

National Adult Literacy Agency submission to the:

# 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy for Ireland

A Whole-of-Government approach 2020 – 2030



December 2020



National Adult Literacy Agency  
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

# Contents

|                                                                       |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Section 1. Introduction .....</b>                                  | <b>3</b>  |
| Who are we? .....                                                     | 3         |
| What do we mean by literacy, numeracy and digital literacy? .....     | 3         |
| What is the issue and why do we need to address this? .....           | 3         |
| What is the solution? .....                                           | 4         |
| What needs to be in the new 10-year Strategy? .....                   | 5         |
| <b>Section 2. NALA's submission to the new 10-year Strategy .....</b> | <b>8</b>  |
| Vision, Goals and Targets .....                                       | 8         |
| 1. Principles .....                                                   | 9         |
| 2. Policy .....                                                       | 12        |
| 3. Participation and provision .....                                  | 15        |
| 4. Promotion and awareness .....                                      | 25        |
| 5. Performance, research, monitoring, reporting and evaluation .....  | 27        |
| <b>Section 3. NALA's contribution to the 10-year Strategy .....</b>   | <b>30</b> |
| Working in partnership .....                                          | 32        |
| <b>Section 4. Conclusion .....</b>                                    | <b>36</b> |
| <b>Section 5. Appendices .....</b>                                    | <b>37</b> |
| The importance of literacy .....                                      | 37        |
| Defining literacy, numeracy and digital literacy .....                | 38        |
| Extent of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs .....   | 40        |
| The cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy .....       | 41        |
| Literacy and equality .....                                           | 42        |
| Literacy needs during COVID-19 .....                                  | 43        |
| Literacy needs among particular groups .....                          | 44        |
| Good adult literacy work .....                                        | 48        |
| Student voice and agency .....                                        | 49        |
| Key recommendations in recent international reports on literacy ..... | 51        |
| New vision and approach .....                                         | 53        |
| <b>Section 6. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) .....</b>     | <b>57</b> |
| Contact details .....                                                 | 59        |

# Section 1. Introduction

## Who are we?

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with 2,300 members. We believe literacy is a human right. We are committed to making sure people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can fully take part in society, and have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs.

## What do we mean by literacy, numeracy and digital literacy?

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are life skills that allow us to participate in, and make sense of, the world. These skills involve **listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers** and **everyday technology** to communicate, to build relationships, to understand information and make informed choices.

It is important to note that the above definition is not static. The literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills needed to participate in society change all the time, and will continue to evolve in the future.

## What is the issue and why do we need to address this?

| Adult Literacy Survey results <sup>1</sup>                                                                                                                                                                           | Number of adults |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>One in six (18%) of Irish adults struggle with reading and understanding everyday text. For example, reading a bus timetable or understanding medicine instructions.</li></ul> | 554, 946         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>One in four Irish adults (25%) has difficulties using maths in everyday life. For example, basic addition, working out a bill or calculating percentages.</li></ul>            | 793,666          |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>42% of Irish adults struggle with basic digital tasks such as looking up a website or sending an email.</li></ul>                                                              | 1,302,108        |

---

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

## Why do we need to address this?

Literacy is a human right to which every member of society is entitled. However only some members of our society have the literacy they need to flourish, thrive and reach their full potential.

Unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs have a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities. People who have experienced educational and wider inequalities earn less income, are more likely to be unemployed and report poor health. They are less likely to vote, access services or understand health or other public information.

This costs individuals in terms of **less life chances** and the economy in terms of **increased costs for public services** and **social transfers**<sup>2</sup> every year.

Strong literacy, numeracy and digital skills enable adults, families and communities to engage effectively with public services and to understand and act upon new information. Stronger skills empower people to advocate for themselves and their communities, use technology and take part fully in society. Higher skills also allow people to seek better employment opportunities, especially as job markets change.

## What is the solution?

Increasingly our international counterparts, who are successfully addressing the literacy gap and skills divide, have taken a more **holistic and cross-departmental approach**<sup>3</sup> that we believe is required in Ireland.

The proposed new 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy offers a unique opportunity to build literacy equality through a cohesive Whole-of-Government approach. It will provide an **interdepartmental framework** to support people to access their literacy rights, improve their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy, whilst also contributing to a more equal Ireland.

---

<sup>2</sup> Social transfers are cash or in kind benefits made to persons or families to lighten the financial burden and protect people from various risks. For example, State pension, Jobseekers allowance, Maternity benefit, Family Income Supplement.

<sup>3</sup> See the [Letter to Parliament](#) about 'Joining forces for a higher skill level in the Netherlands 2020-2024'

## What needs to be in the new 10-year Strategy?

### Vision

The strategy should have a clear vision that everyone in Ireland has the right to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills to reach their full potential and that these skills should be valued and supported throughout society.

