sup> Answer to parliamentary question 112 on 27 November 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



# Part 1

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## The literacy challenge



## Introduction

A basic level of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills are essential for even minimal engagement in society as a citizen, consumer, parent or employee. These skills enable people to reach their full potential, be active and critical participants in society and help address poverty and social exclusion.

This section looks at the definition of literacy and the extent of the issue. It explores the relationship between literacy and equality and literacy and lifelong learning. It provides the most recent statistics and research about the cost of low levels of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills to individuals, society and the economy in Ireland. Finally the section focuses specifically on the areas of literacy and health and wellbeing, families and social and community life.



“ Literacy is essential for sustainable human development in today’s complex and fast-changing societies.”

UNESCO (2016) 3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education

“ 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.”

Distance Learner interviewed in the NALA Research Report (2018) What’s in it for me? The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.



## Literacy – what is it?

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.”<sup>8</sup>



<sup>8</sup> National Adult Literacy Agency (2012). [Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work](#): Dublin: NALA.

Literacy is not neutral, it is bound up with power and powerlessness, with equality and inequality. Literacy is not only a set of technical skills. Rather it is a relational process that is shaped and influenced by the social context in which it is used.

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.

Sometimes a person needs to develop confidence as well as the skills aspects of literacy. Even if a person already has a qualification, it does not always necessarily mean they have high levels of literacy. Some will have left school confident about their literacy and numeracy skills but find that changes in their workplace and everyday life make their skills inadequate as the literacy demands of society are constantly changing. Others may not have used their literacy skills for a number of years and as a result can lose confidence and even literacy skills. Unmet literacy needs have many dimensions that require different responses in different settings.

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 the haves and the have nots.<sup>9</sup> It has been shown that those who need the most assistance are the least likely to be assisted. This is the Matthew effect where “without intervention, those who have acquired more education get more, and those that have not get little or nothing.”<sup>10</sup> The United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda aims to address this through their commitment to reaching the **furthest behind first** and calls for investment in adult literacy.



<sup>9</sup> Foundation for European Progressive Studies and TASC (2019). *Cherishing All Equally 2019: Inequality in Europe and Ireland*.

<sup>10</sup> Kerckhoff, A. and Glennie, E. (1999). *The Matthew Effect in American Education*. Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization.

## Extent of the literacy issue

Ireland ranked in 17th place in adult literacy and 19th in adult numeracy out of 24 countries in the most recent international adult skills survey – Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).<sup>11</sup>

It found that 18% of adults (between the ages 16 and 65) find reading and understanding everyday texts difficult. This means that 521,550 adults struggle with reading a leaflet, bus timetable or medicine instructions. 25% of adults (754,000 people) have difficulties using maths in everyday life, for example basic addition, working out a bill or calculating averages.

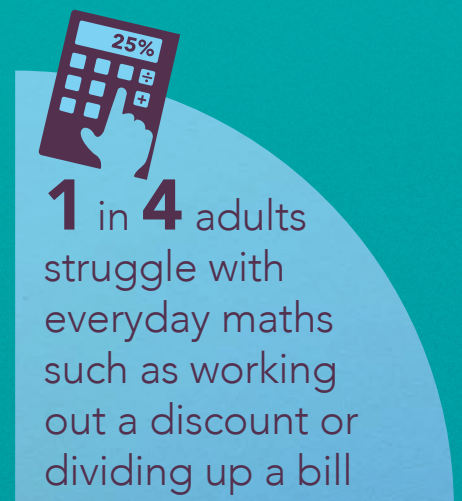
The survey also found that more than two-fifths (42%) of adults struggle with digital skills (or named in the study as problem solving in a technology rich environment (PS-TRE)). Many others find technology difficult to use effectively and safely and face increasing challenges in today's digital world.

The PIAAC data showed a strong correlation between low literacy and low education achievement. This can affect people's health and wellbeing, their ability to access work and lifelong learning and to contribute and participate fully in community life.

**1 in 6** adults find everyday text, such as a bus timetable or medical instructions, hard to read and understand



**1 in 4** adults struggle with everyday maths such as working out a discount or dividing up a bill



<sup>11</sup> CSO (2013). PIAAC 2012 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland.

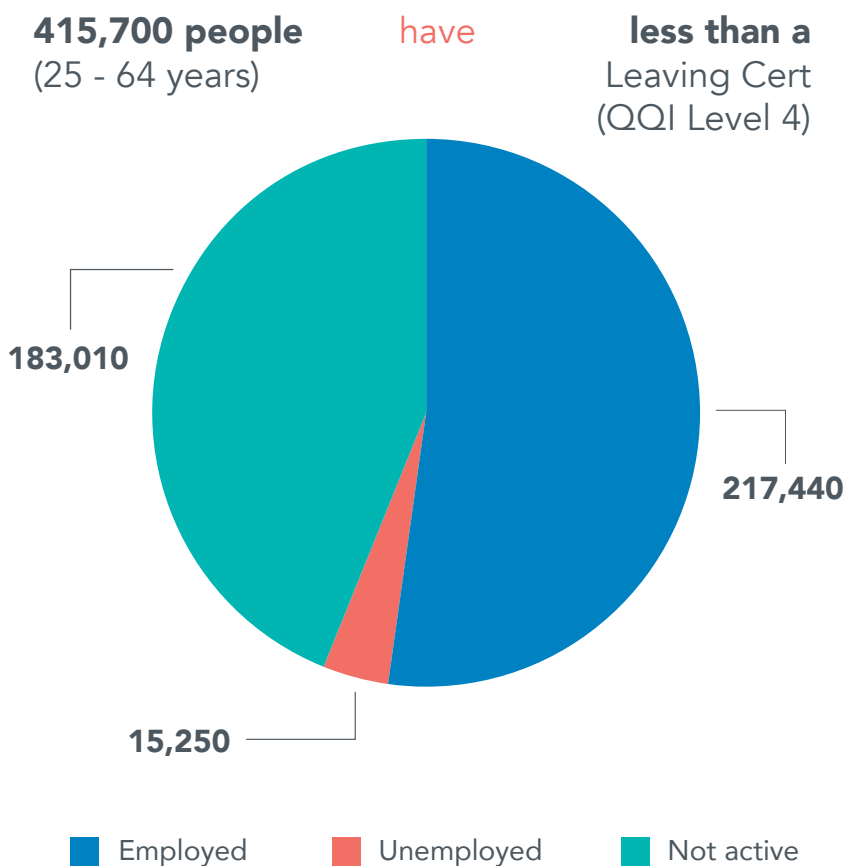


Recent data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO)<sup>12</sup> shows us that currently there are 415,700 people (aged 25 to 64) who have less than a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 4 qualification (equivalent to a Leaving Certificate).

These include:

- 217,440 (52%) employed;
- 15,250 (3.67%) unemployed; and
- 183,010 (44%) not engaged in the labour force.

**Figure 2: People of working age with less than an upper secondary qualification (QQI Level 4 – equivalent of a Leaving Certificate)**



<sup>12</sup> CSO (2019). *Education Attainment Thematic Report 2019*.

## Literacy and equality

Literacy is a **barometer of equality**. Equal societies are happier, healthier and wealthier. Adult learning and education (ALE) promotes “sustainable development, healthier societies, better jobs and more active citizenship.”<sup>13</sup>

Unmet basic skills needs have devastating consequences for our society, economy and environment, both financially and democratically<sup>14</sup> and are a factor in social exclusion and inequality.

Poverty and low literacy are ‘two sides of the same coin’ – they have similar impacts on people: powerlessness; inequality and injustice; feelings of rejection and inadequacy; a sense of hopelessness and failure; social stigma; marginalisation, low health and low self-esteem.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> Research also shows us that these skills are linked to positive outcomes such as volunteerism and greater participation in the community.

Wilkinson and Pickett state that:

**“greater equality is the gateway to a society that is capable of improving the quality of life for all of us.”<sup>17</sup>**

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills are part of the solution to creating a more equal society and changing lives for the better.

“ 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.”

Distance Learner interviewed in the NALA Research Report (2018) What’s in it for me? The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO (2016). *3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*.

<sup>14</sup> OECD (2013). *Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*.

<sup>15</sup> Presentation by Hugh Frazer, Director of Combat Poverty Agency, International Literacy Day, Sept 1987.

<sup>16</sup> OECD (2013). *Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkinson R. and Pickett K. (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*.

## Literacy and lifelong learning

In Ireland lifelong learning is the governing principle of adult education policy.<sup>18</sup> The National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025 defines lifelong learning as:

*“all purposeful learning activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence.”<sup>19</sup>*

The **Europe 2020 strategy** acknowledges “lifelong learning and skills development as key elements in response to the current economic crisis, to demographic ageing and to the broader economic and social strategy of the European Union.”<sup>20</sup> The European Commission **Upskilling Pathways**<sup>21</sup> aims to help adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or acquire a broader set of skills by progressing towards an upper secondary qualification or equivalent.

The **UNESCO Third Global Report on Adult Learning and Education** (GRALE) looks at the overlapping benefits of adult learning and education (ALE) in three areas - health and wellbeing; social, civic and community life and employment and the labour market.

Figure 3: Adult Learning and Education (ALE) Benefits



<sup>18</sup> Department of Education (2000). *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*.

<sup>19</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2016) *Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025*.

<sup>20</sup> European Council (2011). *Resolution adopted by the Council on a renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning*.

<sup>21</sup> European Commission (2019). *Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults Taking stock of implementation measures*.



The National Skills Strategy 2025 and further education and training policy framework for skills development of people in employment <sup>22</sup> highlights the need for a highly skilled workforce and an active engaged citizenship. The strategies have placed an increasing emphasis on upskilling the number of people holding a QQI Level 1 qualification (equivalent to Junior Certificate). In tandem it is important to also ensure the implementation of policies in which literacy and numeracy are promoted as skills vital for developing critical thinking skills and informed and active citizens.

