Literacy for Life

A Whole-of-Government approach for investing in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills for an equal and resilient Ireland

#LiteracyChangesLives

NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

About this report

The purpose of this report is to provide a framework to re-examine the policy approach to supporting adults with unmet literacy and numeracy issues in Ireland.

This report was funded by NALA. The research was completed by Dr Amie Lajoie, Dr Shana Cohen and Nicholas O'Neill of TASC (Think Tank for Action on Social Change).

Contents

Summary

This report aims to provide a framework to re-examine the policy approach to supporting adults with unmet literacy and numeracy issues in Ireland. There is currently a severe inadequacy in the approach and allocated resources to tackle the scale of the adult literacy issue.

Linking literacy with resilience

In this report, TASC advocates for an alternative approach which connects adult literacy with the concept of "resilience". Resilience refers to the ability of systems, organisations and individuals to respond or adapt over time against external shocks and pressures. There are currently vulnerabilities in the Irish economy which require radical policy responses in order to make Ireland more resilient. These vulnerabilities include a public health crisis such as Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, an overreliance on foreign direct investment and urban investment, the low rate of people with disabilities in work, youth unemployment, SMEs (small and medium enterprises) and productivity.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills closely relate to these areas of vulnerability because they enable people to:

- engage with public institutions;

- understand and act upon new information and policy changes;

- use technology; and

- seek better employment opportunities, especially as the job market changes due to automation and demand for evolving complex skills.

Therefore, we emphasise the need to adopt a much broader understanding of the relationship between adult literacy and resilience through an assessment of how literacy contributes to individual agency and the capacity to respond to external events and forms of change. This thinking fits with the "capabilities approach" from international development.

The capabilities approach describes literacy as a key factor influencing what people are actually able to do, their future capabilities and their freedom to lead a dignified life. In short, the capabilities approach outlines a moral framework that prioritises the evaluation of any policy according to the extent to which it enables personal freedoms and capabilities. This means that literacy should facilitate critical thinking – intangible qualities that go beyond functionality.

We argue that this focus underpins the development of a healthier, more participatory and engaged society. In this report, we make the link between the capabilities approach and resilience which prioritises addressing adult and school leaver literacy – with appropriate funding and allocating resources. Similarly, relating literacy rates to resilience and, in turn, framing literacy within a capabilities approach, highlights how re-thinking adult education provision is necessary in order to improve resilience – and to make society more "just" for all.

Structure of the report

In Section 1, the report introduces "literacy" as a concept and why it is so important. In Section 2, the report introduces the "problem" of resilience in Ireland and why it is important when thinking about adult literacy. In particular, this section discusses how to frame literacy when it comes to [a person's] capability.

In Section 3, we map the current adult literacy policies both in Ireland and internationally to underline the structural challenges to tackling adult literacy needs. First, we examine the different policies, initiatives and strategic plans in the nine different Irish government departments currently involved in adult literacy and numeracy. This shows that although there is some recognition of the importance of literacy and numeracy programmes by the various departments, these approaches are largely fragmented and there is a lack of coordination. As such, we argue that this is not an efficient or effective use of government resources.

In Section 3 we also look more broadly at global literacy policy and challenges focusing on three themes:

1. accessibility and provision of literacy services;

2. raising awareness; and

3. targeted funding.

Following on from the challenges associated with these three areas and additional up to date reports on best policy practice such as from the OECD and European Commission, we suggest that the most applicable recommendations for Ireland to come out of international best practice are:

- a cross-departmental and holistic approach to literacy policy;

- calls for a monitoring framework for literacy across policymaking bodies; and

- includes new outcomes and indicators for the impact of literacy learning.

Section 4 outlines our **Whole-of-Government Framework** which we maintain should be phased in over the next ten years. This framework, adopted across departments, integrates a relationship between investment in capabilities (literacies), learning outcomes, and resilience impact. In other words, investment in literacy programmes and initiatives results in improved literacy levels in society which in turn, leads to a more participatory and engaged population able to make better life choices and overcome challenges. The framework aims to make sure that all government departments are facing the same direction in relation to literacy and moving towards the same goals – such as a Whole-of-Government approach.

The report concludes with Section 5. Here we reiterate the key points of the report while stressing the advantages of our proposed framework. In summary, it prioritises the same understanding of literacy in the work of each department and it is a consistent framework that all government departments can work with and measure tangible results. Literacy is a social need, it is a barometer for equality and much more than simply a set of reading, writing and basic maths skills that can be evaluated in a national survey or questionnaire. As such, our proposed framework should be implemented as soon as possible to ensure a policy approach that reflects the social value of literacy learning.

Section 1:
Introduction

Purpose of report

The purpose of this report is to provide a framework to re-examine the policy approach to supporting adults with unmet literacy and numeracy issues in Ireland.

There is substantial research evidence which underpins the scale of the issue in Ireland and highlights the consequences to individuals and wider society of having unmet literacy and numeracy needs.

The current policy and practice have proved insufficient to meet scale of the problem and substantially reduce the numbers of people with these needs. NALA is seeking a new way to consider policy to better support the numbers of adults with unmet literacy and numeracy needs.

In this report, TASC connects the adult literacy issue with the work of theorists concerned with "resilience" as a key characteristic for successful modern living, as well as drawing on the well-established "capabilities approach" from international development. Resilience involves allocating resources by organisations, institutions and individuals in order to adapt to external events and ongoing economic and social pressures.[1] The capabilities approach outlines a moral framework that prioritises the evaluation of any policy according to the extent to which it enables personal freedoms and capabilities, that is, those entities that people have the opportunity and ability to accomplish. Literacy learning is central to this approach.[2]

This report suggests that these ideas offer a conceptual guidepost for policymakers attempting to connect literacy within multiple areas of policymaking. As such, we build from these theories to develop a policy strategy for the Irish government that recognises the importance of supporting people to develop literacy and numeracy in contexts relevant to their lives – as parents, workers and members of the community.

In addition to this report, NALA has commissioned and collated two separate papers, one covering the current research showing the relationship between literacy and numeracy in three domains (health, family and community) and the other covering approaches to measuring the outcomes of national adult literacy and numeracy strategies.

1   Mackinnon, D and Derickson, K. (2012) 'From resilience to resourcefulness: A critique of resilience policy and activism', Progress in Human Geography, 37 (2), pp. 253-270.
2   Alkire, S. (2011) 'The Capability Approach and Human Development', Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, University of Oxford. Available at: https://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/OPHI-HDCA-SS11-Intro-to-the-Capability-Approach-SA.pdf

These papers sit alongside this report which puts adult literacy and numeracy policy into a wider framework for consideration by policymakers.

Setting the scene: adult literacy in Ireland and the rest of the world

On a global scale, rates of low adult literacy have been steadily decreasing in recent years. However, UNESCO estimates that there are still 750 million adults (age 18 or over) worldwide who cannot read at a basic level.[3] Women make up two-thirds of this figure - revealing the intersection of gender-specific barriers to accessing literacy learning. Low literacy also tends to affect certain groups of the population more than others. In Ireland, traditionally marginalised groups also may be disproportionately affected by unmet literacy, numeracy and digital needs. These groups include the following:

- Irish Travellers[4]

- Low-income households (intergenerational poverty)

- Migrants and asylum seekers

- Lone parents

- Persons with a disability

- Persons with specific learning difficulties, for example Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Asperger's syndrome, Attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD)

- Persons with addiction issues or a history of addiction

- Incarcerated persons[5]

---

3   UNESCO (2017) 'Literacy Rates Continue to Rise from One generation to the Next'. Available at: http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs45-literacy-rates-continue-rise-generation-to-next-en-2017_0.pdf

4   For more on the key issues affecting the Traveller Community, see NALA's latest statement to the special Joint Committee, 3rd December 2019. Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_key_issues_affecting_the_traveller_community/submissions/2019/2019-12-03_opening-statement-inez-bailey-ceo-nala_en.pdf;

5   NESC (2018) 'Moving from Welfare to Work: Low Work Intensity Households and the Quality of Supportive Services'. Available at: http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/146_Low_Work_Intensity_Households.pdf

The international community[6], led by the United Nations with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have sought to "ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy" by 2030. However, as with the nature of international targets, the task of fulfilling these goals falls largely to individual countries. Despite having pressure from an international level, the problem of unmet adult literacy needs remains an overlooked area in domestic policy in many states – and Ireland is no exception. This need for countries to take a more proactive approach towards literacy policy is highlighted in recent international literature, such as the European Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways which sealed the commitment of member states to take action to address the high number of adults in the EU who have gaps in their basic skills.[7]

Adult literacy rates within any country, Ireland or elsewhere, directly concern equality. Adult literacy needs are intimately connected with poverty, poor health and social exclusion. The UNESCO 3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE III) revealed that people with low education were more likely to report "overall poor general health and functional limitations."[8] In contrast, higher levels of literacy lead to higher life expectancy rates, reduction in disease, decrease in mental health and overall healthier behaviour and attitudes. However, 90 countries reported to UNESCO that addressing literacy was the toughest challenge for education training and policy.

Despite the risks, adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy levels in Ireland are lower, sometimes substantially, than the EU-28 and OECD averages. These rates correspond with native language, age and education rates, with younger and more educated populations scoring higher.[9] At the same time, those groups with lower scores are often more socially and economically marginalised. This demonstrates the need for more holistic interventions.

---

6   The phrase "international community" is used in geopolitics and international relations to refer to a broad group of people and governments of the world and is common in discussions on human rights. It is also used across the international adult learning and education literature, for example, see the Executive Summary of the fourth and latest "GRALE" (Global Report on Adult Learning and Education) report from 5th December, 2019. Available at: http://uil.unesco.org/system/files/grale_4_final.pdf. For more, see: Byers, M. and Nolte, G. (2003) 'United States Hegemony and the Foundations of International Law'.

7   For more, see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/implementation-report-upskilling-pathways_en.pdf

8   UNESCO (2016) '3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE III)'. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245913. The fourth edition of this report was published in December 2019 by UNESCO – for more, see UNESCO (2019) '4th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 4)'. Available at: http://uil.unesco.org/system/files/grale_4_final.pdf

9   CSO (2013) 'PIAAC 2012 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland'

For instance, the last OECD Survey of Adult Skills[10] also known as PIAAC, notes that "adults who report an excellent state of health have a considerably higher literacy mean score (276) than those who report a fair (249) or poor (232) state of health. Across the levels of the literacy scale this pattern is also apparent, with proportionally fewer of those with excellent (11.7%) or very good (14.6%) health at Level 1 or below compared to those with fair (31.0%) or poor (40.3%) health."[11]

In 2012, the PIAAC put Ireland in the bottom third of 24 countries for the literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments (PSTRE) rates amongst 6,000 surveyed adults. Ireland ranked 17th in literacy and 19th in numeracy; 1 in 6 Irish adults scored at or below basic level 1 in literacy and 1 in 4 adults in numeracy. Ireland also ranks toward the bottom for higher levels (2-5) of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving. The recently published National Skills Bulletin 2019[12] provides insight in relation to education and the labour market in Ireland. The report found that 11.8% of persons aged 15-64 in the labour force have less than upper secondary (NFQ Levels 1-3). At the same time, the UNESCO 4th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE – published in December 2019)[13] shows participation in adult learning and education (ALE) in Ireland is lowest from people with less than secondary education (10%) compared with people who have a third level qualification (75%). The EU Digital Economy and Society Index (2018) reported that 52% of Ireland's population lack basic digital skills, one of the lowest levels in the EU. In addition, Ireland has one of the lowest shares (79%) of the population using the internet, a figure based on shares increasing more rapidly in other EU countries.

In its draft Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025), UNESCO discusses how efforts to increase access to literacy programmes have not kept up with population growth. It stresses the need for more policies and strategies that integrate literacy within a "holistic, cross-sectoral, lifelong and life-widening perspective."[14] In other words, an approach which is long term, whole-of-government and inclusive.

---

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 SOLAS (2019). National Skills Bulletin 2019
13 UNESCO (2019) '4th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 4)'. Available at: http://uil.unesco.org/system/files/grale_4_final.pdf
14 UNESCO (2019), UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) Draft for On-line Forum Consultation. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

The need for these policies is great, as is the challenge of implementation. According to relevant international literature and debate, there are several key challenges of framing adult literacy as a policy concern:

- the accessibility and provision of literacy services;

- raising awareness of adult literacy and encouraging people to return to learning; and

- targeted funding.[15]

We look closer at these three challenges in Section 3. We now turn to a brief definition of literacy to provide clarity before moving forward.

Defining literacy

The background and foundation for this report builds upon the following comprehensive definition of "literacy" as outlined by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA):

> "Literacy involves 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."[16]

As such, we understand "literacy" as covering a multitude of abilities, including reading, writing and numeracy, as well as social experiences. However, literacy is much more than a set of skills – literacy learning is ultimately about agency and empowering people to participate civically and to advocate for themselves. This draws parallels with the capabilities approach theorised by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The capabilities approach emphasises the role of basic education in order to provide the opportunities for "meaningful freedom" people should have to shape their lives.[17] This understanding of "literacy" allows for a focus on "literacy for citizenship" and the promotion of literacy as the cornerstone of a well-functioning and inclusive democracy.

---

15   For more on targeted funding, see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/ implementation-report-upskilling-pathways_en.pdf

16   NALA (2012) 'Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work'. Available at: https://www.nala.ie/publications/nala-guidelines-for-good-adult-literacy-work/

17   Nussbaum, M. (2011) 'Creating Capabilities', Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

This ethos must continue to be at the heart of adult literacy policy and service delivery in Ireland.[18]

In Ireland, NALA (the National Adult Literacy Agency) maintain that there are four main areas that are central to building adult literacy and counteracting the long-term effects of poor literacy: health, the family, the community and the workplace. NALA supports targeted approaches to improving literacy across all these sectors – engaging with stakeholders both in Ireland and internationally.[19] NALA have been a key player in working in these areas as outlined below:

Workplace literacy:

Workplace literacy concerns the mix of skills employees need to complete everyday tasks at work. NALA lobbied for and helped establish the Workplace Basic Education Fund in 2005 to support employers and employees to improve literacy and numeracy levels in the workplace.[20] These 30-hour courses are delivered by the local adult literacy services in the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

Family literacy:

Family literacy is about the way families use and develop literacy and numeracy skills together in the home. When parents are involved in their child's learning, it positively affects the child's performance at school. Important examples of family literacy include reading a book at bedtime, singing, playing word games, and using a calendar.[21] Some family literacy initiatives work on supporting a parents' own unmet literacy and numeracy needs.