### Goals and Targets

The strategy should have clear goals and measureable targets over 10 years. Based on current standards we recommend the following goals and targets:

| Goal                       | Target                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Literacy</b>         | Decrease the number of adults in Ireland with unmet literacy needs, that is PIAAC <sup>4</sup> Level 1 or below, from 18% to 7%.                                                                                                               |
| <b>2. Numeracy</b>         | Decrease the number of adults in Ireland with unmet numeracy needs, that is PIAAC Level 1 or below, from 25% to 12%.                                                                                                                           |
| <b>3. Digital literacy</b> | Decrease the number of adults in Ireland with unmet digital literacy needs, that is PIAAC Level 1 or below, from 42% to 10%.                                                                                                                   |
| <b>4. Accessibility</b>    | Deliver literacy-friendly government services that take account of unmet adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs by implementing a Plain Language Act and centrally-led programme of education and training on literacy awareness. |

### The strategy should incorporate the following 5 P's

1. Principles
2. Policy
3. Participation and provision
4. Promotion and awareness
5. Performance, research, monitoring, reporting and evaluation

---

<sup>4</sup> PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) 2012 [Survey Results for Ireland](#)

## 1. Principles

The strategy should be underpinned by principles of:

- Equality
- Student-centred and directed
- Flexibility
- Relevance

## 2. Policy

The strategy should offer a **literacy learning guarantee** for all adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs. It should offer State-funded **targeted paid learning leave** to employees with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs working in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and community and voluntary sector organisations where the employer does not have the capacity to pay for this. In larger enterprises, employees with these needs should be released with pay to engage in learning.

The strategy should ensure **all government departments have interrelated policies and action plans** and work collaboratively towards the same goals. Each department should deliver a **literacy-friendly service** that takes account of and supports adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to access their services. All public service communication should be in **plain language / Gaeilge Shoiléir**. This is in line with the Programme for Government commitment in June 2020, which seeks to consult with NALA (who provide a plain English editing, writing and training service).

## 3. Participation and provision

The strategy should **significantly increase the provision of literacy learning opportunities, access points, accessible services and providers**. In terms of redressing literacy inequality, those who have been most disadvantaged need to be prioritised and supported to build their **courage, confidence and competency** in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. This means providing tailored and sensitive supports and learning opportunities to those adults who have been most disadvantaged by their initial educational experiences. It means working with adults to provide supports and bespoke learning opportunities in response to their expressed needs.

The strategy should scale up investment for enhanced and flexible provision within the adult literacy services, community education, Further Education and Training (FET) sector and in other settings such as libraries, family resource centres and workplaces. Other areas such as outreach, guidance, quality, coordination and supports for participation must be expanded and targeted at people who need them most. The strategy should also focus on family literacy, health literacy, numeracy and financial literacy, climate and environmental literacy, media literacy and adapt to new and emerging literacies in the future.

#### 4. Promotion and awareness

The strategy should **raise societal and individual awareness** of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy as a human right. It should **promote and provide a range of learning opportunities** to match the dynamic needs of those who experience educational and wider inequalities, which have left them without their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs being met. It should also raise awareness of society's responsibility to support everyone to achieve these goals.

#### 5. Performance, research, monitoring, reporting and evaluation

The strategy should **use qualitative and quantitative research** with potential and current students and providers to ensure that goals, programmes and funding decisions are based on robust evidence and best practice approaches for those most in need. All actions should be clearly identified and have assigned responsibilities and realistic resources and timescales. Activity must be monitored and evaluated across the various levels of the strategy. This means **agreeing indicators and measurable targets**, along with implementing a robust data-gathering and reporting process to monitor progress. All progress, cross-sectoral commitments and actions should be defined, quantified, monitored and evaluated.



## Section 2. NALA's submission to the new 10-year Strategy

### Vision, Goals and targets

The strategy should have a **clear vision** that everyone in Ireland has the right to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills to reach their full potential and that these skills should be valued and supported throughout society.

The strategy should have **clear goals and measureable targets** over 10 years. Based on current standards we recommend the following goals and targets:

| Goal                       | Target                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Literacy</b>         | Decrease the number of adults in Ireland with unmet literacy needs, that is PIAAC <sup>5</sup> Level 1 or below, from 18% to 7%.                                                                                                               |
| <b>2. Numeracy</b>         | Decrease the number of adults in Ireland with unmet numeracy needs, that is PIAAC Level 1 or below, from 25% to 12%.                                                                                                                           |
| <b>3. Digital literacy</b> | Decrease the number of adults in Ireland with unmet digital literacy needs, that is PIAAC Level 1 or below, from 42% to 10%.                                                                                                                   |
| <b>4. Accessibility</b>    | Deliver literacy-friendly government services that take account of unmet adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs by implementing a Plain Language Act and centrally-led programme of education and training on literacy awareness. |

### The strategy should incorporate the following 5 P's

1. Principles
2. Policy
3. Participation and provision
4. Promotion and awareness
5. Performance, research, monitoring, reporting and evaluation

---

<sup>5</sup> PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) 2012 [Survey Results for Ireland](#).