## The cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland

Unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills 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 £800 billion<sup>23</sup> (€936 billion). In a recent study, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) translated the social impact of low literacy into an annual cost for Dutch society.<sup>24</sup> It calculated that Dutch society pays at least €1.13 billion every year because of low literacy. This amount excludes immaterial effects and indirect effects of low literacy. Therefore, the actual social costs of low literacy are likely higher.

A **cost benefit analysis**<sup>25</sup> 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. 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 (NQF) was €3,810. The gain to the Exchequer, in terms of reduced social welfare transfers and increased tax payments, being €1,531 per annum.

<sup>22</sup> SOLAS (2018). Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland: [FET policy framework](#).

<sup>23</sup> World Literacy Foundation (2018). [The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy](#).

<sup>24</sup> PWC (2018). [Europe Monitor: How low literacy impacts us all: Macroeconomic Update Europe: Country Update Belgium](#).

<sup>25</sup> NALA (2009). Dorgan, J. [A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training Research report](#).

## Strong literacy pays and builds human capitals

People with good literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills are more likely to have better health and a longer life, be employed and earn better incomes.<sup>26</sup> Participation in literacy and numeracy provision, and having higher levels of literacy and numeracy also have a positive personal and social impact on individuals and communities.<sup>27</sup>

Literacy and numeracy are key factors that shape individual life chances and their impact is critical for the labour market in terms of employment, earnings and training. Research confirms that people with unmet literacy and numeracy needs who are unemployed are more likely to move into long-term unemployment.

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research report on

**Literacy, numeracy and activation among the unemployed** shows that work specific training for people with literacy and numeracy needs helps enhance employment prospects – up to three times the average.<sup>28</sup>

Another ESRI research report on **Literacy and Numeracy Difficulties in the Irish Workplace** shows a wage differential for employees with literacy and numeracy needs. It found the negative wage impact from having a numeracy need is confined to those with low earnings, while employees with middle to upper level earnings are most negatively affected by having a literacy need.<sup>29</sup>

“ I’m more confident to ask my doctor about my health. I ask questions now that I never really understood before.”

Distance learner interviewed in the NALA research project (2018) What’s in it for me? The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.

<sup>26</sup> OECD (2013). *Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*.

<sup>27</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011). *Review of Research and Evaluation on Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills*.

<sup>28</sup> Kelly, E., S. McGuinness and P.J. O’Connell (2012b). *Literacy, Numeracy and Activation among the Unemployed*. ESRI Research Series Number 25. Dublin: ESRI.

<sup>29</sup> Kelly, E., S. McGuinness and P.J. O’Connell (2012a). *Literacy and Numeracy Difficulties in the Irish Workplace: Impact on Earnings and Training Expenditures*. ESRI Research Series Number 27. Dublin: ESRI.

Other research shows a clear link between literacy, numeracy, information technology (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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

As a result, adults with literacy and numeracy needs require support acquiring new skills to meet the changing demand of the labour market. Skills in the broadest sense refer to what a person 'knows, understands and is capable of doing.'<sup>33</sup> Unmet literacy and numeracy needs are a concern and for the Irish economy to grow there is a need for a skilled workforce across all sectors. Engaging in lifelong learning can boost skills and enable people to become more employable, successful and flexible in the labour market.<sup>34</sup>

## Social cost of literacy

Literacy has a social cost to individuals, families and communities. The World Literacy Foundation (2018) says people with unmet literacy needs are:

**"faced with the prospect of poor health outcomes, welfare dependency, a lack of social cohesion, a higher level of crime and lack of self worth. Poor literacy also limits a person's ability to engage in activities that require either critical thinking or a solid base of literacy and numeracy skills."**<sup>35</sup>

**"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."**

Learner from Homeless Agency interviewed in the NALA Research Report (2018) *What's in it for me? The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.*

<sup>30</sup> Felstead & Green (2017); Kuczera et al (2016).

<sup>31</sup> UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2016). *3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*.

<sup>32</sup> Stiglitz & Greenwald (2015); Jones et al (2008).

<sup>33</sup> SOLAS (2018). *Background paper* to FET policy framework for skills development of people in employment.

<sup>34</sup> UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2016). *3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*.

<sup>35</sup> World Literacy Foundation (2018). *The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy*.



## Investing in literacy

There are many benefits of improving literacy such as increased self-confidence and self-esteem, positive family interactions, improved health and increased wellbeing.<sup>36</sup> Research for the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills found that learning was associated with higher wellbeing.<sup>37</sup> Hammond and Feinstein also found participation in lifelong learning had many health benefits for example in terms of smoking cessation and taking exercise, as well as a growth in self-rated health.<sup>38</sup>

At a societal level, civic and political participation are crucial to the wellbeing of society. **Civic participation** is defined as “voluntary individual actions serving a common benefit, and positive attitudes towards a community or society.”<sup>39</sup> Several studies have identified a positive association between adult learning, literacy and forms of civic participation.<sup>40</sup>

Literacy also influences our **trust** in others, our willingness to volunteer and our belief about the contribution we can make to the political process.<sup>41</sup> Literacy enables us to be critically reflective and engaged citizens, which is essential in today’s news, media and digital world.

“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.”

Distance learner interviewed in the NALA research project (2018) What’s in it for me? The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.

“Good numeracy is the best protection against unemployment, low wages and poor health.”

Andreas Schleicher, OECD  
National Numeracy  
Attitudes towards Maths

<sup>36</sup> UNESCO (2016) *3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Germany.

<sup>37</sup> Jenkins, A., and Mostafa, T. (2012). *Learning and Wellbeing Trajectories: Among Older Adults in England* BIS Research Paper Number 92.

<sup>38</sup> Hammond, C. and Feinstein, L. (2006) “Are Those Who Flourished at School Healthier Adults? What Role for Adult Education?” WBL Research Report 17. London: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.

<sup>39</sup> Ruber, I.E., Rees, S.L., and Schmidt-Hertha, B. (2018). ‘Lifelong learning – lifelong returns? A new theoretical framework for the analysis of civic returns on adult learning’, *International Review of Education*.

<sup>40</sup> Panitsidou 2012; Schuller et al. 2004; Thomas 2017; Vera-Toscano et al. 2017.

<sup>41</sup> OECD (2016). *Skills Matter: Further results from the survey of adult skills*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris.

## Investing in numeracy

Numeracy is a key factor that contributes to individual life chances and its impact is critical for good health, favourable labour market opportunities, participation in family and community life and active citizenship. Low numeracy skills impact on social wellbeing, social participation, financial security and work opportunities.<sup>42</sup>

Low levels of numeracy is estimated to be costing the UK economy £20.2 billion per year or about 1.3 per cent of the UK's gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>43</sup> It is estimated that the "average cost to individuals with poor numeracy is £460 a year. It affects not only people's pockets, but their health and wellbeing too."<sup>44</sup>



**20% off new TV  
€400**

**1 in 6 Irish adults will struggle to answer this question according to the latest Adult Skills Survey (CSO, 2013)**

There is a lot of evidence<sup>45</sup> linking low numeracy skills with poor outcomes such as:

- Employment: People with poor numeracy skills are more than twice as likely to face unemployment.
- Wages: Recent data by the OECD show a direct relationship between wage distribution and numeracy skills.
- Money: Good numeracy is linked to a range of positive financial behaviours including saving frequency and keeping up with bills.
- Health: In OECD and UK basic skills reports, the correlation between poor numeracy and poor health is clear.
- Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties: Children with these problems are more likely to struggle with numeracy, even taking into account factors such as home background and general ability.

<sup>42</sup> Geiger et al, 2016; Kelly et al. 2012a; Kelly et al. 2012b; Bynner and Parsons, 2006; Paulos, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> National Numeracy and Pro Bono Economics (PBE) (2014). Pro Bono Economics [Report](#) for National Numeracy Cost of outcomes associated with low levels of adult numeracy in the UK.

<sup>44</sup> KPMG and National Numeracy (2017). [The Essentials of Numeracy: a new approach to making the UK numerate.](#)

<sup>45</sup> National Numeracy website <https://www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/why-numeracy-important>.

- School exclusions: Pupils beginning secondary school with very low numeracy skills are more likely to face exclusion.
- Truancy: 14-year-olds who have poor maths skills at 11 are more than twice as likely to play truant.
- Crime: A quarter of young people in custody have a numeracy level below that expected of a 7-year-old. Similarly, 65% of adult prisoners have numeracy skills at or below the level expected of an 11-year-old.

Mallows found an intergenerational numeracy effect where “if one parent has a higher numeracy level, his or her child is likely to have a higher numeracy score.”<sup>46</sup> Another study showed that children’s numeracy at age 10 has an impact on their later earnings.<sup>47</sup>

Improving numeracy directly contributes to growth in personal and social confidence.<sup>48</sup> Numeracy skills can improve confidence and self-esteem, and enable learners to develop new aspirations and form new dispositions towards learning.

“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?”

Learner interviewed in the NALA research project (2018) What’s in it for me? The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.



<sup>46</sup> Mallows D. (2013). The intergenerational transfer of numeracy skills, National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.

<sup>47</sup> Crawford C. and Cribb J. (2013). Reading and maths skills at age 10 and earnings in later life.

<sup>48</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011). [Review of Research and Evaluation on Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills](#).