---

18   For more on the ethos of adult literacy services in Ireland, see NALA's Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work (2012) https://www.nala.ie/publications/nala-guidelines-for-good-adult-literacy-work/

19   For more on NALA's recent work, please see NALA Annual Report 2019 https://www.nala.ie/publications/nala-annual-report-2019/

20   For more research on workplace literacy in Ireland, see NALA (2018) https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2015-07/RS27.pdf

21   For more, see NALA (2018). Available at: https://www.nala.ie/publications/family-literacy-in-ireland-a-factsheet/

Health literacy:

Health literacy concerns how people engage with services that are essential to their physical, mental and psychological health and wellbeing.

Health literacy has two elements: [22]

● Health services communicate clearly and take account of possible health literacy and numeracy needs

● People understand health information correctly and make informed decisions.

Media literacy:

Media literacy involves the ability to engage critically with different media sources, and to help people tell the difference between reliable and accurate information and or deliberately false or misleading information. We discuss media literacy and critical literacy in more detail on page 16 and 17.

Numeracy:

Numeracy involves the use of maths ideas effectively to participate in daily life and make sense of the world. It is a very important component of literacy learning and involves understanding of basic maths operations as well as recognising numbers, measuring and critically understanding statistical information.[23]

ESOL:

ESOL is "English for Speakers of Other Languages". ESOL learning is important for non-native English speakers in order to live and navigate daily life and experiences in Ireland. It is an important resource for migrant communities.[24]

---

[22] For more, see NALA (2018). Available at:
https://www.nala.ie/research/health-literacy-and-numeracy-in-ireland-a-factsheet/
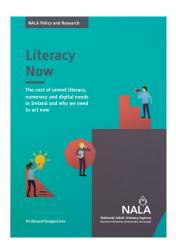[23] For more on numeracy policy and practices in Ireland, see NALA (2018). Available at:
https://www.nala.ie/research/numeracy-policy-and-practice/
[24] For more on ESOL learning in Ireland, see NALA (2018). Available at:
www.nala.ie/research/esol-literacy-numeracy-blended-learning/

Distance Learning Service:

Distance learning services offer access to literacy learning by meeting adult learners where they are, in their homes or online. NALA delivers a distance learning service that provides tutoring options for people over the phone or electronically, as well as e-learning programmes such as learnwithnala.ie.[25]

For further information on these specific services as well as further resources offered by ETBs and NALA, see **Literacy Now: The cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland and why we need to act now**. This report covers the current research involved in addressing unmet adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs, in particular in the areas of health and wellbeing, families, and social and community life.

Literacy as a barometer of equality

There has been extensive research that explores the various economic, social, political and personal impacts of low literacy, numeracy and digital proficiencies. Certain advanced skills are also becoming increasingly necessary in order to engage meaningfully in a growing technologically dependent world.[26] Literacy difficulties are closely tied to poverty, as persons with low literacy are more likely to be unemployed, or if employed, in insecure, irregular and or precarious employment. This results in increased dependency on social welfare programmes.[27] Adults with unmet literacy needs may face social exclusion, have fewer opportunities to participate in cultural and political life and are less likely to be active citizens.

Unmet adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs should not be viewed as an individual failing, but as an indicator of wider structural inequalities and ineffectual public policy.

---

25 For more on distance learning, see NALA
https://www.nala.ie/publications/nalas-distance-learning-service/
26 UNESCO (2016) 3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education.
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245917
27 ELINET (2015). 'Literacy in Europe: Facts and Figures'. Available at:
http://www.eli-net.eu/ leadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/Factsheet-Literacy_in_Europe-A4.pdf

Lifelong literacy learning needs to therefore work across groups and disciplines – and a political approach to literacy needs to be holistic and include a robust and practical delivery. According to Brian Maddox:

"Current educational policies that are oriented to universal primary education but neglect literacy for adults and out-of-school youth are therefore insufficiently oriented to goals of social justice and human development. They implicitly penalise the most unfortunate members of any society, who for various reasons (such as lack of access to equitable and good quality schooling, gender discrimination, poverty, illness, child labour, war, or lack of aptitude) are not able to achieve literacy and numeracy capabilities during their childhood."[28]

In the development of this framework, there is a need to challenge reductive, disconnected and depoliticised understandings of adult literacy. We build on transformative approaches that understand social and economic factors which contribute to poor participation and stress the need to frame literacy learning by focusing on agency, resilience and capabilities.

Critical literacy and media

Critical literacy skills and media literacy are increasingly significant in this context. This is reflected by a growing number of campaigns in Ireland such as Be Media Smart[29] – which aims to help people distinguish reliable information from unreliable information. There is also #Beyondtheclick – which is a teaching toolkit for exploring global digital citizenship produced by 80:20 Educating and Acting for a Better World.[30] As outlined by Uta Papen:

"Critical literacy is much more than reading and writing, it also has political implications because it affects how people participate in society. For example, if people in the UK had greater critical literacy skills, they would have been in a better position to analyse media coverage about Brexit. They would have been able to look at the language used in newspaper articles or social media posts and decide if it was accurate or if it was just being sensational in order to grab their attention."[31]

28   Maddox, B. (2008). "What Good is Literacy? Insights and Implications of the Capabilities Approach", Journal of Human Development, 9:2, 185-206
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14649880802078736
29   For more, see: https://www.bemediasmart.ie/
30   For more, see: https://8020.ie/projects/beyondtheclick-global-digital-citizenship/
31   NALA (2019) 'Literacy Matters'. Available at:
https://www.nala.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Literacy-Matters-Summer-2019-issue-23.pdf

This quote shows us the importance of critical literacy and media literacy skills. It illustrates how literacy is interlinked with broader social and political factors. This highlights the transformative effect of literacy learning and how it facilitates a more inclusive society. The need for well-founded media literacy and critical thinking skills is more crucial than ever before. It also directly relates to the social justice and empowerment components at the core of the capability approach. This report frames a new approach– and we offer a brief introduction to this in the following section.

About the framework: supporting resilience through a capabilities approach

Currently there are nine Irish government departments operating under multiple strategies that concern adult literacy. However, there is no overall coordination, sharing and aligning of ideas to improve adult literacy learning. As such, the disjointed thinking that pervades Irish policy and practice have proved insufficient to meet the scale of the problem and reduce unmet literacy needs. In this report, we develop a framework that re-examines policy approaches in an Irish context.

We advocate for an alternative approach – embedded in a much broader understanding of the relationship between literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy and resilience through assessing how it contributes to individual agency and capacity to respond both to external pressures and change. Such pressures include negative financial events like a recession, Brexit, or the impact of climate change. This work builds from the contributions of several key theorists who we cite throughout this report.

We suggest that an alternative framework consistent with a capabilities approach would emphasise how literacy affects individual capacity to process information (for example, regarding health, job opportunities, and worker rights), make constructive decisions, self-advocate, and ultimately, feel greater life satisfaction. To avoid instrumentalisation while recognising the link between literacy and areas of risk, in this report we develop a new literacy policy structure based on adopting of a **shared framework across government departments**. This framework would integrate a relationship between investment in capabilities (literacies) and resilience outcomes and impacts.

We discuss this framework and outline each outcome in greater detail in Section 4.

Framing literacy within a capabilities approach means that re-thinking adult education provision is necessary in order to improve the resilience of the Irish population. These are the central themes that we expand upon throughout this report.

About this report

Methodology

This report is based on a year-long research project aimed at developing a Whole-of-Government holistic framework. In order to meet this aim, we carried out the following primary research methods:

●   Review of relevant literature and academic debate

This involved an in-depth analysis of existing literature concerning theoretical and practical approaches to adult literacy policies in both Ireland and internationally.

●   Qualitative data collection (with adult learners)

A crucial and insightful part of the research was the focus group with adult learners we conducted in June 2019.

●   Engagement with experts across sectors (adult literacy specialists, academics, community and voluntary sector, businesses and trade unions)

This engagement included one Roundtable with relevant actors (on 31 May 2019) as well as individual conversations with experts on adult literacy in Ireland and elsewhere. These individuals included academics, representatives of charity organisations or persons from other sectors whose work and interests overlap with literacy concerns.

●   Consultations with government departments

We also met with representatives from two government departments in order to discuss the approach and to discern how they framed adult literacy needs as a policy objective. To date, we met with representatives of the Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI) as well as the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP).

In addition, this report incorporated related feedback from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) that was offered to a parallel project run by NALA during the time of this research.

Structure of the report

To structure our discussion, the rest of the report is organised as follows.

- Section 2: introduces the "problem" of resilience in Ireland and why it is so important when thinking about adult literacy. In particular, we continue to elaborate on how to frame literacy from a capabilities perspective.

- Section 3: discusses current adult literacy policies in Ireland and worldwide. We focus in particular on the work from intergovernmental organisations such as the OECD and the European Commission.

- Section 4: outlines the framework in terms of the nine government departments that currently offer adult literacy policies and provide examples of how they can better coordinate investment in building literacies in light of specific resilience outcomes and impacts.

- Section 5: Offers a conclusion to the report and outlines the importance of this framework.

Section 2:

Literacy and resilience — why worry?

Building resilience in the face of national and global challenges

The global challenges posed by public health crisis such as Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, climate change, global economic instability, and technological innovation to jobs, quality of life, and democratic institutions have made policymakers more interested in the concept of "resilience". Resilience involves mobilising resources by organisations, institutions and individuals in order to adapt to external shocks and ongoing pressures.[32] Capano and Woo associate resilience with:

> **"understanding the ability of systems, organisations, policies, and individuals to persist over time against 'external' shocks (without, however, identifying the specific reasons for or causes of this ability)."**[33]

Resilience means "trying to build safe-fail systems capable of learning, self-organising, and adapting to change."[34] These systems may be interconnected but affected differently by external shocks, leaving changed (and not necessarily the same) conditions after the shock has passed. For example, a climate disaster may have a greater immediate impact on certain areas (health and educational services) but not on others (local government authority). Resilience means having the infrastructure in place to restore these services because of good government preparation and policy.

Mackinnon and Derickson argue that the conceptual appeal of resilience lies in its "socially inclusive narrative" that requires "all sections of the community, and not just policymakers serving the needs of privileged 'creatives' to foster permanent adaptability in the face of external threats."[35]

32   Mackinnon, D and Derickson, K. (2012) 'From resilience to resourcefulness: A critique of resilience policy and activism', Progress in Human Geography, 37 (2), pp. 253-270.

33   Capano, G. and Woo, J.J. (2016) 'Resilience and Robustness in policy design: a critical appraisal', Available at: http://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/resilience_and_robustness.pdf

34   Anderies, J. M., C. Folke, B, Walker, and E, Ostrom. (2013) Aligning key concepts for global change policy: robustness, resilience, and sustainability. Ecology and Society 18(2).

35   Mackinnon, D and Derickson, K. (2012) 'From resilience to resourcefulness: A critique of resilience policy and activism', Progress in Human Geography, 37 (2), p.260.

Likewise, other academics have noted that:

> "The resilience lens is useful for making suggestions about broad categories of investment such as in the capacity to learn, adapt, and transform without being too specific about what this actually means in practice, such as how much it costs, who pays, who benefits and so on."[36]

In other words, resilience "provides heuristics for living in a complex world" though not necessarily rules for implementation.[37]

Why consider resilience in Ireland?

The question of resilience is appropriate for Ireland because of the number of challenges facing the country. Policymakers in Ireland often use the term "resilience" when referring to economic growth. For example, in a speech to the Future Jobs Summit in November 2019, the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, explained the rationale for Future Jobs Ireland (a policy initiative in the Department of Business, Enterprise, and Innovation) is as follows:

> "The sustainability and resilience of the Irish economy to ultimately secure and improve the living standards of Irish people for the future."[38]

In a speech March 2019, the Deputy Governor of the Central Bank, Sharon Donnery, argued:

> "It is vital that a small and highly globalised economy like Ireland is proactive in using macro-prudential policy to mitigate systemic risk and build resilience."[39]

However, we suggest that the risks facing Ireland extend beyond economic growth, and point to a need both to elaborate on the concept of resilience and to understand how individual agency and societal wellbeing can be supported. In 2020 the public health crisis of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic puts Ireland at a great risk and requires great resilience. Strong literacy, numeracy and digital skills are essential as part of this resilience as the public are faced with ongoing public health messaging, new words and terms, health booklets, accessing public and other services online and misinformation and fake news.

36   Anderies, J. M., C. Folke, B, Walker, and E, Ostrom. (2013) Aligning key concepts for global change policy: robustness, resilience, and sustainability. Ecology and Society 18(2).

37   Ibid.

38   For more, see the transcript of the speech at: https://www.gov.ie/en/news/74bd52-speech-by-an-taoiseach-future-jobs-summit/

39   For more, see the full press release at: https://centralbank.ie/news-media/press-releases/building-resilience-to-economic-sharon-donnery

The challenges for Ireland relate to:

- population growth, an ageing population, and demand for services across generations;

- climate change and its effect on policy and livelihoods;

- rural decline and the agricultural sector's vulnerability to Brexit; and

- Brexit itself, which may have dramatic political and social consequences, as well as economic.