# 1. Principles

The strategy should be underpinned by principles of:

- **Equality**

Literacy is a barometer of equality that is the gateway to creating a society that is better and more equal for all. Equality is not about treating everyone in the same way, but it recognises that individuals' needs are sometimes best met in different ways. At present, those who need to access education and training the most, benefit the least. This is the Matthew effect where “without intervention, those who have acquired more education get more, and those that have not, get little or nothing.”<sup>6</sup>

Priority should be given to those most in need, **furthest behind first**. This is a principle in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>7</sup> and in successive national anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies. It means that where funding is limited, State investment should be targeted at those most in need. Within such a framework, **the needs of those with less than a Level 4 qualification should be met first**. These adults are most at risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion in a changing world. Vulnerable adults who cannot access or are refused help when they need it, may not seek help again. For the furthest behind first, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning.

- **Student-centred and directed**

People learn best when the content and delivery responds to their needs and interests and when the learning is based on **active participation**. When students participate in decisions about the learning process (for example, what they would like to learn) and are encouraged to evaluate their own learning, they are more likely to develop independence, creativity and self-reliance.<sup>8</sup> These ideas have contributed to the development of a student-centred and relational concept of adult education. The needs, concerns and experience of the students are the focus of learning, rather than an

---

<sup>6</sup> Kerckhoff, A. and Glennie, E. (1999). The Matthew Effect in American Education. Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization.

<sup>7</sup> [Transforming our world](#): the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

<sup>8</sup> Rogers, Carl. 1967. 'The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning.' In H. Kirschenbaum and V. Land Henderson, eds. 1990. The Carl Roger's Reader. London: Constable.

externally structured and enforced curriculum based on the needs of, for example, the economy.<sup>9</sup> These needs are assessed through dialogue and depend on strong learning relationships which require recognition and resources.

NALA's experience shows that many adults only realise or admit that they have a literacy need when faced with a particular personal need or life event (for example, helping children with homework, filling out forms, reading medicine labels). The learning context should take account of the adults' immediate needs and inform how the learning happens.

NALA believes that we also need a **student-directed approach** at the centre of adult literacy work in Ireland. This means that rather than curriculum and approaches being formed by policy-makers or outside agencies, the curriculum is **formed by the students** in discussion with their tutors. Tutors facilitate the learning that the students wish to pursue by developing materials, approaches and structures that follow students' direction.

- **Flexibility**

There are no quick fixes in adult literacy, and a one-size fits all approach will not be successful. What is essential, as international reports recommend, is a **flexible student-centred and directed approach** which:

- is responsive to individual needs as mentioned previously,
- has a range of options for delivery including flexible modular formats,
- actively offers options to those who are hardest to reach, and
- provides personal and educational supports.

The capacity for flexible provision (flexible delivery, duration and intensity including face-to-face, blended and online learning) should be incorporated into the design of existing programmes such as [Skills to Advance](#), [Skills to Compete](#), the Back to Education Initiative and adult literacy and community education programmes to meet the student's needs. Flexible provision should also be incorporated into any new measures emerging from the 2021 budget package and beyond.

- **Relevance**

The strategy should be regarded as a **living document** that will be subject to regular monitoring as well as amendments (where appropriate). There should be a mid-term review in 2025 to take account of the strategy's progress, contextual changes and how literacy, numeracy and digital literacy evolve over time.

The way in which we work, learn, access and even interact with each other is constantly changing. People are now living longer, and therefore learning must be a lifelong process. Given longer life spans, emerging technologies, changing industries and work, the idea that education qualifications for someone in their early 20s can be sufficient to see them through their career no longer seems feasible. We are now in a world that necessitates people engaging in learning and upskilling throughout their lives.

Increasingly our international counterparts are focusing on the link between basic skills and a nation's **resilience**. For example, in the current pandemic, strong literacy, numeracy and digital literacy contribute to resilience as the public faces ongoing public health messaging, more services only available online and the need to identify misinformation and disinformation. This thinking fits with the 'capabilities approach' taken by other countries and outlined in NALA's recent report 'Literacy for Life'.<sup>10</sup> This approach would concentrate on **improving and tracking what people are actually able to do, their future capabilities and their capacity to respond** to external events and forms of change.