## Investing in digital skills

Digital skills are used in everyday life – we need them to book a flight, send emails, pay bills and scan items in the supermarket. These digital skills require a minimum level of literacy and numeracy. The OECD says:

**“Given that text-based and numeric information occupies a considerable portion of the digital world, access to that world depends not only on information and communication technologies (ICT) skills but also on basic proficiency in literacy and numeracy. In other words, the digital divide may also reflect a literacy and numeracy divide.”<sup>49</sup>**

ICT is changing the types of skills people need in the workplace. Occupations and economic sectors are being impacted to a greater or lesser extent by these new technologies and so-called ‘lower skilled’ workers may struggle to find work in the new environment. Cedefop’s European skills and jobs survey (ESJS) shows that:

**“about 85% of all EU jobs need at least a basic digital skills level, 70% of EU jobs require at least a moderate level of information and communications technology (ICT) skills, and 14% require advanced ICT skills.”<sup>50</sup>**

In November 2019 the European Commission (EC) put out a call for action<sup>51</sup> on digital skills stating that:

**“Europe is facing a large digital skills gap. Around 1 million digital experts are missing. 35% of workers do not have even basic digital skills. This is a significant barrier for businesses. People need to be trained and re-trained for the digital transformation.”**

The Commission says significant investments are needed to tackle the digital skills gap. The new European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) (2021 – 2027) will focus on key areas<sup>52</sup> such as enhancing the skills and education levels of people, including digital skills that would equip them for the changing labour market. Ireland must continue to invest in digital skills alongside literacy and numeracy.

<sup>49</sup> OECD (2016). *Skills Matter: Further results from the survey of adult skills*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<sup>50</sup> Cedefop (2020). *Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways*. Volume 1: adult population with potential for upskilling and reskilling. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series; No 112.

<sup>51</sup> Digital Skills, your future: *Call for Action*.

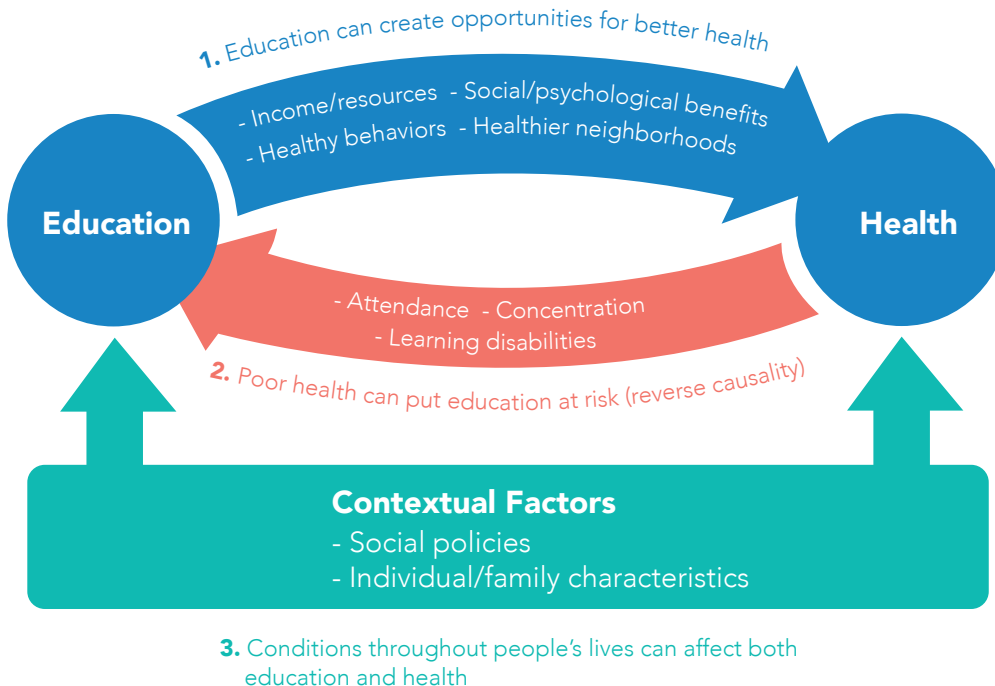
<sup>52</sup> From web: EU Budget: a *new European Social Fund Plus*.

# Literacy for health and wellbeing

Taken from a paper commissioned by NALA and written by Dr. Sarah Gibney called 'Literacy Matters for health and wellbeing'.

Participation in literacy and lifelong learning can contribute to health and wellbeing in several ways. The first and most important point about the link between education and health is that, through intervention studies and economic research, this relationship is now known to be 'causal'. In a statistical sense, 'causality' means that an outcome, such as poor health, is the result of an event, a condition, or a circumstance, such as having unmet literacy and numeracy needs or lack of education. Indeed, in Ireland and in other countries, increases in the minimum schooling laws have increased levels of educational attainment overall, and this has improved the health of the population.<sup>53</sup> How education affects health in this causal way is summarised in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Education and health**



**Source: Centre for Society and Health (2015)**

<sup>53</sup> Oreopoulos, P (2007). Do Dropouts Drop Out Too Soon?

This figure also shows that the relationship between education and health involves reverse causality: poor health can cause low education.

In Great Britain a longitudinal study of people who were born in 1958 found that people who experienced poorer health in childhood (low birth weight or chronic health conditions) had:

- worse health as adults;
- passed fewer O-level exams;
- worked less during their adult years; and
- had lower occupational status by the time they were aged 42.<sup>54</sup>

**Education can create opportunities for better health** through:

- better income and resources;
- social and psychological benefits;
- healthy behaviour; and
- healthier neighbourhoods and communities.

## Income and resources

Those with low income and resources and with low education are also those with the highest levels of poverty, deprivation, and consistent poverty (both poverty and material deprivation) in Ireland.<sup>55</sup> While eligibility for a medical card is designed to protect those most in need both economically and in terms of health needs, analysis of the national survey on Lifestyle, Attitudes and Nutrition showed that the impact of eligibility for general medical services, and the impact of education on health status among adults were independent of one another.<sup>56</sup> This means that, irrespective of providing access to medical services for those most economically in need, low education remains an important factor affecting health status.

<sup>54</sup> Case A., Fertig A., Paxson, C. (2005). The Lasting Impact of Childhood Health and Circumstance.

<sup>55</sup> De Buitelir, D. (2018). Income Inequality in Ireland. MacGill Summer School.

<sup>56</sup> Kelleher, C.C., Friel, S., Nic Gabhainn, S., and Tay, J.B. (2003). Socio-demographic predictors of self-rated health in the Republic of Ireland: findings from the National Survey on Lifestyle, Attitudes and Nutrition SLáN, Social Science & Medicine.

Further, although every citizen is entitled to public healthcare, among other factors, higher education has been associated with a greater probability of purchasing private health insurance. The motivation for this purchase stems from concerns about the length of waiting times and the quality of care in the public system.<sup>57</sup>

## Social/psychological benefits

Turning to the psychological benefits of education on health, there are a range of studies that show the immediate impact such as increased confidence<sup>58</sup> as well as more long-term, quality-of-life benefits such as an improved sense of purpose. This is often linked to the increased mental stimulation that people experience when engaging in further education and training.<sup>59</sup>

Participation in learning also provides intrinsic rewards to people as they age. In addition to increasing knowledge, successful completion of an educational course can enhance quality of life, increase motivation, enhance coping skills, help to maintain independence and increase social connectedness.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, increases in confidence, improved mental health and quality of life that have been identified as outcomes of adult education are strongly linked a person's ability to maintain and enhance their physical health.<sup>61</sup>

## Healthy behaviour

A longitudinal study of adults who participated in further education found that participation in learning had a positive impact on smoking cessation and increased exercise, and self-rated health overall.<sup>62</sup>

Among adults in Ireland from different class groups, a higher level of education was found to reduce their chance of smoking.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Harmon, C., & Nolan, B. (2001). Health insurance and health services utilization in Ireland. *Health economics*, 10(2), 135-145.

<sup>58</sup> Dench & Regan (2000); Preston & Hammond (2003); Schuller, Brassett-Grundy, Green, & Hammond (2002).

<sup>59</sup> Feinstein (2002); Feinstein, Vorhaus, & Sabates (2008); Formosa (2013); Preston & Hammond (2003); Richeson, Boyne, & Brady (2007).

<sup>60</sup> Simone, P., & Scullin, M. (2006). Cognitive benefits of participation in lifelong learning institutes.

<sup>61</sup> Wilson, R., Hebert, L., Scherr, P., & Barnes, L. (2009). Educational attainment and cognitive decline in old age.

<sup>62</sup> Feinstein, L., C. Hammond, L. Woods, J. Preston and J. Bynner (2003). *The Contribution of Adult Learning to Health and Social Capital*.

<sup>63</sup> Layte and Whelan (2008). *Explaining Social Class Inequalities in Smoking: The Role of Education, Self-Efficacy, and Deprivation*.

In addition, an investment in adult learning has been linked to a greater likelihood of taking up cervical screening among adult women.<sup>64</sup> Higher education has also been well established as a major socio-economic factor that contributes to an adult having a healthy and balanced diet, as well as a lower amount of fat in their total daily food intake (also referred to as 'macronutrient' intake).<sup>65</sup>

There is a considerable body of research that has adopted a 'life course' approach to determine the long-term effects of education using longitudinal data, as well as examining the impact of low educational attainment for adults engaging with health and social care providers at later stages in life.

The results of a longitudinal study of adults in England has found that over the course of 12 years, adults with lower education had a significantly increased risk of dementia.<sup>66</sup>

In Ireland, for older adults engaging with their usual source of care, a recent study found that adults with lower levels of educational attainment were:

- significantly more likely to report feeling discouraged to talk about physical, social, sensitive, and emotional health problems, and
- encouraged to talk about these health problems more using a person-centered approach – such as explaining results and listening to preferences.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Sabates, R. and Feinstein, L. (2006). Education and the Take-up of Preventative Health Care: The case of cervical screening in Britain.