Slow progress in addressing these challenges through policy will most likely mean future policy responses will have to compensate. This may spark profound and abrupt changes to lifestyles and livelihoods (with the most severe impact on the lives of disadvantaged groups).

To clarify this argument, Ireland is currently the third highest carbon emitter per capita in the European Union (EU) and has failed to meet EU carbon emissions targets (which will come at a cost). Population growth is third highest in the EU, which has subsequent impact on demand for affordable housing, public health services, and public education. At the same time, to remove the severe level of market inequality, Ireland distributes the highest level of cash social transfers compared to other States in the OECD[40] and amongst similar EU economies.[41] Relatedly, though household debt has fallen over the decade since the financial crisis, Ireland still ranks fifth highest for household debt in the EU.[42] Ireland also has the only health system within the EU lacking universal access to primary care, sometimes deterring those without a medical card from seeking care or pushing individuals to make decisions between basic needs.[43] Similarly, there are also inequalities in the Irish hospital sector, fuelled by privatisation in the last few decades which results in access to healthcare being determined by the ability to pay rather than need.[44]

---

40   OECD (2018) 'Income Redistribution Through Taxes and Transfers across OECD Countries'. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=ECO/WKP(2017)85&docLanguage=En

41   Sweeney, R. (2019) 'Inequality in Ireland Today'. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/blog/2019/01/16/inequality-in-ireland-today/

42   Central Bank (2019) 'Household debt continues to decline but remains fifth highest in the EU'. Available at: https://www.centralbank.ie/news-media/press-releases/press-release-household-debt-continues-to-decline-but-remains-fifth-highest-in-the-eu-23-october-2019

43   Doyle, K., Forster, T., Kentikelenis, A., Legido-Quigley, H. and Torrecilla, M. (2019) 'Reducing Health Inequalities: The Role of Civil Society', Dublin: TASC and FEPS, Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/publications/reducing-health-inequalities-the-role-of-civil-soc/ Forster, T., Kentikelenis, A.E. & Bambra, C. (2018) 'Health Inequalities in Europe: Setting the Stage for Progressive Policy Action', Dublin: FEPS and TASC. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/publications/health-inequalities-in-europe-setting-the-stage-fo/ Mercille J. (2019) The Public Private Mix in Primary Care Development: The Case of Ireland. International Journal of Health Services, 49 (3). pp. 412-430; Mercille, J. (2017). Neoliberalism and health care: the case of the Irish nursing home sector. Critical Public Health, pp. 1-14.

44   Mercille, J. (2018). Privatisation in the Irish hospital sector since 1980. Journal of Public Health. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdy027

All of these trends indicate current vulnerabilities for households, especially those in the bottom 40% income brackets. This could undermine resilience to external shocks and the capacity to adjust to radical policy measures to affect household behaviour (for example, higher carbon taxes, more expensive food and so on).

Vulnerabilities in the Irish economy

In recent years, the Irish economy has been growing and the labour force is at a high level of employment. However, even fundamental trends related to economic growth may require aggressive policy responses, possibly beyond what the government is currently proposing. We list some of these trends below:

Job losses and upskilling needs

In March 2020 many businesses shut temporarily due to restrictions from the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. While the government provided a COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment and wage subsidies, some businesses will struggle to reopen and jobs may be lost. Many people who now seek new employment may need to upskill and this may include brushing up on their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. They may also need to gain qualifications at QQI Levels 1 to 4.

Productivity and SMEs

- Ireland has a lower than EU average productivity rate amongst small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which employ approximately 70% of the workforce.

- This percentage of workers is higher than the EU-28 average, but SMEs themselves generate a value-added share of 41.7%, substantially less than the EU average of 56.8%.[45]

---

45   European Commission (2018) 'Annual Report on European SMEs: SMEs growing beyond borders.

Employment gaps

- Ireland has a higher than average rate amongst OECD countries[46] for underemployment, the gender income gap, and employment gap for disadvantaged groups.

- The gender income gap is due primarily to low employment rates among women with low education rates.[47]

- The long-term unemployed still account for a high percentage of those out of work and overall labour force participation is just above 60%.[48]

- This means that there is a substantial percentage of the population (in particular those with low skills) who are economically inactive.[49]

Youth unemployment

- In early 2020, the unemployment rate published for young people was 11.8%, approximately 50% higher than pre-crisis levels.

People with disabilities in work

- Ireland also has one of the lowest rates in the EU for people with a disability in work.[50]

Overdependence on FDI and urban investment

- Finally, economic growth has been concentrated in Dublin and several other urban centres and based on foreign direct investment (FDI), which leaves rural areas and towns more dependent on SMEs and agriculture.

- This reproduces discrepancies in economic opportunities as well as resilience to economic shocks.[51]

---

46 OECD (2018) 'How does Ireland Compare?', Available at: https://www.oecd.org/ireland/jobs-strategy-IRELAND-EN.pdf

47 OECD (2018) 'Starting close, growing apart: Why the gender pay gap in labour income widens over the working life', Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/empl_outlook-2018-10-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/empl_outlook-2018-10-en

48 For more, see: https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/what-does-irelands-participation-rate-tell-us

49 Department of Education and Skills (2016) 'National Skill Strategy 2025', Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

50 Department of Education and Skills (2016) 'National Skill Strategy 2025', Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

51 Sweeney, R. and Wilson, R. (2019) 'Cherishing all equally 2019: Inequality in Europe and Ireland', Dublin: TASC and FEPS. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/20190220114456.pdf?issuusl=true

The importance of literacy to resilience

Literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy relate to all of these areas of vulnerability - as discussed above - because they help enable individuals to do the following:

- to engage with public institutions;

- to understand and act upon new information and policy changes;

- to use technology; and

- to seek better employment opportunities, especially as the job market changes due to automation and demand for evolving complex skills.

Writing for the online site "The Medium",[52] Eric Newton defines literacy in part as "the ability to find, understand, create and act on information" and "new literacies" of the modern era as "information literacy, digital literacy, media literacy and news literacy".

Civic literacy is "a key way of acting on information; using it to improve our governments and our lives." Slow progress in improving these skills can worsen shortcomings in public services, SME productivity, labour force participation and income among disadvantaged groups and women with low levels of education. Critically, slow progress may influence attitudes toward public policy and trust in state institutions and public services.[53] This has short-term implications for voting trends and party politics and longer-term effects on the sustainability of democratic practices, like engagement in political and policy debate.[54]

---

[52]   Newton, E. (2018) 'Understanding news? We're not even close', Trust, Media and Democracy, January 15. Available at: https://medium.com/trust-media-and-democracy/understanding-news-were-not-even-close-1770c7f89954

[53]   See the wealth of research (e.g. Becker et al. "Who voted for Brexit? A comprehensive district-level analysis on the Brexit vote," *Economic Policy*, Volume 33, Issue 93, January 2018, Pages 179–180) and media commentary examining the relationship between education rates and support for the far right. For example, for media analysis, see Nate Silver's (2016) correlation of education rates and voting for Trump and Jean-Laurent Cassely's (2017) similar demonstration that lower education rates corresponded with support for Marine Le Pen, while higher education rates led to greater affiliation with Emmanuel Macron. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/education-not-income-predicted-who-would-vote-for-trump/ and http://www.slate.fr/story/138311/candidat-premiers-classe

[54]   Jose Morais forcefully makes this argument, writing of literacy and democracy that, "Their mutual influences may be either positive or negative: they are negative when literacy, unequally distributed, is reduced to mere skills (even if these are highly sophisticated), rather than conducive to free, argumentative and critical thinking, inspired by humanist values." He laments the substitution of elections for "well-informed public debate and collective decision-making, as well as the people's control over such decisions." (2017, page 1) José Morais (2017): "Literacy and democracy," Language, Cognition and Neuroscience, pages 1-22.

Literacy and a just society

This report emphasises the need to adopt a much broader understanding of the relationship between literacy and resilience. This can be completed through an assessment of how literacy contributes to individual agency and the capacity to respond to external events and forms of change. This thinking directly relates to the capabilities approach as theorised in international development discourses. The approach "describes literacy as a key factor influencing people's achieved functioning's (what they are actually "able to do and be"), their future capabilities, and their freedom to lead a dignified life of the type they choose to value."[55]

Literacy is a foundational concept of the capabilities approach. Amartya Sen[56] viewed illiteracy as "incommensurable" with well-being and life satisfaction. Simply put, the capabilities approach involves understanding literacy as an indicator of whether or not a society is "just" in terms of promoting equality and combatting social exclusion.

In her work, Martha Nussbaum[57] in particular recognises literacy as a social good, rather than a more instrumental acquisition to enhance individual chances. She distinguishes between literacy for individual benefit, such as access to better jobs and greater knowledge of rights. She also views literacy as reflective of social values, where respect for individual dignity is paramount.

This means that literacy should facilitate critical thinking – intangible qualities that go beyond functionality. We argue that this focus underpins the development of a healthier, more just and more democratic society.

55   Maddox, B. (2008), "What Good is Literacy? Insights and Implications of the Capabilities Approach", Journal of Human Development, 9:2, 185-206, Available at: 10.1080/14649880802078736.p.187.
56   Sen, A. (1999), Development as Freedom. New York: Alfred Knopf.
57   Nussbaum, M. (2003) 'Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice', Feminist Economics, 9 (2-3) pp. 33-59.

Policy implications of this thinking

The implication for policy (as Maddox stresses[58]) is that prioritising universal primary education while neglecting adult and school leavers undermines social justice and human development. Maddox contends that focusing on primary education at the expense of adult literacy penalises disadvantaged groups. It also fundamentally conflates "the provision of schooling (as a procedural commitment) with the achievement of basic educational capabilities." Not providing students in school with the support to overcome multiple and often complex forms of disadvantage can mean that children lack both the capability and freedom to learn. In this way, education risks reproducing existing inequalities.[59]

We argue that making the link in literacy policy between the capabilities approach and resilience prioritises addressing adult and school leaver literacy – with appropriate funding and resource allocation. Similarly, relating literacy rates to resilience and, in turn, framing literacy within a capabilities approach, highlights how re-thinking adult education provision is necessary in order to improve resilience – and to make society more "just" for all.

The need for a new literacy policy approach in Ireland

In the aftermath of the economic crisis in 2008, the Irish government has predominately focused on a neo-liberal agenda which seeks ways to promote international investment and privatisation.[60] This agenda involves changing the role of the State to primarily represent the interests of private corporations and market-led policies. This has resulted in higher levels of socio-economic inequality.[61]

---

58 Maddox, B. (2008), "What Good is Literacy? Insights and Implications of the Capabilities Approach", Journal of Human Development, 9:2, 185-206, DOI: 10.1080/14649880802078736.

59 For more, see: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/reports/2019/2019-06-05_report-on-education-inequality-disadvantage-and-barriers-to-education_en.pdf

60 For example, see Hearne, R. (2016). "Neoliberalism exposed". TASC blog, Accessed at: https://www.tasc.ie/blog/2016/06/15/neoliberalism-exposed/ ; Roche, W. K., O'Connell, P. J., & Prothero, A. (2017). Introduction 'Poster Child' or 'Beautiful Freak'? Austerity and Recovery in Ireland; W. K. Roche, P. J. O'Connell, & A. Prothero (Eds.), Austerity and Recovery in Ireland: Europe's Poster Child and the Great Recession (pp. 1-22). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Mercille, J., & Murphy, E. (2015). Deepening neoliberalism, austerity, and crisis: Europe's treasure Ireland. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

61 Hearne, R. (2016), "Neoliberalism exposed". TASC blog, Accessed at: https://www.tasc.ie/blog/2016/06/15/neoliberalism-exposed/.

There has been much academic debate[62] on the effects of neoliberal policy agendas on all areas of education – including adult learning. According to Duckworth and Maxwell,[63]

> "…the neoliberal discourse marginalises education for social justice. Symbolic meanings of neoliberalism expose the discriminatory landscape of capitalism, which with its focus on individual responsibility and morality fails to address structural inequalities, for example, gender, class and ethnicity in learners' lives".

This agenda becomes evident when policies first and foremost prioritise education that first and foremost serves the needs of the labour market.

For example, while the Future Jobs Strategy 2019 adopted by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation[64] does mention the need to improve literacy, it does so narrowly, using predominately the language of "upskilling". As mentioned earlier, improving the employment opportunities of adults is key to literacy learning, but we argue this should not be over-emphasised over other key activities/benefits associated with literacy learning.

The Future Jobs Strategy conflates the importance of lifelong learning as only relevant to the potential economic value of adult learners. It states:

> "Soft skills, transversal skills (e.g. communication skills, organisational skills, self-motivation) and the mastery of core competencies in numeracy, literacy and digital technologies are critical for work in all sectors, and opportunities to develop and enhance these skills are vital." (p. 49)

---

62   For more on neoliberalism and education, see:
Professor Bronwyn Davies & Peter Bansel (2007) Neoliberalism and education, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 20:3, 247-259;
Davies, B. 2003. Death to critique and dissent? The policies and practices of new managerialism and of 'evidence-based practice'. Gender and Education, 15(1): 89–101; and
Fitzsimons, Camilla (2017). Community Education and Neoliberalism : Philosophies, Policies and Practices in Ireland, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017.
63   Duckworth, V. and Maxwell, B. (2015), "Extending the mentor role in initial teacher education: embracing social justice". International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 4 (1), pp.4-20.
64   See: https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Future-Jobs-Ireland-2019.pdf

Despite highlighting the vital importance of these core competencies, the strategy does not explain how to achieve them, especially in relation to work in each sector, beyond listing specific "deliverables". More fundamentally, the Strategy does not relate improving literacies to economic resilience beyond the assumption that better literacy will help prepare for the impact of technological innovation on the job market.

Further, the "lifelong learning" skills associated with economic resilience in the Future Jobs Strategy include "cognitive skills, problem solving, logic, social and emotional skills.[65] These skills can also be identified within the capabilities approach. However, a capabilities approach means that literacy policy should move away from a relatively narrow policy association between further education and training and the needs of the labour market and drivers of economic growth.

The 2020 Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic emerged very fast and Ireland had to respond quickly. This ranged from government decisions about new ways of delivering health and public services to the public adapting to new societal and working restrictions. Everyday the public is faced with new information and health messaging from many sources. Many people have felt overwhelmed by the volume of information, however for the one in six adults with literacy and numeracy needs in Ireland, it is an especially difficult time. The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the essential role of strong adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Currently one in six adults (521,000 aged between 16 and 64) will struggle with:

- reading and understanding health information and messaging;

- supporting their children's learning at home;

- using smartphones and technology to communicate with family and friends;

- accessing public services online; and

- adapting to changes in the workplace.

As such, an alternative strategy consistent with a capabilities approach emphasises how literacy affects individual capacity to process information (for example, regarding health, job opportunities, and worker rights), make constructive decisions, self-advocate, and ultimately, feel greater life satisfaction.

---

65   See: https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Future-Jobs-Ireland-2019.pdf

Conceptual tools of a capabilities approach

In terms of designing, delivering and assessing a literacy strategy focused on building resilience, the capabilities approach provides a set of conceptual tools rather than a conventional measurement of progress to evaluate and in turn improve services and social opportunities.

Firstly, the capabilities approach stresses that it is important to meet adult learners where they are – literacy is all about "opportunity" and "equality" – and policymakers should not approach literacy from a "deficit" perspective but rather by acknowledging literacy needs as part of wider social equality concerns. Second, literacy relates to multiple dimensions of life experience, such as employment, health, and finances.

Adult literacy learning classes adopt an empowerment approach that centres on strengthening the existing skills of participants and improving their choices, rather than overcoming a lack.

Finally, adult learners, particularly those from marginalised groups, should have a say in adult literacy policy formation. These indicators form the foundation of the development of a new policy approach to adult literacy learning. We suggest that they are of particular relevance in the Irish context.

Investing in all persons and groups

It is important to note that there is a strong economic argument for improving literacy – and this should not be overlooked. Having a population with higher skills in literacy is good for a country's economy. A cost-benefit analysis of adult literacy conducted by NALA in 2009[66] found that domestic spending on literacy programmes creates "high economic returns" and as such "literacy training should move further up the hierarchy of educational priorities".

---

66   NALA (2011) 'A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training', Available at: https://www.nala.ie/publications/a-cost-benefit-analysis-of-adult-literacy-training-nala-research-report-march-2009/

Further evidence of this can be seen in the Netherlands, where a report commissioned by the Dutch Literacy Foundation found that the total social cost for low literacy amounts to 1.12 billion EUR per annum, approximately 50% of which is "borne by the government and society."[67] Countries with high percentages of adults with advanced literacy skills also have higher incomes per capita.[68] As low literacy levels are directly related to poverty and deprivation, higher literacy results in higher incomes, and an overall decrease in the percentage of the population relying on social transfers.

Yet despite these advantages, standard government policies in Ireland concerning education and learning predominately target the public-school system for those under 18. Much less money and resources are invested in programmes that address the basic skill needs of the population after they finish or leave formal schooling. In 2017, only 0.38% of the total education budget (9.531 billion EUR) and 5.7% of the Further Education and Training budget (638 million EUR) was spent on adult literacy programmes and services.[69]

This spending only currently reaches approximately 12% of the people who have literacy needs. We return to this discussion of government policies and practices in Section 3.

Reaching all people with literacy needs

As we know, low literacy is a structural issue, and people with low literacy and numeracy levels tend to have dropped-out of school, come from socially marginalised and deprived communities, and work in elementary or low-skilled occupations. For example, according to the Children's Rights Alliance in 2010, one in ten children in Ireland leave primary school with a writing need and this figure rises to one in three in disadvantaged areas.[70] These groups are much less likely to access basic skills education and other forms of educational training after they leave school.

In addition, according to the 2017 CSO Adult Education Survey in Ireland of those who participated in lifelong learning – nearly 72% already had attained a third level degree or above before taking part.

67   Press Release on report, available at: https://www.lezenenschrijven.nl/nieuws/laaggeletterden-lopen-jaarlijks-ruim-half-miljard-aan-inkomsten-mis/

68   OECD (2013) 'OECD Skills Outlook 2013'. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/oecd-skills-outlook-2013_9789264204256-en

69   NALA (2019) 'Literacy Changes Lives: 2020 Pre budget Submission', Available at: https://www.nala.ie/publications/nala-2020-pre-budget-submission/

70   This was cited from a 2010 Oireachtas Report from the Joint Committee on Education and Skills: Staying in Education: 'A New Way Forward School and Out-of-School Factors Protecting Against Early School Leaving'. Available at: http://www.erc.ie/documents/staying_in_education.pdf

Only a quarter (25%) of those who were educated to primary level or below participated in lifelong learning.[71] In addition, the demand for lifelong learning was not satisfied for 32.4% of adults in 2017. We can see that if we only invest in training for the "higher educated" and "higher skilled" cohort of the population, a significant number of people will be left behind. This is why we must target the "furthest behind first" which is a principle enshrined in the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

In addition, despite the high percentage of adults with unmet literacy needs, few adults access literacy services. Recent data from the Department of Education and Skills[72] show that only 62,736 adults accessed local adult literacy services offered by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in 2017. This is only 12% of people with literacy needs. Data from the CSO revealed that, nationally, the most common difficulty to accessing education for adults was: "did not have time due to family responsibilities" (43.7%). In addition, over one in ten adults (11.0%) who were unemployed said that there was "No suitable education or training activity available".

There is a need to address this large gap between the number of people who are in need of adult literacy learning and the number who access adult literacy services. As discussed in the next section of this report, we argue that the reasons for this gap are structural.

In order to develop a truly transformative policy initiative, we need to challenge mainstream approaches and encourage the government to build resilience by investing in all citizens. This includes those who are unemployed/not economically active, in low-skilled employment or working for indigenous companies in addition to those sectors across the foundational economy.

71   CSO (2018) Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/aes/
       adulteducationsurvey2017/
72   See: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2019-01-15/350/#pq_350

Section 3
Government approaches to adult literacy

Mapping current adult literacy policies in Ireland

As mentioned previously, recent CSO research has found that in Ireland over 520,000 adults struggle with basic reading, and over 754,000 with basic maths. These numbers are even higher for digital skills literacy. This means that a large number of adults living in Ireland experience difficulty reading a health leaflet, the back of a medicine label, a bus timetable, and/or working out how to split a bill in a restaurant.

In this section, we highlight the specific activities, initiatives and strategic plans in nine different government departments (see Table 1 on the following page) that, to a certain extent, address adult literacy, numeracy and digital learning in Ireland.
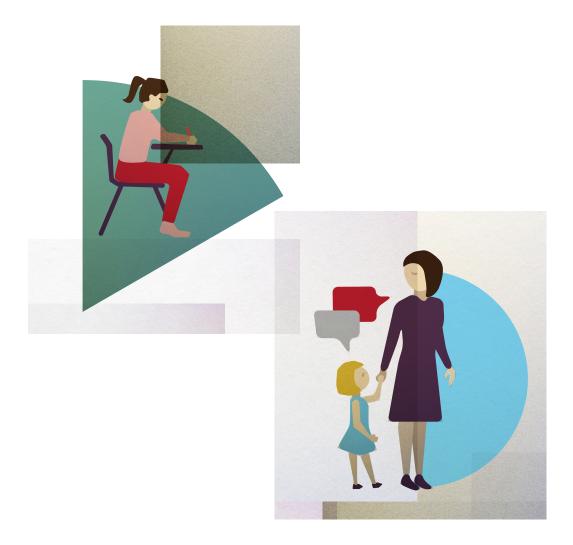
Figure 1 Map of Government Departments with policies involving literacy

Education and Skills

- Action Plan for Education Framework 2016-19

- The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020 - 24

- 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

- Sláintecare Action Plan 2019

- Healthy Ireland

- Health Literacy policy and implementation (Health and Wellbeing Directorate)

Communications, Climate Action and Environment

- Digital Skills for Citizens

- Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and the Media Literacy Network

- Sustainable 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 support

Rural and Community Development

- Right to Read programme which forms part of "Our Public Libraries 2022: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities strategy"

- Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)

According to Inez Bailey, Chief Executive Officer of NALA, the work currently being conducted bi-laterally across these nine departments is aimed at "building literacy and numeracy competence across a number of areas."[73] Below, we offer further detail on some of this work. For clarity, we list these departments and their activities in alphabetical order.

Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI):

As mentioned in Section 2, in March 2019, the DBEI identified the importance of "literacy" and "lifelong learning" in the Future Jobs Report (launched in March 2019).[74] In particular, according to the report: "the mastery of core competencies in numeracy, literacy and digital technologies are critical for work in all sectors, and opportunities to develop and enhance these skills are vital."[75] The Report also advocated for the importance of literacy skills in reference to the European Council's directive of "Upskilling Pathways – New Opportunities for Adults" and its core recommendations.[76] This programme also overlaps with the objectives of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP).

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA):

In its Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028, the DCYA identified importance of specific parenting supports, including "family literacy" programmes.[77] Family literacy programmes can be beneficial in tackling intergenerational literacy inequalities, as they promote the development of literacy and numeracy learning within a family and or community context.

---

73 NALA (2019) Dr Inez Bailey, Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills, Tuesday 19 November. Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_ committee_on_education_and_skills/submissions/2019/2019-11-19_opening-statement-inez-bailey-ceo-national-adult-literacy-agency_en.pdf

74 Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (2019) 'Future Jobs Ireland 2019'. Available at: https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Future-Jobs-Ireland-2019.pdf

75 Ibid

76 European Commission (2016) Upskilling Pathways – New Opportunities for adults. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224

77 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2018) 'A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families'. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/31184/62acc54f4bdf4405b74e53a4afb8e71b.pdf

Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCAE):

The DCCAE supports media literacy and several related initiatives. For example, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) launched its Media Literacy Policy in 2016, which sets out a range of skills to help people to navigate current, new and emerging media platforms.[78] BAI also facilitates the Be Media Smart website and Media Literacy Ireland network.[79] In 2019 the Department also supported the Digital Skills for Citizens Grant Scheme – government allocated 2.2 million EUR to 12 organisations that offer basic digital skills training around Ireland.[80] These initiatives, although limited in volume and scope of training, reflect government recognition that digital skills and media literacy are important aspects of literacy learning and are becoming increasingly significant due to recent technological and social advancements.[81]

Department of Education and Skills (DES):

In 2013, the DES reformed its FET (Further Education and Training) structure and established SOLAS, the new Further Education and Training Authority, as well as the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in order to provide specific resources to the FET sector. They also endorse specific frameworks and strategies that target a dimension of youth and adult literacy in their objectives:

● Empowering through Learning: Action Plan for Education 2019[82]: launched in March 2019, this plan is part of the Action Plan for Education Framework (2016-2020) and outlines the overarching goals of the DES. This framework includes some reference to the importance of literacy.

78 Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (2016) 'BAI launches Media Literacy Policy', Available at: https://www.bai.ie/en/bai-launches-media-literacy-policy/

79 Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (2019) Available at: https://www.bemediasmart.ie/

80 Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (2019) 'Digital Skills for Citizens Grant Scheme', Available at: https://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/communications/topics/Digital-Strategy/getting-citizens-online/digital-skills-for-citizens/Pages/Get-Citizens-Online.aspx

81 For more on digital literacy, see Joint Committee on Education and Skills debate – Tuesday, 19 November 2019, "Digital Literacy in Adults: Discussion" at: https://bit.ly/2x1IVjR

82 DES (2019) 'CUMASU – Empowering through learning', Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/action-plan-for-education-2019.pdf

- **Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-19**[83] **and Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024**[84]: these are published by SOLAS and offer a detailed plan of how government spending is being applied by ETBs and SOLAS against current policy objectives.

- **National Skills Strategy 2025**[85]: is a 10-year government strategy to support an "adaptable" and well-educated, well-skilled labour force, through further education and upskilling.

- **Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024**[86]: this strategy was developed as a whole-of-government approach to providing avenues for employment for people with disabilities.

- **The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020**[87]: This literacy and numeracy strategy was launched in 2011 and responds to areas of weakness identified in national literacy surveys. It sets core targets for improvement in these areas – specifically covering early childhood, primary and secondary education. This Strategy was reviewed in 2017, and based on the evidence, provided for some new targets and re-focused priorities.[88] The report of the interim review thus sets a positive but realistic trajectory to hopefully ensure that the national strategy will achieve its objectives.

The above strategies supported by the Department of Education and Skills include some provisions for adult literacy, numeracy and digital learning. However, they tend to predominately support children and the prevention of early school leavers, or, if targeting adults, the importance of literacy for economic reasons – such as employability and improving certain skills while participating in the labour market. The DES school and family literacy element evaluated by National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) has stressed the need for a cross government approach.[89]

83   SOLAS (2014) 'FET Strategy 2014-2019', Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf

84   SOLAS (2020) 'Further Education and Training strategy 2020-2024'. Information available at: https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

85   DES (2016) 'National Skills Strategy 2025' Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

86   National Disability Authority (2018) 'Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2018: National Disability Authority Year-end Review', Available at: http://nda.ie/Publications/Employment/Employment-Publications/Comprehensive-Employment-Strategy-2018-National-Disability-Authority-Year-end-Review.html

87   DES (2011) 'Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life', Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/lit_num_strategy_full.pdf This strategy is also monitored by the OECD's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) – for more, see: http://www.erc.ie/studies/pisa/.

88   DES (2020) 'National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020. Interim review: 2011-2016 and New Targets: 2017-2020' Available at: https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

89   NESF (2009) ' Literacy and Social Inclusion' Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Submission_by_Home,_School_Community_Liaison_National_Team.pdf

It is clear that the current approach to adult literacy and raising adult educational attainment is not working effectively in terms of meeting the objectives set out in the National Skills Strategy (NSS) 2025.[90] The targets set out in the NSS 2025 are the same targets from the National Skills Strategy 2007 due to the fact that Ireland did not meet this target and it was rolled over.