<sup>65</sup> Friel, S., Kelleher, C. C., Nolan, G., & Harrington, J. (2003). Social diversity of Irish adults' nutritional intake. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

<sup>66</sup> Cadar D, Lassale C, Davies H, Llewellyn DJ, Batty GD, Steptoe A. (2018). Individual and Area-Based Socioeconomic Factors Associated with Dementia Incidence in England.

<sup>67</sup> Gibney, S. and Moore, T (2018). Older Patients' Views of Health Care Interactions in Ireland.



## Healthier neighbourhoods and communities

Education forms an important part of how Ireland and other countries measure the social deprivation profile of an area, such as a town or county council area. For example, in Scotland the social deprivation index includes the proportion of the people who are of working age but have no qualifications.

A similar approach is taken with the Social Deprivation Index for Ireland. In this approach, education forms part of a profile that also includes crime rates, housing conditions, income, employment, access to services, and health. The Index works on the basis that these domains combine to produce outcomes for those living in the area, such as quality of life. In Ireland, and elsewhere, lower health status is disproportionately more concentrated in higher social deprivation areas.

Among rural dwellers in Ireland, area deprivation and low education were found to have a combined negative effect resulting in lower health status and lower quality of life, particularly among men.<sup>68</sup>

Staying in the context of the community, the social impact of further education and training for those with lower education and unmet literacy needs can also be community wide, particularly where there is an intergenerational component. Learning in life increases personal and community wellbeing through opportunities for older people to share their life experience, expertise and contribute to voluntary activities and enhances intergenerational solidarity by bridging age differences and promoting the worth of all ages.<sup>69</sup> According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), young people who learn with older people have more positive and realistic attitudes towards older generations.<sup>70</sup> According to the OECD community-based adult education programmes provide opportunities to strengthen the social wealth of a neighbourhood in that it provides a forum where values are exchanged, and understanding is increased, as well as fostering greater trust between groups within the community.<sup>71</sup> This helps to grow a community where individuals are socially connected in healthy and affluent ways<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Tay, J.B., Kelleher, C.C., Hope, A., Barry, M., Nic Gabhainn, S., & Sizsmith, J. (2004). Influence of sociodemographic and neighbourhood factors on self-rated health and quality of life in rural communities: findings from the Agriproject in the Republic of Ireland.

<sup>69</sup> Merriam, S. B., & Kee, Y. (2014). Promoting community wellbeing: The case for lifelong learning for older adults.

<sup>70</sup> World Health Organisation (2002). [Health and Ageing: A discussion paper](#).

<sup>71</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2011). Conceptual framework of the background questionnaire main survey.

<sup>72</sup> Merriam, S. B., & Kee, Y. (2014). Promoting community wellbeing: The case for lifelong learning for older adults.

## Intergenerational transfer of education and health

We will also discuss the role of family characteristics as the relationship between education and health is intergenerational – meaning that parental, and even grand-parental education can impact on the health of their children and grandchildren.

Within the context of the family, parental education is a strong predictor of adult children's educational attainment and literacy skills. In Ireland, adults with parents who attained upper secondary education only were more likely to have unmet literacy needs (at or below Level 1 measured by the PIAAC survey).<sup>73</sup>

A study of older adults in Europe showed that, in addition to educational attainment, the household education environment measured by the number of books in the household when the person was aged 10 is an important factor in determining later life earnings and income.<sup>74</sup>

## Summary

Unmet literacy needs and low education affects health and wellbeing among adults. Drawing on Irish and international evidence, while adults in Ireland often enjoy better health than their European counterparts, inequities in terms of education are often greater than elsewhere in Europe.

The long-term impact that low education has on the health, wellbeing, health behaviours and health literacy of adults, presents a challenge for the health system and adults engaging with it. If we do not address this, it will continue to be costly for individuals, for society, and for the economy. For this reason, investment in raising the level of literacy and education among the adult population will contribute to achieving the goals of Healthy Ireland<sup>75</sup> and other linked strategies. We must also invest in health literacy and numeracy and work with health services to deliver literacy-friendly services that take account of literacy needs of its patients.

<sup>73</sup> Gibney, S. and Byrne, T. (2015). Social wellbeing Bulletin: Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Dublin: NALA.

<sup>74</sup> Brunello, G., Weber, G., Weiss, C.T. (2012). Books are Forever: Early Life Conditions, Education, and Lifetime Income.

<sup>75</sup> Department of Health (2013). [Healthy Ireland: A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013 – 2025](#).

## Literacy and Families: Enabling intergenerational learning

Taken from a research study commissioned by SOLAS and written by Dr. Ann Hegarty and Dr. Maggie Feeley called 'Enabling Intergenerational Learning: Background Report on Family Literacy Practices in Irish Education and Training Boards (ETBs)'

NALA's focus on family literacy is from the perspective of the adult learner. NALA suggests that a key feature of an adult education approach to family literacy work is the recognition that literacy is a broader concept than the needs and demands of school work.<sup>76</sup> The literacy learned at home and in local communities is rich in the use of local language and the expression of the experience and history of families, communities and cultures.

Family literacy describes the uses of literacy and numeracy within families and communities, especially activities that involve two or more generations. Family literacy also denotes education programmes that help to develop literacy and numeracy learning in a family context.<sup>77</sup>



“ You are learning your kids before they start school. You are not teaching them in a school way but you are their teacher.”

Parent interviewed in NALA research (2010) Taking care of family literacy work.

<sup>76</sup> National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (2004). *Working Together: Approaches to Family Literacy*.

<sup>77</sup> NALA (2011a). *Family literacy in Ireland, Research Briefing Paper*. Dublin: NALA.

Family literacy is needed because there are still substantial literacy inequalities both amongst adults and children in Ireland.<sup>78</sup> These disparities are indicators of wider and multifaceted inequalities including poverty, social and cultural exclusion, disaffection and disempowerment.<sup>79</sup> Having better literacy skills does not change structural inequalities but it does increase the likelihood of personal wellbeing, employment, social and cultural inclusion and the skills to work for just change in our communities.

## Benefits of family literacy

National and international research into family literacy make egalitarian and economic arguments in favour of family literacy. It is perceived to be good economic sense to invest in children's early education so that they will be less dependent on the public purse in adulthood.<sup>80</sup>

According to the research, parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on their educational outcomes than any other demographic measure including social class or level of parental income.<sup>81</sup> Investment in adult literacy is seen by many as a human rights issue as well as a way to halt generational cycles of literacy inequalities and state neglect.<sup>82</sup> Pan-European family literacy research in partnership with UNESCO provides examples of good practice and evidence of improved skills for children and adults. Evidence is cited that 'the majority of learners take a step to becoming a lifelong learner and move on to more formal learning opportunities in the adult education centre.'<sup>83</sup>

“ In my opinion education is power. In this particular area alone you can have third and fourth generations of families with a history of early school leaving. It is now very important that we remove the barriers especially around parents' negative experiences of school. They have gone through a system that has left them with shattered confidence and self-esteem, and has virtually thrown them out on the streets.”

School Principal from [NALA Family literacy briefing paper \(2011\)](#)

<sup>78</sup> Central Statistics Office (2013). [PIAAC 2012 Survey Results for Ireland](#); Educational Research Centre (2015). The 2014 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics.

<sup>79</sup> Baker, J., Lynch, K., Cantillon, S., and Walsh, J. (Eds) (2004). Equality: From Theory to Action.

<sup>80</sup> Heckman and Masterov (2007); Elango et al. (2014).

<sup>81</sup> Desforges (2003); Feinstein et al. (2004); NESF (2009).

<sup>82</sup> Baker et al. (2004); Hegarty and Feeley (2010); NALA (2011a).

<sup>83</sup> Carpentieri et al. (2011). Family literacy in Europe: Using parental support initiatives to enhance early literacy development.

## Family literacy in Ireland

Family literacy is written about in Ireland from 1994 onwards and provides evidence of successful interventions that have gained national and international recognition.<sup>84</sup> The literature supports adopting an adult learning approach and working in multi-agency partnerships in order to access parents that will most benefit from family literacy.

### Family literacy study

A recent study into family literacy practices by Dr. Ann Hegarty and Dr. Maggie Feeley was to “elicit family literacy best practice from Education and Training Board (ETB) family literacy activity and relevant government policy in order to guide future development of family literacy practice.”<sup>85</sup>

“ We learned a lot, we did a load of spellings and a lot of maths skills. Just doing something like that makes your confidence come up and you’re after meeting new people and you’re speaking to new people and you’re after doing all this work yourself and it’s like here I’m not stupid at all. Do you know what I mean? ”

Parent interviewed in NALA research (2010) Taking care of family literacy work.

### Research findings

The research revealed extensive family literacy activity across the further education and training (FET) sector. Despite the sometimes ad hoc nature of provision, learners were engaging in family literacy, completing courses, re-engaging and progressing to further education courses and sometimes into employment.

<sup>84</sup> Clare Family Learning Project (2009); Carpentieri et al. (2011).

<sup>85</sup> Hegarty, A. and Feeley, M. (2020). *Enabling Intergenerational Learning: Background Report on Family Literacy Practices in Irish Education and Training Boards (ETBs)*.



Evidence gathered during the qualitative data collection phase of the research pointed to resource related barriers to provision. The lack of available childcare for younger children, the timing of activities and poor transport in rural areas made attendance at family literacy activities challenging.

For many, negative prior learning experiences made reengagement in a learning situation unattractive. An adult learning approach that values adults' life experience and creates a relaxed, fun and learner-centred environment was found to work best. Good relationships between tutors and learners ensured many adults kept engaged and gradually became committed learners. This in turn impacted positively on children's schooling and shifted the whole family culture of learning.