In addition, Ireland produced a plan in 2018 for the recent European Commission "Upskilling Pathways" initiative.[91] This initiative aims to target adults with low levels of skills and without upper secondary education. It specifically targets pathways into employment for unemployed and economically inactive people through skills assessments, learning offers as well as specific forms of validation and recognition. In June 2019, the European Commission also published Country Specific Recommendations for Ireland, including the following:

> "[Ireland should] Provide personalised active integration support and facilitate upskilling, in particular for vulnerable groups and people living in households with low work intensity."[92]

The DES is currently working on integrating these recommendations into their policies and practices.

- **Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP):**

  The DEASP is one of the departments (along with the DES) that support the implementation of the directive from the European Council, "Upskilling Pathways – New Opportunities for Adults."[93] The DEASP also offers the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) available to persons who are unemployed, parenting alone or have a disability. The BTEA was evaluated in 2015 by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), who found that while the initiative was somewhat effective in encouraging individuals back to study, there was no evidence to support its effectiveness as an employment activation programme.[94]

90   DES (2016) 'National Skills Strategy 2025' Available at:
     https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf
91   European Commission (2016) 'Upskilling Pathways – New opportunities for adults', Available at:
     https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224
92   For a full list of recommendations and information, see the European Commission (2019)
     https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-specific-
     recommendation-commission-recommendation-ireland_en.pdf
93   European Commission (2016) 'Upskilling Pathways – New opportunities for adults', Available at:
     https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224
94   For more, read the ESRI's report:
     https://www.esri.ie/publications/an-evaluation-of-the-back-to-education-allowance

In terms of its relevancy for literacy concerns, this funding tends to only be available to those pursuing second or third-level courses and not basic skills training.

In addition, over the last couple years the DEASP has also worked with NALA to write their leaflets and letters to the public in plain English.

- **Department of Finance:**

    The newly established Competition and Consumer Protection Coalition (CCPC) organises some trainings on financial education for children in secondary school and adults - including the Money Skills for Life: Workplace Programme, that allows employers to book a free, one-hour talk on money, insurance and saving for their employees.[95] The CCPC also supported a holistic research on financial capability in Ireland in 2018.[96]

- **Department of Health:**

    The Healthy Ireland: Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013-2025[97] is a 12-year Whole-of-Government strategy to address improving the health status of Irish people and proposes new goals and arrangements across government departments to improve the overall health and wellbeing. The Healthy Ireland framework outlines the intention to "address and prioritise health literacy in developing future policy, educational and information interventions".

    Since its adoption, the Healthy Ireland framework has supported the Crystal Clear Pharmacy and General Practice Programme[98] developed by NALA, MSD and the Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU). The programme provides pharmacies with a "crystal clear" certificate if they offer specific literacy assistance and support to customers. In addition, NALA has also worked with the Health Service Executive (HSE) over the last number of years on plain English and the HSE recently launched their Communicating Clearly[99] resources.

95   CCPC (2019) Available at:
     https://www.ccpc.ie/consumers/about/financial-education/money-skills-life-workplace-programme/.
96   CCPC (2018) Available at:
     https://www.ccpc.ie/business/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/12/Financial-capability-2018.pdf
97   Department of Health (2013). Available at:
     https://assets.gov.ie/7555/62842eef4b13413494b13340fff9077d.pdf
98   See: https://www.nala.ie/health-literacy/crystal-clear-mark/
99   See: https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/communications/communicatingclearly/

In 2018, there was a cross-party 10-year framework launched called "Sláintecare". In 2019 the Action plan for Sláintecare was published and the Department of Health (along with the HSE) commits to a series of actions under a workstream entitled "Sharing Progress: Citizen and Staff Engagement and Empowerment Programme". In reference to literacy, one action reads: "scope initiatives to support health literacy."[100]

- **Department of Justice and Equality:**

    Educational and literacy services[101] are offered in all prisons in Ireland and are provided in collaboration with the Education Training Boards (ETBs), Public Library Services, the Open University and the Arts Council. There are specific courses that prioritise basic skills in literacy and numeracy, and these generally follow an adult education approach. In addition, the Irish Prison Service developed a three-year joint education strategy with the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) from 2016-2018. NALA is currently working on a pilot project with Portlaoise Prison and Waterford Institute of Technology to train prisoners to deliver peer to peer literacy support.

- **Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD):**

    The DRCD support the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2018 – 2022[102], which provides funding to address poverty and social exclusion by promoting local partnerships between marginalised individuals and groups, community and voluntary organisations and State agencies. The programme includes "lifelong learning" as a thematic priority area and outlines the importance of "community education". Community education is an element of lifelong learning and is a critical access point for individuals who are experiencing disadvantage and is associated with the provision of basic literacy and numeracy skills. It is also about empowering people to develop confidence, feel included, enhance their skills and thereby engage more effectively with the labour market. Pobal oversees this scheme and the European Social Fund (regulated by the Department of Education) under the Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020[103] also offer financial support for this programme.

100 Department of Health (2019). Slaintecare Action Plan 2019
https://assets.gov.ie/9379/05384619bb2240c18c294b60578117e1.pdf
101 See Department of Justice (2019) Available at:
https://www.irishprisons.ie/prisoner-services/prison-education-service/
102 Social Inclusion and Community Activation (2018) 'Programme Requirements', Available at:
https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/05/SICAP-Programme-Requirements-2018-2022-V1-1.pdf
103 DES (2019) 'The Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (European Social Fund)', Available
at: https://www.esf.ie/en/About-Us/What-do-we-fund-/

The Right to Read Strategy[104] is a national programme which forms part of "Our Public Libraries 2022: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities strategy"[105]. This framework concentrates on promoting literacy and reading for persons of all ages throughout Ireland and centres on enhancing the services offered by public libraries. This framework is supported by the Department, as well as the CCMA (County and City Management Association) and the LGMA (Local Government Management Agency). The strategy is currently focussed on children and will move to supporting adults soon.

In summary, the presence of these initiatives demonstrates that there is some recognition of the importance of adult literacy and numeracy programmes by various government departments. However, the majority of these initiatives are framed in terms of the overall skills-deficit of adults and prioritise the needs of the labour market over the needs of adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs. We argue that this is a narrow description of adult literacy learning and we will expand upon this critique in the next section and throughout the report.

---

104 See Libraries Ireland (2019) https://www.librariesireland.ie/services/right-to-read
105 https://www.lgma.ie/en/about-us/libraries-development/our-public-libraries-2022.pdf

Literacy polices and global challenges

In its report "Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy" (2020-2025), UNESCO discusses how, all over the world, efforts to increase the number of adults who access literacy learning have not kept pace with the need. UNESCO emphasises how countries need more policies and strategies that integrate literacy within a holistic, cross-sectoral, lifelong and life-widening perspectives.[106] The need for these policies is great, as is the challenge of implementation. According to relevant international literature and debate, there are several key challenges of framing adult literacy as a policy concern, and in this section, we highlight three of these concerns in more detail:

- the accessibility and provision of literacy services;

- raising awareness; and

- targeted funding.

Accessibility and provision of literacy services

The European framework for cooperation in education and training[107] (referred to as ET 2020 framework) outlines the goal that "at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning" by 2020. Many countries have adapted measures to increase the number of individuals accessing adult education services, but there remain fundamental obstacles to accessibility for many persons with unmet literacy and numeracy needs.

The "context" of adult literacy programmes is equally as important as the programmes themselves. Drop out and retention rates remain a serious concern for adult learners. The question remains: how to make adult learning and return to education programmes accessible, flexible and keep adults engaged?

106 UNESCO (2019), UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) Draft for On-line Forum Consultation. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

107 European Commission (2019) 'Education and Training (ET) 2020 Framework', Available at : https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-framework

At the end of the day, adult literacy services and supports need to be compatible with the intricacies of adult life – and evidence shows that robust supports are needed in order to make this happen, including childcare, access to social services, reliable and affordable transport and protections to avoid wage loss and unemployment during course participation.[108] The barriers to participation in adult literacy services are undeniably linked to issues of social exclusion, inequality and stigma.

In their 2015 report, the OECD highlights the following core recommendations in terms of access to literacy services and the accessibility of such programmes:

● possibility of flexible working hours;

● the existence of individualised study programmes;

● personal choice of study methods; and

● access to good information and advice about the different programmes and services offered.[109]

At the moment, an adult in Ireland can receive between 2 and 6 hours of face-to-face adult literacy tuition per week. There are a certain number of longer programmes offered, but there is no financial support or incentive (for example, a tax relief) available for those who want to return to learning at NQF (National Qualifications Framework) levels 1, 2 and 3. This is a substantial barrier to participation.

108 Benseman, J., A. Sutton and J. Lander (2005), "Working in the light of evidence as well as aspiration: A Literature Review of the best available evidence about effective adult literacy, numeracy and language teaching", Ministry of Education, Auckland;
NESC (2018), "Moving from Welfare to Work: Low Work Intensity Households and the Quality of Supportive Services". Available at:
http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/146_Low_Work_Intensity_Households.pdf
Windisch, H. (2015), "Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills: A literature review on policy intervention", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 123, OECD Publishing, Paris,
https://doi.org/10.1787/5jrxnjdd3r5k-en;
OECD and Statistics Canada (2005), Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, and OECD Publishing, Paris, Accessed at:
www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/34867438.pdf.

109 Windisch, H. (2015), "Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills: A literature review on policy intervention", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 123, OECD Publishing, Paris,
https://doi.org/10.1787/5jrxnjdd3r5k-en

Raising awareness

The challenge of raising awareness of available literacy supports is critical to the effective implementation of adult literacy policy. Many countries, including Ireland, have tried to support the roll-out of national campaigns that draw national attention to the prevalence of literacy issues. NALA's awareness campaigns have been supported and funded by the Department of Education, our national state training agency (SOLAS) and An Post. They have mainly told an adult's story about the difference returning to literacy learning has made in their lives.

Some national campaigns target specific sections of the population, such as "Literacy Creates Power", a national campaign in Indonesia[110] that looks specifically at women's literacy.[111] Others take more comprehensive approaches, such as the "The National Literacy and Numeracy Awareness Campaign"[112] launched in Ireland in 2016 and the "Fight against Illiteracy" in France.[113] In 2013, Luxembourg rolled out a campaign to target adult education and specific "basic skills" – namely, literacy, numeracy and digital learning. The campaign included the dissemination of postcards to homes throughout the country, the organisation of a free number to call in order to receive advice and information about specific adult education courses available and the launch of a centralised, national website that provided crucial information through text, pictures and audio content.[114]

---

110 UNESCO (2012) 'AKRAB! Literacy Creates Power, Indonesia', Available at: https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/akrab-literacy-creates-power-indonesia

111 Other such gender-specific national literacy campaigns include that of Turkey, for more see: 'Literacy Campaign Launched Across Turkey' (2018) Available at: https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/literacy-campaign-launched-across-turkey-16374

112 For more on this campaign, see NALA and SOLAS Evaluation Report 2016 and 2017.

113 UNESCO (2016) https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/fight-against-illiteracy-france

114 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2015), "Adult Education and Training in Europe: Widening Access to Learning Opportunities". Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

A thematic and practical resource to support national adult literacy campaigns was developed by UNESCO[115] in 2016. This policy brief outlined both the various advantages and challenges of national literacy campaigns. In particular, the brief highlighted that:

> "Literacy campaigns have helped to create and harness momentum for general mobilisation in the countries where they have been launched. […] Campaigns have placed literacy high on national agendas and helped to create a social environment that encourages motivation, participation and retention among learners. […] They have demonstrated strong potential for mobilising different stakeholders for partnerships and strengthening commitment to contribute to national literacy efforts."[116]

The extract above outlines several strong reasons to support a national campaign at a policy level. However, the brief also warned of the challenges and shortcomings of such initiatives, including the following:

> "…the promotional language of campaigns often portrays illiteracy as a 'social illness' that can be permanently 'eradicated' with the right intervention. This stigmatises and potentially demotivates people with low literacy skills."[117]

Targeted funding

There can be a strong prevailing "shame" associated with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital needs. To counter this, the OECD stresses the importance of encouraging a pervasive "culture of lifelong learning", rooted in both the development of innovative policies as well as the investment in practical approaches to improving adult education.
To enable such a cultural shift, we need a radical restructuring and reprioritisation of literacy learning. First and foremost, these services need to be sufficiently funded and accessible to all persons while removing any socio-economic barriers to participation.

---

115 UNESCO (2016) 'Making Large-Scale Literacy Campaigns and Programmes Work', Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245161
116 Ibid.
117 UNESCO (2016) 'Making Large-Scale Literacy Campaigns and Programmes Work', Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245161

Schuetze[118] (2007) identifies three funding models in Europe for the funding of adult literacy services and programmes:

1.   State funding (public sector funding)

2.   Funding from the employer (private sector funding)

3.   Parafiscal funding (collective funds made up of different contributions from various stakeholders, including state agencies, employers, and so on)

Public subsidies

These funding sources include targeted funding and incentives towards prospective adult learners, as well as public subsidies. There are several European states in particular that use targeted financial streams to support literacy and issue vouchers or other incentives for adults to participate in programmes. For example, Netherlands are introducing a voucher scheme and countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Luxembourg, Spain and Belgium offer financial supports for adult learners that target funding for those groups who may particularly need it: including ethnic minority groups, migrants, unemployed individuals, older adults and less skilled and educated adults.[119] These policies frame literacy within wider initiatives to tackle poverty and social deprivation. These programmes are largely funded by the State, and there is an underlying ethos and understanding that some people may be left behind in education and may need assistance later in life.

118 Schuetze, Hans G., (2007). "Individual Learning Accounts and other models of financing lifelong learning". International Journal of Lifelong Education, 26 (1), pp. 5-23.

119 Windisch, H. (2015), "Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills: A literature review on policy intervention", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 123, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/5jrxnjdd3r5k-en

Childcare and family support

The need for adult literacy programmes to provide additional supports has been well-documented in recent literature.[120] In terms of childcare and family responsibilities, this is also a massive barrier to participation in adult education in Ireland. As mentioned in Section 2.3, according to Adult Education Survey 2017[121] conducted by the CSO, in Ireland the most common difficulty to accessing adult education was "Did not have time due to family responsibilities" (43.7%). This was reflected in the responses from women in particular – and 39.9% reported that they "did not have time due to family responsibilities as the main difficulty" compared to 21.6% men.

The provision of additional supports directly corresponds with the capabilities approach, and the way that programmes should take into account all aspects of learners' well-being into their design and implementation. Importantly, not having the time due to family responsibilities, or not being able to afford the cost of a bus or childcare should not stand in the way of someone accessing adult literacy services. These programmes are worth the investment and should receive greater investment when it comes to government spending.[122]

120 Benseman, J., A. Sutton and J. Lander (2005), "Working in the light of evidence as well as aspiration: A Literature Review of the best available evidence about effective adult literacy, numeracy and language teaching", Ministry of Education, Auckland;
NESC (2018), "Moving from Welfare to Work: Low Work Intensity Households and the Quality of Supportive Services". Available at:
http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/146_Low_Work_Intensity_Households.pdf
Windisch, H. (2015), "Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills: A literature review on policy intervention", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 123, OECD Publishing, Paris,
https://doi.org/10.1787/5jrxnjdd3r5k-en;
OECD and Statistics Canada (2005), Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, and OECD Publishing, Paris, Accessed at:
www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/34867438.pdf.

121 CSO (2017) Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/aes/adulteducationsurvey2017/

122 Dorgan, J. (2009) Adult Literacy Policy: A Review for the National Adult Literacy Agency Dublin: NALA Available at: https://www.nala.ie/publications/adult-literacy-policy-a-review-for-the-national-adult-literacy-agency-2009/

Recommendations for best policy practice

Following on from the challenges presented in the previous section, we will now examine some of the most up to date multilateral recommendations for literacy policies from intergovernmental organisations. We prioritise those of particular relevance for Ireland.

There are two main types of recommendations, depending on the institution. Some, such as the European Commission, use the language of "upskilling" and orient their recommendations towards the primary goal of employability and adult learners. Meanwhile, others – in particular the OECD – stress the importance of a more holistic approach where the quality of a programme complements other aspects of learners' lives. Overall, the OECD's "holistic" approach is more in line with the ethos of our research. However, in our framework, building resilience also involves core economic benefits for learners – although we suggest that such gains should not be the sole emphasis of adult literacy programmes. As such, we discuss aspects of both perspectives in this section.

Recommendations from the OECD

To start, the recent OECD report "Improving the quality of basic skills education for adults" is of relevance.[123] The report found that two categories of quality assurance mechanisms exist in a European context: "accreditation and quality labels, and quality approaches that do not impose minimum standards, namely (self-) evaluations". The study, however, emphasises the significance of establishing a wide and holistic quality approach, where typical measures are complemented with additional support structures such as validation of prior learning and lifelong guidance, professionalisation of teaching staff, involvement of social partners and provision of best practice and guidelines.

Another 2019 OECD report looks at "monitoring participation in adult education."[124] It stresses that it is important to remember that participation statistics should be used as a tool and "not an end in itself". Participation statistics are only output indicators of adult education programmes.

---

123 OECD (2019b) 'Improving the quality of basic skills education for adults: A review of European best practices on quality assurance'.
124 OECD (2019c) 'Monitoring participation in adult learning programmes: A review of European best practices on monitoring instruments'.

As summarised in the conclusion of the report:

> "To get a better picture of the effectiveness of adult learning programmes, it is necessary to also measure outcome and impact indicators, such as learning outcomes, and career development and social inclusion information. Gathering information on outcomes and impact along output indicators is crucial to make sure that measuring participation does not distort the incentives of training providers away from the initial policy goal. Indeed, greater or more targeted participation should not be the only objective, especially as it could come at the expense of training quality."[125]

Another recent study from the OECD centres around a review of European best practice regarding the various initiatives aimed at developing a system to monitor the outcomes of adult learning programmes for the "low skilled."[126] Perhaps the most important conclusion drawn from this study is that in order to make monitoring results comparable across providers, regions, and time, then there is a need for a harmonised and common monitoring framework to be put in place at a macro (national, regional, or sectoral) level. A large effort is thus needed to coordinate the process, and make sure each actor involved can play a role.

Recommendations from the European Commission

In addition to these three key OECD reports, there is also a recent European Commission report which is of particular relevance. The "Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults" explores the accelerating changes in the labour market, the demand for higher skills and the penetration of digital technologies in all aspects of daily life. The report underscores an urgent need to "upskill" people who have not mastered basic skills and have not gained a qualification to ensure their employability.[127] In this context, it splits the analysis into positive developments and remaining challenges for EU member states. The positives according to the report are that many countries are setting in motion new ambitious agendas to support the upskilling and "reskilling" of the adult population. On the other hand, the EC states that in a large majority of EU member states, literacy, numeracy and digital skills are not explicitly addressed.

---

125 OECD (2019c) 'Monitoring participation in adult learning programmes: A review of European best practices on monitoring instruments'.
126 Ibid
127 European Commission (2019) Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/implementation-report-upskilling-pathways_en.pdf

The EC report therefore recommends that future policy agendas in these countries need to embed basic skills provision into skills assessment and training offers targeting low skilled adults.

This Section's focus on some of the most current international recommendations for adult literacy highlights an important point: there remains a lack of alignment surrounding literacy recommendations for best practice (much like the absence of literacy policy alignment) – and the language used in international spaces is still developing.

We suggest that the most applicable recommendations for Ireland to come out of these reports are as follows:

- The importance of establishing a wide and a Whole-of-Government holistic approach, where typical measures for "quality" adult literacy programmes are complemented with additional support structures.

- If we are to make monitoring results in literacy comparable across providers, regions, and time, then there is a need for a harmonised and common monitoring framework to be put in place at a macro (national, regional, or sectoral) level.

- To get a better picture of the effectiveness of adult learning programmes, it is necessary to also measure outcome and impact indicators, such as learning outcomes, career development and social inclusion information.

A crucial take home message here is that literacy is a complex policy issue – and the cooperation and resources are needed across government departments and levels. For more on holistic national literacy policies please see Appendix 1 for a case study on the current Whole-of-Government strategy in the Netherlands.

As we outline in the following Section, our approach to addressing adult literacy concerns involves establishing a holistic framework that crosses all the nine government departments that currently work on adult literacy. This framework incorporates a relationship between investment in capabilities (literacies), learning outcomes, and resilience impact. In order for this to be realised, all departments need to adopt a holistic understanding of adult literacy as a core capability and as it relates to building resilience. This marks a slight departure from previous work and national strategies that focus on literacy needs. We outline this framework in the following Section 4.

Section 4:

Whole-of-Government framework: investing in adult literacy to build resilience

We have suggested here that a new policy framework concerning the different forms of literacy should go beyond focusing solely on literacy as a skill. This framework would regard literacy as a human right and be beneficial to individual wellbeing and society and as critical to resilience, where residents and citizens of Ireland have the confidence and capacity to make good choices, especially when faced with external and personal shocks.

In designing this framework, we borrow from the key recommendations from international practice - as highlighted in Section 3:

- a cross-departmental and holistic approach to literacy policy;

- calls for a monitoring framework for literacy across policymaking bodies; and

- includes new outcomes and indicators for the impact of literacy learning.

Likewise, the proposed framework facilitates a joined-up policy approach crossing multiple departments while retaining the link between improved literacy, health, critical thinking, participation in the job market, productivity, and alleviating poverty.

All departments need to adopt a holistic understanding of adult literacy as a core capability and as it relates to building resilience. This suggested framework, when adopted across departments, integrates a relationship between investment in capabilities (literacies), learning outcomes, and resilience impact. In other words, investment in literacy programmes and initiatives results in improved literacy levels in society which in turn, leads to a more participatory and engaged population able to make better life choices and overcome challenges. For example, individuals suffering unforeseen health conditions who have improved their literacy should be able to read and understand information about their health and thus complement their medical care. The longer-term impact is that as literacies improve, a higher proportion of the population are able to make informed decisions about medication and look after their own personal health, reducing stress on the health systems, private and public.

Below, we outline this framework in terms of the nine government departments that currently offer adult literacy policies and provide examples of how they can better coordinate investment in building literacies in light of specific resilience outcomes and impacts.

This is a framework that should be phased in over the next 10 years and aims to make sure that all government departments are facing the same direction and moving towards the same goals – that is a Whole-of-Government approach to meeting the unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs of the entire adult population.

For clarity, the terms in the table are defined as follows:

- "Existing Providers": are those government and non-government stakeholders who are currently working on delivering literacy services in Ireland.

- "Existing Literacy Interventions": identify the current literacy supports offered by each department.

- "Gaps in Literacy Activities" relate to areas where we suggest more directed literacy supports are needed.

- "Proposed Outcome": include those direct behavioural changes related to the improvement of literacy. These outcomes involve individuals gaining an "improved understanding" in specific areas as a result of literacy learning. This section also includes wider institutional outcomes.

- "Proposed Resilience Impact": consists of those long-term developments that relate to increasing the resilience of Irish society on the whole. These "impacts" are centred around the idea of "resilience" as related to the ability of people to be active, to be more engaged and to participate more.

While the language presented in the "proposed resilience impact" appears to stress outcomes for individuals – it is important to remember that this is not the case. In focusing on building resilience, the framework emphasises the actions of the State – not individuals. This frames literacy as a core state responsibility with wider collective social benefits. We need to challenge the narrative in public debates that present unmet literacy needs as a failing of individuals. We also need to emphasise the importance of public institutions and social structures to become more literacy-friendly and supporting all people with varying literacy abilities.

It is important to note that the aspects of the framework are comprised in the next two headings "proposed outcome" and "proposed resilience impact". These involve framing literacy as a core capability for individuals and as essential for building long-term resilience of the Irish population.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills in everyday life

2020 - 2030 Whole-of-Government Framework for investing in adult literacy to build resilience

This visual is based on the current structure of Government Departments as of June 2020.

Figure 2: 2020 - 2030 Whole-of-Government Framework for investing in adult literacy to build resilience

Government Department	Existing Providers	Existing Literacy Interventions
Education and Skills	Adult Literacy Specialists (ALSs) ETBs (Education and Training Boards) NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency) Other (Community groups/charities)	One-to-one and group classes with a trained literacy tutor which focuses on the needs of the learner

Gaps in Literacy Activities	Proposed Outcome	Proposed Resilience Impact
Need for intensive tuition models.

Need for more summer tuition.

Need for more blended learning options available to learners.

More supports available such as transport, childcare and eldercare.

No financial support or incentive to participate at Levels 1 to 3. | Irish population has improved skills in reading, writing, maths and digital literacy.

Better understanding of the role of literacy in building self-confidence and facilitating engagement with political and social life. | Individuals are more empowered as citizens, workers, and members of society. Their decision-making skills lead to better life opportunities and making choices that have a positive impact on their health, financial and economic wellbeing and so on.

They also understand where to access trustworthy information and are included and are more active/ participatory in society.

The confidence, critical thinking, and decision-making capacity strengthen ability to respond to external pressures (such as public health crisis of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Brexit, climate change, financial crisis) and personal (such as illness, sudden job loss) shocks or abrupt changes. |

Government Department	Existing Providers	Existing Literacy Interventions
Employment Affairs and Social Protection	Department Service providers such as Intreo Department-supported Work Training Programmes Other (Community groups/charities)	DEASP service providers and workers using Plain English Language and presenting important welfare information in a clear way. Activation programmes incorporate literacy learning and support the improved literacy levels of learners (these programmes include Specific Skills Training Programmes, the Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and provisions through the Back to Education Allowance).
Health	Hospitals and Health Clinics Primary Care Centres General practice Pharmacies Other (Community groups/charities)	Health services provide a literacy-friendly service which takes account of possible literacy and numeracy needs of the patient. Health service providers and workers using Plain English Language and presenting health information in a clear way.

Gaps in Literacy Activities	Proposed Outcome	Proposed Resilience Impact
Need for specific tailored and holistic supports for people who are long-term unemployed. Currently there is no financial incentive for adults to return to learning.	Improved understanding of social benefits and the welfare system (such as impact of introducing new taxes, ways to maximise income, and so on). Improved literacy skills that enables access to work, job progression and upskilling.	Individuals make better decisions in terms of their job prospects, maximising their income and remaining economically active. Reduction in the overall number of people on social welfare who are long-term economically inactive.
Expansion of Well Now! (health and well-being course delivered in a literacy-friendly way) for adult learners Need for awareness video for the public on health literacy and empowerment. Need for health literacy training for healthcare professionals.	Improved understanding of health-related information and materials. Delivering a literacy-friendly health service.	Individuals can make constructive decisions regarding their health and wellbeing, and specifically assume more responsibility for medication and preventative care. This impact should affect health trends in Ireland. Health services and systems deliver a literacy-friendly service.

Government Department	Existing Providers	Existing Literacy Interventions
Communications, Climate Action and Environment	Department Service Providers Local authorities ETBs (Education and Training Boards) Other (Community groups/charities)	DCCAE service providers are supporting digital literacy learning and critical skills for engaging with various forms of media.