The time needed to develop family literacy programmes required considerable investment by those coordinating courses. All the ETBs felt that they could further develop provision in their area with additional budget and a dedicated family learning person. A collaborative partnership approach was the best way to engage 'hard to reach' learners through aligning with communities of practice where prospective family learners were already engaged. These partnership relations required time and effort to build and sustain them and those currently carrying out these roles, as part of wider responsibilities, felt overstretched and limited in their capacity.

“ Trying to teach your kids as well as trying to teach yourself is difficult which is why support is so important. ”

Parent interviewed in NALA research (2010) Taking care of family literacy work.

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teacher in the DEIS school had opportunities to influence the parents who would most benefit from participation in family literacy. The HSCL teacher and the FET coordinator had a key and central role in organising activities that engage parents and support children and the school. Where this model of partnership was well developed it had significant impact on families. It changed the relationship between parents and the school and ultimately opened the school up to true cooperative work with parents.

## Summary

Literacy development remains a crucial and pressing issue in Ireland and investment in family literacy provides a win-win scenario to policy makers. In the current climate, family literacy provides a policy option that can help deliver value on several socio-economic priorities such as raising adult literacy levels, enhancing child literacy development and improving children's performance in schools.

The evidence strongly supports the effectiveness of family literacy in addressing the goals of more active inclusion and improved literacy skills for parents and children. It is an important way of recognising and building the literacy strength of families who before have felt excluded or marginalised from the expectations of schools and society. Finally family literacy work offers potential opportunities to break inter-generational cycles of educational disadvantage that exist in Ireland. The latest findings suggest a number of solutions to current barriers and indicate ways in which already good practice can be made even better.



## Literacy in social and community life

Taken from a paper commissioned by NALA and written by Professor Seán Ó'Riain and Dr Delma Byrne called 'Literacy Matters in social and community life.'

Literacy skills can have important benefits for people living and working in communities. The development of appropriate skills can enhance people's levels of social trust, civic engagement and political efficacy. The benefits are not just for individuals, but for their relationship to the communities and society they live in as well as for overall patterns of social and community development. Research has also shown that the positive impact of further education carries beyond families and into communities – a ripple effect that produces broader social benefits.<sup>86</sup>

### The social, civic and political effects of literacy

Social, civic and political participation are crucial to the wellbeing of society. Civic participation has been defined as "voluntary individual actions serving a common benefit, and positive attitudes towards a community or society."<sup>87</sup>



<sup>86</sup> Duckworth V. and Smith R. (2019). Transformative Teaching and Learning in Further Education.

<sup>87</sup> Ruber, Lees and Schmidt-Hertha (2018). Lifelong learning – lifelong returns? A new theoretical framework for the analysis of civic returns on adult learning.

Furthermore, it includes both 'hard' and 'soft' measures to include both political and non-political actions and attitudes. In their work on adult learning in the UK, Dewson et al. define trust in others, voluntary work, active membership in social organisations, volunteering and being an active member of an association as 'hard' measures.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, 'soft' measures are defined by Dewson et al. as 'attitudes' – pro-social values, general trust.

Several studies, using a range of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches across a range of institutional contexts, have identified a positive association between adult learning, literacy and forms of civic participation.<sup>89</sup> The positive effects of increased human capital on civic participation have been identified in Northern Ireland,<sup>90</sup> the UK<sup>91</sup> and the Netherlands.<sup>92</sup>

In the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), literacy is defined using the OECD definition as "the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."<sup>93</sup> This is captured alongside measures of numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments. A strength of using PIAAC data is that it captures micro data on literacy levels among the population, as well as a wider range of outcomes beyond the economic domain – including social trust, civic volunteering and political efficacy.

Several questions emerge:

- How do social trust, civic volunteering and political efficacy differ for people with literacy, numeracy and digital skills and those without?
- Does any statistically significant relationship emerge when we control for the effects of other factors (for example, levels of formal education, age, gender and so on)?

<sup>88</sup> Dewson, S., Eccles, J., Tackey, N. D., & Jackson, A. (2000). Measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled: A review of current practice.

<sup>89</sup> Panitsidou (2012); Schuller et al. (2004); Thomas (2017); Vera-Toscano et al. (2017).

<sup>90</sup> McClenaghan, P. (2000). Social capital: exploring the theoretical foundations of community development education.

<sup>91</sup> Paterson, L. (2009). Civic Values and the Subject Matter of Educational Courses.

<sup>92</sup> DeGreef, Verté and Segers (2015). Differential outcomes of adult education on adult learners' increase in social inclusion.

<sup>93</sup> CSO (2012). PIAAC 2012 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: [Survey Results from Ireland](#).

We have seen that literacy enhances social trust and participation, particularly when combined with a recent educational experience. However, several studies have identified that adult learning in society is stratified – that is, some groups are more likely to access adult learning than others.

In the UK, the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) captures data on those aged 50 - 69 years. A study found that education begets education – those with more years of education are more likely to participate in both formal and informal learning.<sup>94</sup>

The type of education matters also – those who are more highly educated (including those with a degree) were three times more likely to engage in both formal and informal learning. All else being equal, good health is a determinant of participation in formal learning, but not informal learning. Gender also matters, as men are somewhat less likely to engage in informal learning activities than women.

There is a dilemma here, therefore – education generally enhances social capital and self-esteem, but people with strong feelings of self-worth and rich social networks do better in education. Education is intrinsically linked to social and community development, but the link must be managed and nurtured. Indeed, the various sides of the triangle are linked to a wide range of enabling institutions – in education and the labour market, but also in local communities.<sup>95</sup> The trick is to design adult educational systems and processes that quickly build a “virtuous triangle of adult learning” and gain social recognition for that learning.

## Literacy as a driver for social and community development

How can we solve this dilemma of advancing literacy and social capital in a virtuous circle and escape the vicious cycle of unmet literacy and numeracy needs and diminished participation?

<sup>94</sup> Jenkins and Mostafa (2012). Learning and Wellbeing Trajectories: Among Older Adults in England.

<sup>95</sup> Myers, K. et al. (2014). State of knowledge review of the wider benefits of adult learning.



As we have discussed, learning can occur through any kind of activity – both in the process of that activity and in formalised learning settings – and often blending the two (as is long established in the apprenticeship model of learning). Indeed, these benefits arise through a complex process that offers richer and more varied opportunities for policy interventions.

However, recent literature has shifted from understanding the individual level differences in accessing adult learning and education (ALE) to better understanding the macro-level dimensions that lead to social inequality across institutional settings.<sup>96</sup> These include:

- patterns of macro levels of social inequality;
- patterns of income, education and skill inequality;
- characteristics of institutional settings including political systems and welfare state models;
- labour market structures and policies; and
- education and training systems.<sup>97</sup>

This wide range of potential factors crucially directs our attention away from characteristics of learners and towards the kind of institutions and spaces that facilitate learning. We can identify in Ireland a range of typical pathways to literacy improvement that also involve social and community development. These are differentiated by the institution around which they are built, and the way that the adult learner comes to engage with literacy improvement. Here are some of the key venues where this can happen.

### ● **Schools**

These are forms of adult learning linked to children's participation in formal education – for example, learning in parenting programmes linked to education, family literacy activities (Doodle Families run by Childhood Development Initiative) and the development of 'learning communities' around these programmes.<sup>98</sup> Here, the learner typically engages first as a parent or guardian of a child involved in formal education.

<sup>96</sup> Lee, J. (2018). Conceptual foundations for understanding inequality in participation in adult learning and education (ALE) for international comparisons.

<sup>97</sup> For example, see Roosmaa and Saar (2010); Riddell, Markowitsch and Weedon (2012).

<sup>98</sup> Jordan, C. (2017). Report & Summary of Evaluation 2nd Parenting Conference "Working together towards Positive Parenting".

- **Training**

Certain training programmes (albeit a minority) incorporate strong elements of the adult learning triangle into their approaches. These include, for example, the Local Training Initiatives provided through Education and Training Boards and SOLAS. Here, the learner typically enters into adult learning through the (often demoralising) process of unemployment and activation assessment.

- **Public spaces**

Learning through unstructured interaction has increasingly been recognised as central to innovation, and the role of public spaces of various sorts in promoting learning and innovation has been argued to be crucial.<sup>99</sup> Alongside the ‘high end’ world of innovation in the spaces of universities and high-tech regions are less glamorous worlds of learning in public spaces – with, for example, libraries potentially playing a key role. Programmes such as the Communiversity, for example, build on participation in libraries to create paths to third level education.<sup>100</sup>

- **Community development**

Wickert and McGuirk discuss a number of cases in Australia where partnerships among community organisations, service providers and educational institutions enhanced community learning.<sup>101</sup>

These partnerships are built around projects that were primarily focused on social service provision. Ireland’s large community and voluntary sector makes this an important potential pathway to literacy improvement. Such efforts are also, typically, at least partly publicly funded.<sup>102</sup> For example, a particularly successful example is An Cosán, which has had the support of a diverse range of public agencies, including among them Pobal, The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Department of Health, Department of Children and Youth Affairs and TUSLA (Child and Family Agency).

<sup>99</sup> Lester, R. and M. Piore, 2005. *Innovation: The Missing Dimension* Cambridge: Harvard University Press

<sup>100</sup> Barter, D (2018). “How the Communiversity introduces people to higher education” RTE Brainstorm, January 8th.

<sup>101</sup> Wickert, R., and McGuirk, J. (2005). *Integrating Literacies: Using Partnerships to Build Literacy Capabilities in Communities*.

<sup>102</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2012). *Literacy and Numeracy For Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*.

- **The Learning City**

UNESCO has placed great emphasis on this concept in recent years, and, in Ireland, both Cork and Limerick have pursued the UNESCO Learning City policy programme.<sup>103</sup> For UNESCO “a learning city promotes lifelong learning for all.”

UNESCO defines a learning city as a city that:

“effectively mobilises its resources in every sector to promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education; revitalises learning in families and communities; facilitates learning for and in the workplace; extends the use of modern learning technologies; enhances quality and excellence in learning; and fosters a culture of learning throughout life. In doing so, the city enhances individual empowerment and social inclusion, economic development and cultural prosperity, and sustainable development.”

This is a broad concept but is very helpful in its focus on the importance of inclusive learning in local and regional economies and societies. It provides a mobilising concept for cities to link and promote learning beyond formal educational institutions. However, the ‘learning city’ can and should be broken down into a better understanding of its various components.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, the four settings noted above are likely to be components of any successful Learning City programme, at least in Ireland. A potential vehicle for such a programme is the local network of community development committees, which are linked with local economic plans.

Across these diverse forms, literacy and social capital can be built in tandem so that enhanced literacy can become a crucial driver of social and community development.

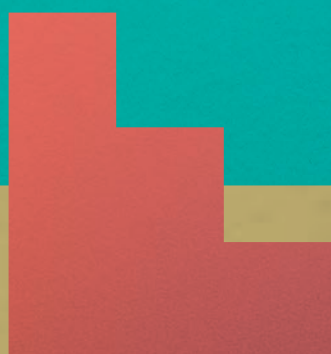
<sup>103</sup> Power, M et al (2011). The Social Value of Community-Based Adult Education in Limerick City.

<sup>104</sup> Osborne, Kearns and Yang, (2013). Learning cities: Developing inclusive, prosperous and sustainable urban communities.

# Part 2

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## Current policy, practice and approach

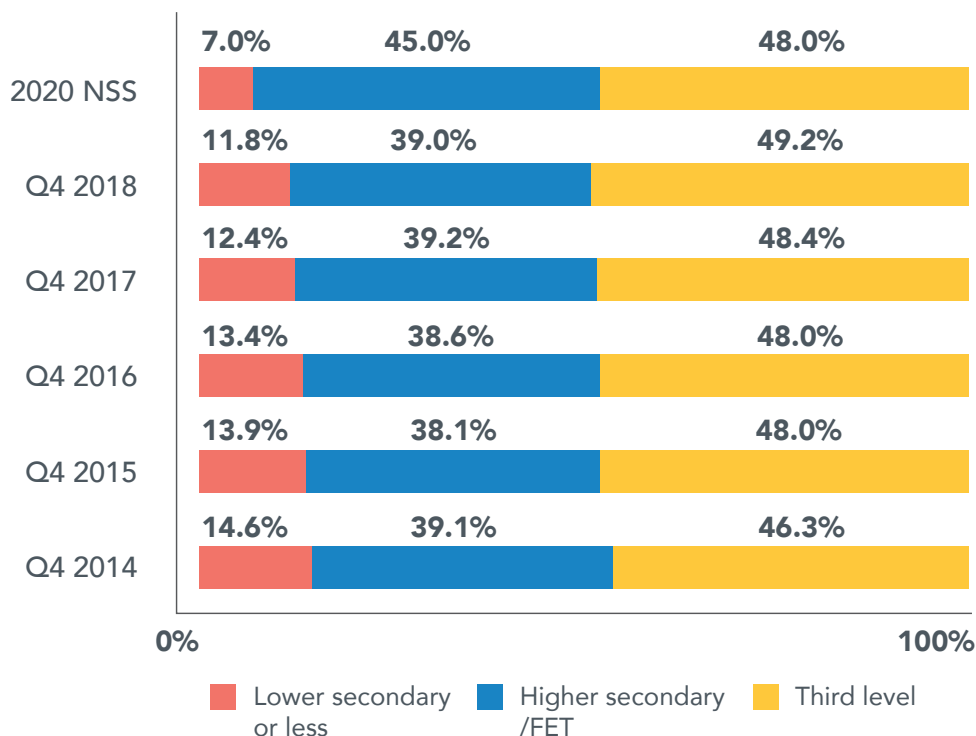


## Policy: the Irish context

### Department of Education and Skills

Ireland's **National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025**<sup>105</sup> sets out 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. The strategy has set a target to reduce the numbers of adults with less than upper secondary to 7% by 2020. This is the same target as Ireland's first National Skills Strategy in 2007 set to be achieved in 2020. Whilst its higher education performance target was surpassed, we are not on track to reach the low skills target.

**Figure 4: Labour Force (15-64 years) by Education and the NSS target**



**Source: SLMRU (SOLAS) analysis of CSO data**

Note: excludes those who did not state their education level

<sup>105</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2016) [Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025](#).



## SOLAS

SOLAS – Ireland’s national state agency for further education and training – was established in 2013 as part of significant reform of the education and training sector. It is responsible for funding and monitoring further education and training provision. It spends around €800 million per year on further education and training with €35 million spent on adult literacy in 2019.<sup>106</sup> SOLAS funds 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to deliver a wide range of further education and training programmes including adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

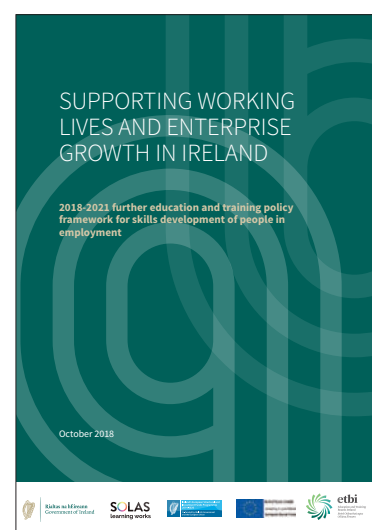
## Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-19

The current **Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy**<sup>107</sup> outlines 12 elements of a literacy and numeracy strategy. While work progresses here, there has been no significant financial investment to increase the hours of literacy tuition per person. SOLAS is currently developing a new FET Strategy for 2020.

## 2018-2021 further education and training policy framework for skills development of people in employment

In 2018 SOLAS published a **background paper** and **policy framework** for skills development of people in employment. The new policy framework will:

“target support for vulnerable groups in the Irish Workforce, particularly those who have lower skills levels and who need more opportunities to advance in their working lives and careers, to sustain their employment and to avoid displacement or to avail of emerging job opportunities.”<sup>108</sup>



<sup>106</sup> Answer to parliamentary question 112 on 27 November 2019.

<sup>107</sup> SOLAS (2014). *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019*.

<sup>108</sup> SOLAS (2018). *Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland: FET policy framework*.

It also highlighted that:

**“Lower skilled roles are the most likely to be affected by the on-going changes, but are less likely to receive training than the rest of the workforce.”<sup>109</sup>**

The new policy framework will “target support for vulnerable groups in the Irish Workforce, particularly those who have lower skills levels and who need more opportunities to advance in their working lives and careers, to sustain their employment and to avoid displacement or to avail of emerging job opportunities.”<sup>110</sup>

**Skills to Advance** is new employee development programme, offering upskilling and reskilling opportunities to employees in lower level jobs. It aims to equip employees with the skills to progress in their current job, or to take advantage of new job opportunities. Our concern is that the initiative is too broad, is not focused enough on employees with less than an upper secondary (NFQ Levels 1-3) and is not interdepartmental or interagency.

After many years of NALA lobbying for supporting literacy needs of employees, in 2005 the Government announced a €2 million **Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF)**. This was funded by the National Training Fund (NTF) under the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The aim of the WBEF was to develop initiatives to provide opportunities for employees’ in the private sector to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, on a 100% grant aided basis. FÁS, along with NALA and the trade union movement, were involved with setting up the structures and piloting the initiative – ‘**Skills for Work**’.

Since 2007 Skills for Work is coordinated by Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (ETB) with 8 regional coordinators around the country. The budget is currently €2.8 million, providing a more restricted model of adult literacy and numeracy tuition (35 hour course) to approximately 3,000 employees annually (mainly in the private sector). There is no cost to the employer or employee for the training course. Skills for Work provides much needed upskilling for adults in work with literacy and numeracy needs and low or no qualifications. In 2019 the WBEF/Skills for Work initiative budget line moved to the Department of Education and Skills and the national website was shut down. It is now part of the Skills to Advance programme.

<sup>109</sup> SOLAS (2018). 2018-2021 FET policy framework for skills development of people in employment [Background paper](#).

<sup>110</sup> SOLAS (2018). Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland: [FET policy framework](#).

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills tuition also takes place in other ETB programmes such as Youthreach, Community Training Centres and Post-Leaving Certificate. This is called **'integrating literacy'** and SOLAS commissioned research on this in 2017-8. The report states there are clear benefits to having a whole-organisation approach at provider level to ensure that literacy, numeracy and digital skills are supported by all staff and percolate through to the learning environment, curriculum development and have a joined-up approach. It concluded that "SOLAS should consider focusing on increasing the visibility of existing practice and providing tailored support to enhance the existing landscape."<sup>111</sup>

### Low spend on adult literacy tuition

In 2019 €35 million was projected to be spent on adult literacy tuition.<sup>112</sup> This is 0.325% of the total education budget (€10.74 billion) and 4.38% of the Further Education and Training budget (€800 million). This works out at €538 per person.

The **2006 Adult Literacy report** (Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science, 2006) proposed a quadrupling of the adult literacy tuition budget from €25 to about €100 million by 2013 with an additional €25 million for improving ancillary and support services. **These recommendations were never implemented.**

### Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (2011-2020)

The National Strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among Children and Young People<sup>113</sup> focuses on the actions that the education system can make beginning with early childhood care and education. Parents, grandparents, extended family and other members of the community are named as important contributors to children's learning of literacy and numeracy. Parents with literacy needs are identified as needing support, possibly through family literacy initiatives. However, while there was ring-fenced funding for this area previously, there is none now. There is no formal relationship between the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for Children and Young People and the literacy and numeracy strategy for adults in the FET strategy.