Gaps in Literacy Activities	Proposed Outcome	Proposed Resilience Impact
Targeted literacy learning intervention as it relates to the environment, climate change and Just Transition (local wealth building projects). Increased digital literacy learning support and embed and integrate into other learning programmes. Voter education and civil engagement programmes. Design and roll out a digtal citizenship and media literacy learning programme for adult learners	Improved understanding of digital literacy skills. Improved understanding of information on climate change and its effect on Ireland. Increased knowledge of democracy and voting. Better critical thinking and digital citizenship skills.	Individuals feel more empowered to critically engage with online resources and news. They can distinguish factual and non-factual information and make choices about lifestyles that will contribute to effective climate action. In general, less educated and socially marginalised groups will be more able to engage with digital technology and innovation and to use information for positive ends. They will change behaviour as it affects climate change – such as reducing dependence on fuel, strengthening the capacity of Irish society to be more engaged and more active in climate action and to be prepared for longer-term climate change and extreme events.

Government Department	Existing Providers	Existing Literacy Interventions
Rural and Community Development	Local partnerships between marginalised individuals and groups, community and voluntary organisations and State agencies Public library services ETBs (Education and Training Boards)	Targeted resources are provided to support unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs for adults and families, with a particular focus on marginalised, vulnerable and hard to reach groups.
Justice and Equality	ETBs (Education and Training Boards) The Open University and the Arts Council Other (Community groups/charities)	There are specific courses that prioritise basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Prisoners providing peer to peer literacy support.

Gaps in Literacy Activities	Proposed Outcome	Proposed Resilience Impact
Enhanced partnerships between adult literacy providers and libraries, community programmes and services. Develop literacy hubs in libraries.	Individuals in urban and rural communities have improved understanding of climate change and its impact on livelihoods as well as quality of life.	Individuals in urban and rural communities (and especially industries such as agriculture and fishing) are empowered to make decisions about diversifying their livelihoods. Strengthening the Irish economy by improving the capacity of workers in the rural and agricultural sector. Strengthening the capacity of urban and rural communities to endure shocks associated with climate change, for example widespread job loss and related events.
Additional support for targeted ESOL programmes for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Additional literacy support for prisoners and people recently released from prison.	Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have improved skills in reading, writing, maths and digital literacy and can participate more in society. Individuals who have been incarcerated have the necessary skills to pursue employment, financial wellbeing, physical and mental health and so on.	Individuals are empowered to engage actively in society (in their community, work and so on). Overall, reduces recidivism by improving life chances after release.

Government Department	Existing Providers	Existing Literacy Interventions
Children and Youth Affairs	Schools (such as DEIS) ETBs (Education and Training Boards) Youth Workers Other (Community groups/charities)	Family literacy programmes in DEIS Schools – including ESOL learning and other skills.
Finance	Competition and Consumer Protection Coalition (CCPC) MABS (Money Advice and Budgeting Service) and the CIB (Citizen Information Boards) ETBs (Education and Training Boards)	Group trainings on financial education for children in secondary school and adults in the workplace.

Gaps in Literacy Activities	Proposed Outcome	Proposed Resilience Impact
Further supports for the Youth Work sector to engage with young people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs.	Improved understanding of literacy as it relates to empowerment and participation. Improved family literacy skills and confidence in reading, writing, maths and digital skills. Improved literacy, numeracy, digital skills and confidence of parents.	Individuals are more empowered, making better decisions, having access to good information, and are more active/participatory in society. Reduce the amount of early school leavers.
Financial literacy programmes and support (in particular those for groups of adults).	Individuals have better understanding of financial services and products, debt relief options, retirement planning and so on. Improved financial literacy and capability skills.	Individuals are empowered to make constructive financial choices on issues related to debt, saving, financial management, retirement planning, and so on. Reduces occurrence of problem debt or over-indebtedness at a household level. Strengthens the Irish society to weather the impact of a large financial event (like a recession, or the economic ramifications of Brexit).

As illustrated in Figure 2 above, we are calling for the adoption of literacy policies across departments to have better cohesion and coordination. This narrative relates personal achievement in literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy to progress in multiple areas of public policy now regarded as problematic, such as health inequalities, high unemployment in certain sectors and need for adapting skills and retraining, relatively low SME productivity, and household debt. Slow progress in these areas undermines Ireland's preparedness for external shocks and policy-instigated changes, such as related to the current public health crisis of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, climate action, financial crises or welfare.

Section 5:

Conclusion: Literacy Changes Lives

Throughout this report, we claim that Ireland needs a holistic, cross-departmental policy framework that would effectively address the need to improve different forms of literacy amongst a substantial portion of the Irish population and goes beyond focusing solely on literacy as a skill. Instead, any strategy should be framed as beneficial to individual wellbeing and the social fabric, through enabling residents and citizens of Ireland to have greater choices in their lives and the confidence to make those choices. This framework, outlined in Section 4 of this report, provides an overarching perspective that facilitates a joined-up, Whole-of-Government policy approach crossing multiple departments while retaining the link between literacy and increased chances in the job market and higher productivity and alleviating poverty.

Literacy policy in Ireland is currently not fit for purpose and should adopt a less instrumental focus that links achievements in literacy, numeracy, and digital learning to progress in multiple areas of public policy regarded as important in order to build resilience.

Advantages of this approach:

- Prioritises the same understanding of literacy in the work of each department.

- Consistent framework that all government departments can work with and can measure tangible results.

- Consistent framework that chimes with other policy outcomes.

In short, there is currently a severe inadequacy in the approach and allocated resources to tackle the scale of the adult literacy issue in Ireland. There is an unfounded view that this issue will eventually disappear with time through improved school attendance. In reality, as recently highlighted by the CEO of NALA Inez Bailey:

> "[T]here is a crisis in the learning outcomes for many in society, both young and old. Whilst acknowledging the contribution of the Department of Education and Skills and ETBs Ireland, who cater for over 60,000 participants in literacy services (12% of those with literacy needs), costing less than €600 per person. It is clear we need a better resourced and coordinated effort by Government."[128]

---

128 NALA (2019) Dr Inez Bailey, Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills, Tuesday 19 November. Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/submissions/2019/2019-11-19_opening-statement-inez-bailey-ceo-national-adult-literacy-agency_en.pdf

Literacy is a social need, it is a barometer for equality and much more than simply a set of reading, writing and basic maths skills that can be evaluated in a national survey or questionnaire. Literacy is about opportunity and it is essential to frame literacy as a "reading of the world" with a focus on equality.[129] It is vital to understand literacy issues as structural, systemic and intergenerational. When framed purely as a skillset, literacy becomes disconnected from context, social experiences and wider formulations of power.

We maintain that the best way to tackle these problems is to support a joined-up policy approach crossing multiple national departments that understands the crucial link between improved literacy, participation in the job market, productivity, health, critical thinking, and alleviating poverty. In other words, coordinated investment in literacy programmes will lead to improved literacy levels in society across the board. The effects of this is a more participatory, engaged, equal and resilient Irish population.

---

129   Freire, P and Macedo, D. (1987) Reading the Word and the World, London: Routledge.

Bibliography

Alkire, S. (2011) 'The Capability Approach and Human Development', Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, University of Oxford. Available at: https://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/OPHI-HDCA-SS11-Intro-to-the-Capability-Approach-SA.pdf

Anand, P., and M.V. Hees (2006), Capabilities and achievements: An empirical study.

Anderies, J. M., C. Folke, B, Walker, and E, Ostrom. (2013) Aligning key concepts for global change policy: robustness, resilience, and sustainability. Ecology and Society 18(2).

Arndt, C., and J. Volkert (2011), "The Capability Approach: A Framework for Official German Poverty and Wealth Reports", Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 12:3, pp. 311-337, DOI: 10.1080/19452829.2011.589248.

Benseman, J. (2012), "Literacy and workplace change: evaluation findings from 18 workplace literacy programmes", Journal of Research and Practice in Adult Literacy, Secondary and Basic Education.

Benseman, J., A. Sutton and J. Lander (2005), "Working in the light of evidence as well as aspiration: A Literature Review of the best available evidence about effective adult literacy, numeracy and language teaching", Ministry of Education, Auckland.

Byers, M. and Nolte, G. (2003) 'United States Hegemony and the Foundations of International Law'.

Capano, G. and Woo, J.J. (2016) 'Resilience and Robustness in policy design: a critical appraisal', Available at: http://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/resilience_and_robustness.pdf

Casey, H., et al. (2006), ""You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering...": Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes – the impact on learning and achievement", National Research and Development Centre, London. Available at: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/22311/1/doc_3188.pdf

Central Bank (2019) 'Household debt continues to decline but remains fifth highest in the EU'. Available at: https://www.centralbank.ie/news-media/press-releases/press-release-household-debt-continues-to-decline-but-remains-fifth-highest-in-the-eu-23-october-2019

CSO (2013) 'PIAAC 2012 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland'.

Davies, B. (2003) Death to critique and dissent? The policies and practices of new managerialism and of 'evidence-based practice'. Gender and Education, 15(1): pp.89–101.

Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (2019) 'Future Jobs Ireland 2019'. Available at: https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Future-Jobs-Ireland-2019.pdf

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2018) 'A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families'. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/31184/62acc54f4bdf4405b74e53a4afb8e71b.pdf

Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (2019) 'Digital Skills for Citizens Grant Scheme', Available at: https://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/communications/topics/Digital-Strategy/getting-citizens-online/digital-skills-for-citizens/Pages/Get-Citizens-Online.aspx

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2016) 'National Skill Strategy 2025', Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

DES (2011) 'Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life', Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/lit_num_strategy_full.pdf

DES (2018) 'National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020. Interim review: 2011-2016 and New Targets: 2017-2020' Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/pub_ed_interim_review_literacy_numeracy_2011_2020.PDF

DES (2019) 'CUMASU – Empowering through learning', Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/action-plan-for-education-2019.pdf

DES (2019) 'The Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (European Social Fund)', Available at: https://www.esf.ie/en/About-Us/What-do-we-fund-/

Dorgan, J. (2009) Adult Literacy Policy: A Review for the National Adult Literacy Agency Dublin: NALA Available at: https://www.nala.ie/publications/adult-literacy-policy-a-review-for-the-national-adult-literacy-agency-2009/

Doyle, K., Forster, T., Kentikelenis, A., Legido-Quigley, H. and Torrecilla, M. (2019) 'Reducing Health Inequalities: The Role of Civil Society', Dublin: TASC and FEPS, Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/publications/reducing-health-inequalities-the-role-of-civil-soc/

Drèze, J., and A. Sen (2002), "India: Development and Participation". Available at: https://books.google.ie/books/about/India.html?id=UpOl35r8UHQC&redir_esc=y.

Duckworth, V. and Maxwell, B. (2015), "Extending the mentor role in initial teacher education: embracing social justice". International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 4 (1), pp.4-20.

ELINET (2015) 'Literacy in Europe: Facts and Figures'. Available at: http://www.eli-net.eu/fileadmin/ELINET/Redaktion/Factsheet-Literacy_in_Europe-A4.pdf

European Commission (2016) 'Upskilling Pathways – New opportunities for adults', Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224

European Commission (2018) 'Annual Report on European SMEs: SMEs growing beyond borders.

European Commission (2019) 'Education and Training (ET) 2020 Framework', Available at : https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-framework

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2015), "Adult Education and Training in Europe: Widening Access to Learning Opportunities". Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Fitzsimons, Camilla (2017) 'Community Education and Neoliberalism: Philosophies, Policies and Practices in Ireland', Palgrave: Macmillan.

Forster, T., Kentikelenis, A.E. & Bambra, C. (2018) 'Health Inequalities in Europe: Setting the Stage for Progressive Policy Action', Dublin: FEPS and TASC. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/18456_health_inequalities_finalweb.pdf

Freire, P and Macedo, D. (1987) Reading the Word and the World, London: Routledge.

Hearne, R. (2016), "Neoliberalism exposed". TASC blog, Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/blog/2016/06/15/neoliberalism-exposed/.

Kato, S, Ashley, S.R., Weaver, R., (2018) "Insights for Measuring Social Value: Classification of Measures Related to the Capabilities Approach" VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Non-profit Organizations.

Langendonk, A and Toonen, M. (2017) 'Dutch approach to prevent and curate low literacy', Available at: http://library.ifla.org/1759/1/138-langendonk-en.pdf

Lewis, L. (2012), "The capabilities approach, adult community learning and mental health" Oxford University Press and Community Development Journal.

Mackinnon, D and Derickson, K. (2012) 'From resilience to resourcefulness: A critique of resilience policy and activism', Progress in Human Geography, 37 (2), pp. 253-270.

Maddox, B. (2008), "What Good is Literacy? Insights and Implications of the Capabilities Approach", Journal of Human Development, 9:2, pp. 185-206, DOI: 10.1080/14649880802078736.

Mercille J. (2019) The Public Private Mix in Primary Care Development: The Case of Ireland. International Journal of Health Services, 49 (3). pp. 412-430

Mercille, J. (2017). Neoliberalism and health care: the case of the Irish nursing home sector. Critical Public Health, pp. 1-14.

Mercille, J. (2018). Privatization in the Irish hospital sector since 1980. Journal of Public Health. DOI : https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdy027

Mercille, J., & Murphy, E. (2015). Deepening neoliberalism, austerity, and crisis: Europe's treasure Ireland. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Merriam, S.B. (2011) "Adult Learning" in K. Rubenson (ed.) Adult Learning and Education, Elsevier: Oxford, pp. 29-34.

Morais, J. (2017): "Literacy and democracy," Language, Cognition and Neuroscience, pp. 1-22.

Myers, K., Gyarmati, D. and Voyer, J. P. (2009) 'Skills Upgrading for Ontario Working Age Adults: An Environmental Scan of Programs, Gaps and Opportunities: Final Report'. Ontario, Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC).