<sup>111</sup> SOLAS (2018). Integrating Literacy & Numeracy [Final Report](#).

<sup>112</sup> Answer to parliamentary [question 112](#) on 27 November 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2012). Literacy and Numeracy For Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020.

## Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP)

### Pathways to Work

**Pathways to Work** 2012-2020 sets out the Government's strategy to engage with and support the unemployed to get back into the labour market. A number of changes have taken place in the last number of years from introducing a Probability of Exit (PEX) profiling to new Intreo offices. We also saw new processes of engaging with people who are unemployed and outsourcing of case work for people who are long-term unemployed. There is also a Memorandum of Understanding between the DEASP and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) about referral from the case officer to adult literacy services.

### Moving from Welfare to Work

A recent NESC report on low work intensity households and the quality of supportive services concluded 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."*<sup>114</sup>

The research found that some of the interviewees are very far from the labour market, and contend with problems that are difficult to address, such as serious literacy difficulties. It noted that "sometimes the service provision is not intensive enough to adequately address the problem ... for example, most literacy support is still provided for only two hours a week."

The report also recommends:

- Tailored supports for those most distant from the labour market.
- More **intensive** literacy and numeracy education is required for those with unmet literacy and numeracy needs as well as vocational literacy supports to ensure better access to employment and training.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>114</sup> National Economic and Social Council (NESC) (2018). *Moving from Welfare to Work: Low Work Intensity Households and the Quality of Supportive Services*.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) will publish a new Pathways to Work strategy in 2020. NALA made a submission on addressing literacy needs in the new strategy. We propose 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 session to 460 Intreo staff in 2014-5.
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 necessary, 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.
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).

## Policy: the European context

There are 70 million Europeans with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs. This puts them at risk of social exclusion, poverty and unemployment.

Many European countries are struggling to address adult literacy. **Finland** only recently developed its first adult basic skills strategy, realising literacy was not solved through schools alone despite excellent PISA<sup>116</sup> results. Due to poor learning outcomes, the 'school crisis' has been replaced by a 'learning crisis'. This shift is informing reform of the education system in Finland, as well as The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Portugal and Spain. These countries have accessed structural support funding from the European Commission to develop policy and responses to raising adult literacy levels.

One of the key messages from **Education and Training 2020**<sup>117</sup> is that adult learning can improve lives and economies. Adults that continue to learn enjoy better health, are more active citizens, are more employable and earn more. The report notes that the issue of adults with low basic skills is complex and tackling low basic skills of adults is challenging because there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

According to **A New Skills Agenda for Europe**,<sup>118</sup> Europe faces a basic skills challenge. People need a minimum level of literacy, digital and numeracy skills in order to participate fully in society and access good jobs. Adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs and low or no qualifications are more vulnerable to precarious jobs and twice as likely as those who are more qualified to experience long-term unemployment. It suggests that policies that focus only on increased attainment are not sufficient and that the relevance and quality of what people learn must now take centre stage.

<sup>116</sup> PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>.

<sup>117</sup> European Commission (2015). *Education and Training 2020: Improving Policy and Provision for Adult Learning in Europe*.

<sup>118</sup> European Commission (2016) *A New Skills Agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness*.



It is acknowledged in Europe that tackling the low skills challenge will require significant commitment by national governments towards policy efforts and systemic reforms in education and training. The social partners, including education providers, employers and learners themselves will play a central role in the successful delivery and implementation of the Skills Agenda.

Under the European Commission Skills Agenda is an initiative called **Upskilling Pathways**,<sup>119</sup> which aims to target adults with low levels of skills and without upper secondary education.

**Upskilling Pathways**, has three work strands:

1. Improving the quality and relevance of skills formation;
2. Making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable; and
3. Improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices.

The Department of Education and Skills is leading out on this initiative and set up an Upskilling Pathways advisory group consisting of government departments and stakeholders. The Department submitted a plan to the European Commission in 2018 highlighting efforts to achieve upskilling pathways, however there is no additional funding as yet to address existing gaps.

In 2019 the European Commission produced a report on the implementation of Upskilling Pathways<sup>120</sup> and highlighted that:

“In 2017, still 61 million adults aged 25 to 64 had stopped their formal education before completing upper secondary education. 43% of the EU population has insufficient level of digital skills and 17% has none at all.”

It concluded that:

“The accelerating changes on the labour market, the demand for higher skills and the penetration of digital technologies in all aspects of daily life, give added urgency to the need to upskill people who have not mastered basic skills and have not gained a qualification to ensure their employability.

<sup>119</sup> European Commission (2016). [Upskilling Pathways](#) – new opportunities for adults.

<sup>120</sup> European Commission (2019). [Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways](#): New Opportunities for Adults Taking stock of implementation measures.

The European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>121</sup> acknowledges their right to lifelong learning, as a way to acquire the skills necessary to participate fully in society and successfully manage work transitions.”

The Upskilling Pathways Implementation report, assessing the efforts of member states, identified a number of remaining challenges including:

- \* scale;
- \* addressing three basic skills;
- \* a coherent pathway with three steps;
- \* outreach, guidance and support measures;
- \* coordination and partnerships; and
- \* sustainability.

Under sustainability it notes:

“Addressing the low skilled challenge requires a long-term systemic approach and needs to be accompanied by appropriate funding resources and mechanisms.”

In June 2019 under the European Semester process, the European Commission published Country Specific Recommendations for Ireland. One of the three recommendations for action in 2019 and 2020 is to:

“Provide personalised active integration support and facilitate upskilling, in particular for vulnerable groups and people living in households with low work intensity.”<sup>122</sup>



<sup>121</sup> European Pillar of Social Rights.

<sup>122</sup> European Commission (2019). [Recommendation](#) for a Council Recommendation on the 2019 National Reform Programme of Ireland and delivering a Council opinion on the 2019 Stability Programme of Ireland.

## Practice: current adult literacy provision

In Ireland the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) run local adult literacy services to deliver small group adult literacy tuition. Here is the current state of play.

- **Low number of tuition hours:**  
Currently adults can receive on average between 2 and 6 hours adult literacy tuition per week through their local adult literacy service in the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). There are a small number of longer programmes delivered under Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) and some through the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI).
- There is **no financial support or incentive** to return to education for QQI levels 1, 2 or 3, for example tax relief. There is no support towards full-time childcare, elder care or transport costs.
- **65,000<sup>123</sup> adults** accessed local adult literacy services in 2019 (up to November) through the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). This includes adult literacy groups (including family literacy), English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE), Skills for Work (basic skills programme for employees) and one-to-one voluntary literacy tuition.

**Table 1 Breakdown of participants from 2015–2019<sup>124</sup>**

	2015 actual	2016 actual	2017 actual	2018 actual	2019 projected
Adult literacy	52,778	37,928	39,591	35,252	39,310
ESOL	12,362	13,232	14,794	15,397	17,936
ITABE	Included above	2,960	2,329	2,754	2,588
Skills for Work	Included above	3,053	3,435	3,289	4,014
Voluntary literacy tuition	Included above	2,625	1,271	1,066	1,056
Total	65,140	59,798	61,420	57,758	64,904

<sup>123</sup> Answer to parliamentary question 112 on 27 November 2019.

<sup>124</sup> Taken from SOLAS FET Services Plans.

- **Only 12.5% of people with literacy needs are accessing adult literacy services.**

From EU analysis, including a 2018 Eurostat report, lifelong learning rates for employed people in Ireland, are estimated at 8.3%, below the EU average of 12%.<sup>125</sup> In 2018 the CSO published results from Adult Education Survey which showed that “over half of adults (53.9%) reported participating in lifelong learning (formal and/ or non-formal education).”<sup>126</sup> While this is welcome, participation is lower from people with higher secondary or below (14%) compared with people who have a third level qualification (55%).

A 2019 UNESCO Global Report on Learning and Adult Education (GRALE)<sup>127</sup> showed that participation in learning and adult education in Ireland is lowest from people with less than secondary education (10%) compared with people who have a third level qualification (75%).

## Approach

Modern society requires an adequate level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills among all its adult members.

### Philosophy of adult literacy work

Adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills work in Ireland is based on a belief that effective learning builds on the wealth of life experience which adults bring to their work on literacy development. At the heart of this approach is the understanding, “A beginner reader is not a beginner thinker.”<sup>128</sup>

Students bring to the process of learning a knowledge and understanding of themselves, their community and the wider society. They wish to engage with their teachers as equals and to support each other as peers. This underpins the ethos and development of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills work.

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<sup>125</sup> SOLAS (2018). Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland: [FET policy framework](#).

<sup>126</sup> Central Statistics Office (2018). [Adult Education Survey 2017](#).

<sup>127</sup> UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2019). [4th Global Report on Learning and Adult Education \(GRALE\)](#).

<sup>128</sup> Frost G. and Hoy C. (1985). Opening Time. A writing resource pack written by students in Basic Education. Manchester: Gatehouse.

Adult literacy development in Ireland is based on a student centred approach where the needs, concerns and experience of the students are the focus of learning, rather than an externally structured and enforced curriculum. A more challenging concept, also at the centre of adult literacy work in Ireland, is the student-directed approach. This means that rather than curriculum and approaches being formed by tutors who take into consideration the needs of students, it is formed by the students in discussion with their tutors.

## Supporting literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs

Adult literacy work takes place in a range of different settings and contexts. While most adult literacy tuition is delivered through the adult literacy services in the 16 Education and Training Boards, literacy learning and support also takes place in other programmes.