NALA (2010), 'NALA 1980-2010: A Living History', Dublin. Available at: https://www.nala.ie/publications/nala-1980-2010-a-living-history/

NALA (2009) 'A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training', Available at: https://www.nala.ie/publications/a-cost-benefit-analysis-of-adult-literacy-training-nala-research-report-march-2009/

NALA (2012), "Guidelines on good adult literacy work", *NALA policy document*, Dublin, https://www.nala.ie/publications/nala-guidelines-for-good-adult-literacy-work/

NALA (2019) 'Literacy Changes Lives: 2020 Pre budget Submission', Available at: https://www.nala.ie/publications/nala-2020-pre-budget-submission/

NALA (2019) Dr Inez Bailey, Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills, Tuesday 19 November. Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/submissions/2019/2019-11-19_opening-statement-inez-bailey-ceo-national-adult-literacy-agency_en.pdf

National Disability Authority (2018) 'Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2018: National Disability Authority Year-end Review', Available at: http://nda.ie/Publications/Employment/Employment-Publications/Comprehensive-Employment-Strategy-2018-NDA-Review1.pdf

NESC (2018), "Moving from Welfare to Work: Low Work Intensity Households and the Quality of Supportive Services". Available at: http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/146_Low_Work_Intensity_Households.pdf

NESF (2009) ' Literacy and Social Inclusion' Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Submission_by_Home,_School_Community_Liaison_National_Team.pdf

Newton, E. (2018) 'Understanding news? We're not even close', Trust, Media and Democracy, January 15. Available at: https://medium.com/trust-media-and-democracy/understanding-news-were-not-even-close-1770c7f89954

Nussbaum, M. (2003) 'Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice', Feminist Economics, 9 (2-3) pp. 33-59.

Nussbaum, M. (2011) 'Creating Capabilities', Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

OECD (2013), OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, OECD Publishing, Paris. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en.

OECD (2018) 'How does Ireland Compare?', Available at: https://www.oecd.org/ireland/jobs-strategy-IRELAND-EN.pdf

OECD (2019) 'Income Redistribution Through Taxes and Transfers across OECD Countries'. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=ECO/WKP(2017)85&docLanguage=En

OECD (2018) 'Starting close, growing apart: Why the gender pay gap in labour income widens over the working life', Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/empl_outlook-2018-10-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/empl_outlook-2018-10-en

OECD (2019a) 'Monitoring learning outcomes of adult learning programmes: A review of European best practices on monitoring instruments'

OECD (2019b) 'Improving the quality of basic skills education for adults: A review of European best practices on quality assurance'

OECD (2019c) 'Monitoring participation in adult learning programmes: A review of European best practices on monitoring instruments'.

OECD and Statistics Canada (2005), Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, and OECD Publishing, Paris, Available at: www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/34867438.pdf

Otto, H., Walker, M., & Ziegler, H. (2018), Capability-promoting policies enhancing individual and social development. Bristol: Policy Press University of Bristol.

Phipps, S. (2002) The Well–Being of Young Canadian Children in International Perspective: A Functionings Approach. Review of Income and Wealth, 48: pp. 493-515. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1475-4991.00065

Robeyns, I. (2006), "The Capability Approach in Practice". Journal of Political Philosophy, 14: pp. 351-376.

Roche, W. K., O'Connell, P. J., & Prothero, A. (2017). Introduction 'Poster Child' or 'Beautiful Freak'? Austerity and Recovery in Ireland. In W. K. Roche, P. J. O'Connell, & A. Prothero (Eds.), Austerity and Recovery in Ireland: Europe's Poster Child and the Great Recession (pp. 1-22). Oxford: Oxford University Press

Schuetze, Hans G., (2007). "Individual Learning Accounts and other models of financing lifelong learning". International Journal of Lifelong Education, 26 (1), pp. 5-23.

Sen, A. (1999), Development as Freedom. New York: Alfred Knopf.

Sligo, F., E. Tilley, N. Murray, B. Watson, M. Comrie and F. Vaccarino (2010), "Modern apprentices literacy learning: A formative evaluation", Department of Labour, Wellington.

Social Inclusion and Community Activation (2018) 'Programme Requirements', Available at: https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/05/SICAP-Programme-Requirements-2018-2022-V1-1.pdf

SOLAS (2014) 'FET Strategy 2014-2019', Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf

SOLAS (2019) 'Further Education and Training strategy 2020-2024'. Available at: http://www1.solas.ie/Pages/NewsArticle.aspx?article=56

SOLAS (2019) 'National Skills Bulletin 2019", Available at: : https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/a6c2780d38/national-skills-bulletin-2019.pdf

Stewart, F. (2013), "Nussbaum on the Capabilities Approach", Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 14:1, 156-160, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19452829.2013.762175

Sweeney, R. (2019) 'Inequality in Ireland Today'. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/blog/2019/01/16/inequality-in-ireland-today/

Sweeney, R. and Wilson, R. (2019) 'Cherishing all equally 2019: Inequality in Europe and Ireland', Dublin: TASC and FEPS. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/20190220114456.pdf?issuusl=true

UNESCO (2012) 'AKRAB! Literacy Creates Power, Indonesia', Available at: https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/akrab-literacy-creates-power-indonesia

UNESCO (2016) 'Making Large-Scale Literacy Campaigns and Programmes Work', Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245161

UNESCO (2016b) 3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education. 3rd ed. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, pp.67-124.

UNESCO (2017) 'Literacy Rates Continue to Rise from One generation to the Next'. Available at: http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs45-literacy-rates-continue-rise-generation-to-next-en-2017_0.pdf

UNESCO (2019) '4th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE IIII)'. Available at:
http://uil.unesco.org/system/files/grale_4_final.pdf

UNESCO (2019b), UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) Draft for On-line Forum Consultation. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

Vorhaus J., et al. (2011), 'Review of Research and Evaluation on Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills', London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) "The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better". London: Penguin.

Windisch, H. (2015), "Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills: A literature review on policy intervention", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 123, OECD Publishing, Paris,
https://doi.org/10.1787/5jrxnjdd3r5k-en.

Glossary of terms

Adult education: Education specifically targeting people who are regarded as adults by the society to which they belong to:

- improve their technical or professional qualifications,

- further develop their abilities,

- enrich their knowledge with the purpose to complete a level of formal education, and/or

- acquire knowledge, skills and competencies in a new field or to refresh or update their knowledge in a particular field.

Adult learners: Adult learners are a diverse group – typically age 25 and older – with a wide range of cultural and educational backgrounds, abilities, responsibilities and experiences. Adult learners return to or begin education for personal and/or professional reasons.

Advocate: A person or organisation that actively supports or argues for a cause, idea or policy, which may involve raising awareness, recommending particular action and, or speaking up for individuals' rights.

Capabilities approach: a moral framework that prioritises the evaluation of any policy according to the extent to which it enables personal freedoms and capabilities, that is, those entities that people have the opportunity and ability to accomplish.

Critical literacy: the ability to engage with and interrogate a variety of texts or other sources in order to understand and determine the reliability of information, particularly in terms of socially constructed concepts such as power and inequality.

Digital skills: Life-skills that involve the knowledge, skills, and behaviours needed to use a range of digital devices and technology such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers and the confidence to use these skills in everyday situations.

Distance Learning: Distance Learning occurs when learners and tutors are separated by either space or time. For example, a student can follow an online computer programme from their home while their tutor is in another location.

Lifelong learning: not easy to define, but the CSO and Eurostat define lifelong learning as the percentage of adults between the ages of 25 and 64 years of age who participated in learning activities during the preceding 4-week period. This definition notes that lifelong learning encompasses all purposeful learning activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence.

Literacy: Literacy involves 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.

Media literacy: involves the ability to engage critically with different media sources, and to help people tell the difference between reliable and accurate information and or deliberately false or misleading information.

Plain English: Plain English is a way of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it.

Resilience: involves allocating resources by organisations, institutions and individuals in order to adapt to external events and ongoing economic and social pressures.

Appendix 1:
A Case Study of the Netherlands

Doing somewhat of a deep dive on the Dutch approach to adult literacy policy highlights potential lessons which are applicable to the Irish context. 1.3 million Dutch people between the ages of 16 and 65 have low literacy skills.[130] Moreover, a recent PwC report commissioned by the Dutch Literacy Foundation found that the total social cost for low literacy amounts to 1.12 billion euros per annum, approximately 50% of which is "borne by the government and society."[131]

To prevent and curate low levels of literacy in the Netherlands, the government initiated the Tel mee met Taal (Count on Skills) programme which launched in 2016.[132] The programme is very much based around a holistic approach and creates synergy by connecting various areas where language plays a role; for example, in libraries and community centres, social neighbourhood teams, social services, income support departments and schools.[133] It is a "Whole of Government" strategy which spans the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. The programme focuses on three main areas (family, employment and healthcare) and includes five action points, to which we now turn:

1. **Local networking approach to low literacy via Language for Life:** Support for libraries, municipalities, training and employment desks, language education providers and many other organisations in their long-term approach to low literacy. These support teams contribute ideas on matters such as policy plans, funding, linking literacy to other social focus areas such as employment, debt assistance and healthcare.

2. **Regional language agreements and incentive budgets:** Regional language agreements set out the arrangements between various parties who contribute to promoting reading, improving language skills and combating low literacy.

---

130 For more, see: https://nltimes.nl/2016/04/21/netherlands-literacy-policy-fails-25-million-illiterate

131 Press Release on report, available at: https://www.lezenenschrijven.nl/nieuws/laaggeletterden-lopen-jaarlijks-ruim-half-miljard-aan-inkomsten-mis/

132 For more, see: https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/good_practice_count_on_skills_elinet_en.pdf

133 Langendonk, A and Toonen, M. (2017) 'Dutch approach to prevent and curate low literacy', Available at: http://library.ifla.org/1759/1/138-langendonk-en.pdf

Partners (such as language education providers) use the agreements to set out their joint objectives, define partners' roles and make concrete agreements regarding their efforts to promote reading and raise literacy levels. Additional funding is available to incentivise these types of partnerships. The objective is for the network approach outlined in action point 1 to result in a long-term infrastructure that municipal authorities can use to address low-literacy in conjunction with local partners. This makes regional language agreements more than just a declaration of intent, as they must always consist of a work plan and a description of concrete activities that cater to local needs.

3. **Reading promotion via "Art of Reading":** Municipal authorities play a key role in shaping local libraries, and thereby also in the promotion of reading. The 'Art of Reading' programme offers municipalities a tailored approach via libraries, who coordinate the activities and support schools, child health centres and kindergartens in designing an approach to reading promotion.

4. **Experiments:** Investment in experiments aiming to better serve target groups that are difficult to reach, to unite various segments that are affected by low literacy, and to develop instruments for addressing language deficits and low literacy – for example, the aforementioned "Art of reading" is one such experiment which is now a programme.

5. **Knowledge and Communication:** To support the regional and local approach of Count on Skills, a number of national support tasks have been organised by the ministries involved. For example, a research agenda which supports policy and research into language deficits, reading promotion and low literacy. There is also a basic skills support centre which organises events and training courses. Furthermore, the Count on Skills programme continually undergoes evaluation by independent research agencies to ensure that modifications can be made where necessary.

The final evaluation of the programme was conducted in late 2018 and offers important insights into its effectiveness. The evaluation found that the Count on Skills programme has seen important steps in ensuring that literacy, numeracy and digital skills do not form an obstacle for people, but rather offer them opportunities to participate fully in society. The programme met expectations and even exceeded objectives in certain areas. The extract from the evaluation quoted below alludes to this:

"The first main objective of the programme is that the approach to tackling low literacy should be focused on raising the self-reliance, participation and/or development possibilities of people who face obstacles in these areas due to limited language, numeracy and digital skills. The approach in the various lines of action focuses explicitly on the aspects mentioned. As a result, main objective 1 has been achieved.

The second main objective of the programme is that sustainable cooperation should be established in each labour market region between municipalities and local partners in order to prevent as well as tackle low literacy. The infrastructure of Tel mee met Taal has led to a strong impetus in cooperation between parties. Existing collaborations have been further expanded and new parties have joined. The role of municipalities was especially examined closely in the interest of firmly establishing sustainable cooperation."[134]

It is important to note that the Count on Skills programme consciously chose to focus on improving language skills rather than numeracy or digital skills. The rationale behind this was that "language skills form the basis for social participation, parent involvement, a healthy lifestyle and continued employment for many low literate people."[135] Importantly, a portion of Dutch society with low basic skills have a high threshold to start language training - such as those born and educated in the Netherlands who had negative school experiences and get by reasonably well in their daily lives despite limited reading/writing skills. The Dutch approach for these groups is to introduce digital skills as a first step. There is less stigma in taking a digital skills course than a language or numeracy one, which is a very important point applicable to adult literacy policy on a broad scale. In addition, learning to work with apps, websites and digital resources can have a huge impact on the daily lives of an individual due to the ubiquity of digital skills in contemporary society.

134 Parliamentary Papers, House of Representatives of the State's States General, Subject: Joining forces for a higher skill level in the Netherlands: follow-up approach to low-literacy, 2020–2024
135 Ibid.

The success of the Count on Skills programme means that consequently, the Netherlands have outlined an adult literacy strategy for the next few years that aims to sustain and expand on the results achieved. They recently put forward 10 measures to this end, based around reaching more people, agreements with towns and cities, extra funding, national level programmes, setting up an expertise centre for basic skills and the improvement of language hubs/points.[136]

In summary, the Count for Skills programme in the Netherlands provides a valuable example of international best practice in terms of adult literacy. Overall, the programme takes a holistic approach and the evidence confirms that it has been instrumental in preventing situations of marginalisation among people with limited literacy skills. Examining this programme has allowed for a close scrutiny of what exactly has led to its effectiveness which offers up several applicable lessons for Ireland.

---

136 Parliamentary Papers, House of Representatives of the State's General, Subject: Joining forces for a higher skill level in the Netherlands: follow-up approach to low-literacy, 2020–2024.

Notes

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.

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)
Sandford Lodge
Sandford Close
Ranelagh, Dublin 6

Phone: 01 412 7900
Freephone: 1 800 20 20 65
Website: www.nala.ie
Email: info@nala.ie

 nalaireland @nalaireland

NALA celebrates **40**
National Adult Literacy Agency

Changing life stories 1980 - 2020