Literacy learning and support takes place in a range of settings:

### ETB Adult literacy services

- Adult literacy small group tuition including family literacy
- Voluntary one-to-one tuition (limited)
- ITABE (Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education)
- BTEI (Back to Education Initiative)
- ESOL (English for speakers of other languages)
- Skills for Work

### Other ETB settings

- Community Education
- Other ETB programmes leading to certification at levels 4, 5 and 6 integrate literacy, numeracy and digital skills into them, such as:
  - › VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme)
  - › Youthreach
  - › Apprenticeship

### Other settings outside ETBs

- Community groups
- Local partnerships
- NALA Distance Learning Service – telephone tutoring and online learning website with certification at QQI Levels 2 and 3
- Trade Unions
- Workplaces

## Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work

Adult literacy work in Ireland is developing and evolving all the time to meet the changing literacy, numeracy and digital skills we need. This work is based on five principles.<sup>129</sup>

Adult literacy work is based on a philosophy of adult education which is concerned with personal development and social action.



Adult literacy learning 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.



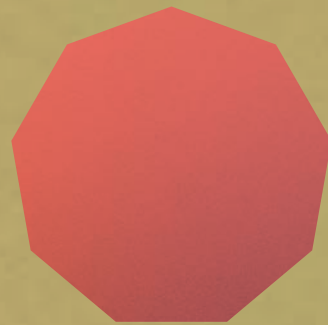
<sup>129</sup> NALA (2012). *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*. 4th edition.



# Part 3

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## New vision for literacy



## Introduction

Literacy changes lives and benefits everyone – individuals, society and the economy. Research on the needs and current responses lead us to conclude there is more to do. UNESCO says that “Adult Learning and Education (ALE) needs to be seen as part of a larger set of social, cultural and economic practices.”<sup>130</sup> The report goes on to say that ALE interacts with and impacts on important aspects of our life, such as health and well-being; employment and the labour market; and social, civic and community life. Considering how much literacy, numeracy and digital skills we engage with each day, improving literacy in these domains is a beneficial long-term investment for adults.

## Why we need to do more

As this paper has shown unmet adult literacy and numeracy needs have devastating consequences for individuals, communities and the economy<sup>131</sup> and are a factor in social exclusion and inequality.

Research summarised in this report has shown that the positive impact of further education carries beyond families and into communities – a ripple effect that produces broader social benefits.<sup>132</sup>

Some people have their **literacy needs met**; others do not.

This can be for **many reasons**.



<sup>130</sup> UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2016). *3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Duckworth V. and Smith R. (2019), *Transformative Teaching and Learning in Further Education*.

While 65,000 adults accessed adult literacy services in 2019 (12.5% of those with needs), 456,000 adults are not getting any support. We need to look at how to reach them. The service grew strongly from the late-90s to mid-2000's until the economic downturn. However since then we have reached a plateau in participation. The budget, options and participation have not grown in the last 10 years.

NALA works with **nine** government departments, state agencies, national policy documents and implementation plans on literacy issues (see appendix 1 for list).

“ We have no idea in Ireland what literacy is required to lift us beyond being just an economy to become a Republic, a democracy, a society that works as hard for human rights and worker's rights and freedom as it does for the economy. ”

Ted Fleming, TASC and Carnegie Trust UK (2019). Ensuring Good Future Jobs

**Table 2 List of Government Departments with policies involving literacy**

Education and Skills	Health	Communications, Climate Action and Environment
Children and Youth Affairs	Business, Enterprise and Innovation	Employment Affairs and Social Protection
Finance	Justice and Equality	Rural and Community Development

However, there is no coordination or alignment of this work across departments. Interdepartmental work that might happen often depends on the knowledge and goodwill of people working in different sections or areas. This is a missed opportunity to coordinate, share and align to maximise our efforts to increase levels of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

Adult literacy is a relatively neglected issue. Current adult literacy policies and provision in Ireland are insufficient to redress educational inequalities and meet current government and international targets.

We need to think about how we support people to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital skills – what do people want, how do they learn, when and where suits them.

## Literacy for the future

Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) says

“future-ready societies and labour markets need a renewed approach to upskilling and reskilling, underpinned by lifelong continuing learning and by providing those skills and competences enabling each individual to fully realise his/her potential and progress in the labour market and society.”<sup>133</sup>

Many European countries are struggling to address adult literacy.

The European Commission acknowledges that “addressing the low skilled challenge requires a long-term systemic approach and needs to be accompanied by appropriate funding resources and mechanisms.”<sup>134</sup>

Finland only recently developed its first adult basic skills strategy, realising literacy was not solved through schools alone despite excellent PISA<sup>135</sup> results. Due to poor learning outcomes, the ‘school crisis’ has been replaced by a ‘learning crisis’. This shift is informing reform of the education system in Finland, as well as The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Portugal and Spain. We must shift from an over reliance on the school system to solve this problem towards the concept of a **lifelong learning system** and we must value all learning – formal, non-formal and informal – throughout the life course.

Ireland needs to broaden our view and scope of literacy to more than just a skill within an education and training strategy. **Literacy is a life skill relevant to all parts of life and should be addressed in different ways, in different settings for different purposes.** Literacy is a part of lifelong learning and it enables adults to develop personally, become increasingly empowered and engage fully in modern life.

NALA want to create a **Vision for literacy** for Ireland that develops a literacy learning society.

<sup>133</sup> Cedefop (2020). *Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways*. Volume 1: adult population with potential for upskilling and reskilling. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop reference series; No 112.

<sup>134</sup> European Commission (2019). *Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the 2019 National Reform Programme of Ireland and delivering a Council opinion on the 2019 Stability Programme of Ireland*.

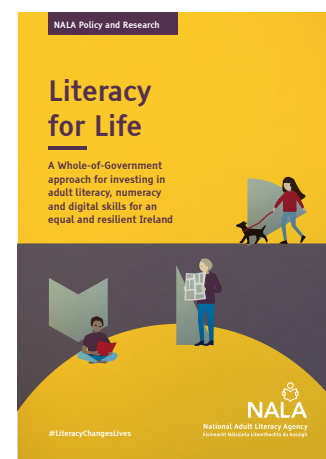
<sup>135</sup> PISA is the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>.

## Next steps: Literacy for Life

Ireland needs a **new vision** for the next decade to support people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs and prioritise the **furthest behind first**.<sup>136</sup> This will help build a more equal, more resilient and happier society.

This report has examined key issues in the area of policy and practice in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills and provided an emphasis on the importance of these skills in particular to health and wellbeing, family and community. Finding a way forward will be important in positioning Ireland for its future social, cultural and economic development.

Over the last number of years NALA has met politicians and policy-makers about the positive impact of improving literacy, numeracy and digital skills and how best to approach it. In 2019 NALA commissioned TASC (an independent think-tank whose core focus is addressing inequality and sustaining democracy) to develop a framework for supporting literacy, numeracy and digital skills. This framework, **Literacy for Life**, suggests a Whole-of-Government approach for investing in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills for an equal and resilient Ireland.



NALA will use this framework to persuade politicians and policy makers to have greater vision and new thinking on supporting adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs. As a significant period of reform in the further education and training sector concludes, we have much stronger infrastructure in place. Now is the time to invest in lifelong learning and adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills across government departments and agencies. This framework and vision can ensure everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital skills for today and the future.

Ireland can act now - investing in adult literacy and lifelong learning is investing in people and society.

<sup>136</sup> Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development



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# Glossary of terms

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## ALE

Adult learning and education

## BTEI

Back to Education Initiative

## Cedefop

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

## CSO

Central Statistics Office

## DBEI

Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation

## DCYA

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

## DCCAE

Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment

## DES

Department of Education and Skills

## DEASP

Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

## DRCD

Department of Rural and Community Development

## ESF

European Social Fund

## ESOL

English for Speakers of Other Languages

**ESRI**

Economic and Social Research Institute

**ETB**

Education and Training Board

**EC**

European Commission

**FET**

Further Education and Training

**GRALE**

Global Report on Adult Learning and Education

**HSCL**

Home School Community Liaison

**ICT**

Information and communication technologies

**ITABE**

Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education

**NALA**

National Adult Literacy Agency

**NQF**

National Qualifications Framework

**NSS**

National Skills Strategy

**OECD**

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**PIAAC**

Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

## PISA

Programme for International Student Assessment

## PS-TRE

Problem-solving in technology rich environments

## QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

## SOLAS

Ireland's national state agency for further education and training

## TASC

Independent think-tank focusing on addressing inequality and sustaining democracy

## UNESCO

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

## WBEF

Workplace Basic Education Fund

## WHO

World Health Organisation

# Appendix 1

## Map of Government Departments with policies involving literacy

There are nine Government Departments that have policies involving literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

### Education and Skills

- Action Plan for Education Framework 2016–19
- FET Strategy 2014–19
- National Skills Strategy
- Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland
- The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020

### Health

- Healthy Ireland
- Health literacy policy and implementation (Health and Wellbeing Directorate)
- Sláintecare: Action Plan 2019

### Communications, Climate Action and Environment

- Digital Skills for Citizens
- Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and the Media Literacy Network
- Sustainability Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020 and the Voluntary National Review (VNR)

### Children and Youth Affairs

- Family literacy in DEIS schools
- School completion programme
- First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028

### Business, Enterprise and Innovation

- Action Plan for Jobs
- Workplace literacy in particular around sectors identified by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

### Employment Affairs and Social Protection

- NESC jobless households report and low skills trap
- Pathways to Work

### Finance

- Competition and Consumer Protection Commission on Financial Literacy

### Justice and Equality

- Prison and probation literacy supports

### Rural and Community Development

- Right to Read Library Strategy
- Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)



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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership-based organisation. We work to support adults with unmet literacy and numeracy needs to take part fully in society and to have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice, providing distance learning services and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

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