The new 10-year strategy must offer real opportunities for an individual to constantly improve the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills needed to participate fully in life and develop the changing skills demanded by society.

---

<sup>10</sup> [Literacy for Life](#): a Whole-of-Government approach for investing in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

## 2. Policy

The 10-year strategy should include five policy areas:

1. Literacy learning guarantee
2. Targeted paid learning leave
3. Whole-of-Government approach<sup>11</sup> and partnership model
4. Delivering literacy-friendly public services including plain language
5. Flexible, multi-annual funding

### 1. Literacy learning guarantee

The strategy should offer a **literacy learning guarantee** giving a learning entitlement for all adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs and or less than a QQI Level 4 qualification (Leaving certificate or equivalent). This would include increased hours, intensive and flexible tuition options, along with bite-sized learning programmes on areas such as shopping and money, attending health appointments or media literacy.

We have not quantified a specific duration of tuition for the guarantee. This will vary depending on a student's starting point and pace of progress. It should be noted that based on international research,<sup>12</sup> 550 to 600 hours of tuition is needed to become fully literate and numerate. In Ireland, the Return to Education<sup>13</sup> model of 270 hours tuition improved literacy, numeracy and personal development skills substantially. Some adults needed to do a second year on the Return to Education programme so flexibility is important depending on the student's needs. Tuition hours may also need to increase for students with language needs, specific learning difficulties or special needs. The guarantee should provide for free tuition to cover whatever is needed within Level 1 to 4 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to meet a student's needs, allowing for entry and re-entry to the system.

For any adult with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs who is on a social protection payment, there needs to be flexibility and clarity around conditionality for attending literacy learning programmes.

---

<sup>11</sup> See recent NALA report [Literacy for Life](#): a whole-of-Government approach.

<sup>12</sup> [Moser Report \(1999\)](#). Improving literacy and numeracy: a fresh start.

<sup>13</sup> [Return to Education](#) was a 270 hour course for Community Employment participants where attended literacy tuition in small groups for 9 hours a week over 30 weeks. It began as a pilot in 1999 and was expanded to every county. It continued until FÁS was disbanded in 2013.

## 2. Targeted paid learning leave

The strategy should introduce a **targeted paid learning leave** programme for employees with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs or less than a QQI Level 4 qualification. This intervention should be funded by the State and targeted at Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and community and voluntary sector organisations where the employer does not have the capacity to pay for this. In larger enterprises, employees with these needs should be released with pay to engage in learning.

## 3. Whole-of-Government approach<sup>14</sup> and partnership model

The strategy should ensure **all government departments have inter-related policies** and **action plans** and are working collaboratively towards the same goals. There should be a focus to involve the participation of all sections of society, reach those most in need and empower people and communities to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

The strategy should look at a **partnership model** where government and state agencies work with employers, trade unions, farmers, sporting and community and voluntary groups to implement this strategy.

## 4. Delivering literacy-friendly public services including plain language

The strategy should invest in and implement a **centrally-led programme of education and training on literacy awareness and plain language** in the public sector. The lead government department should co-ordinate this training and lead out on an awareness campaign of what it means to deliver a literacy-friendly service for both staff and the public.

A Whole-of-Government approach to the adoption of **plain language** is required to ensure that “All public service communication should be in plain language” (in line with current Programme for Government Commitment, June 2020). The Government should put the **Plain language Act** on the legislative agenda for 2021. In the last Dáil there were two plain Language Bills that were at the second stage in 2020.

---

<sup>14</sup> See recent NALA report [Literacy for Life](#): a whole-of-Government approach

Each government department should deliver a **literacy-friendly service** that takes account of and supports adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to access their services. Building on good practice to date, there is a need for all public sector organisations to take responsibility for ensuring that:

- Awareness of literacy issues informs their ongoing work with the public;
- Designated staff have attended literacy awareness and plain language training; and
- Printed and digital communications are adapted to plain language.

Some services are only available online, for example booking the Driver Theory Test. This service will need to consider what is in place where adults do not have the digital skills to book a test online. Organisations with a specific public education remit (such as consumer protection, media and financial literacy, health literacy, climate change and so on) should tailor their programmes to those with literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs, with the support of ETB, NALA and other services. This approach also applies to organisations outside the public sector, such as trade unions, workplaces, business, youth, sporting and farming organisations and community groups, and to those within the education and training system who are communicating with students and parents.

## 5. Flexible, multi-annual funding

The strategy should include **multi-annual budgetary allocations and flexibility** in the funding to allow agencies to reflect, revise work programmes and submit additional innovative actions and proposals that respond to emerging needs and opportunities. Unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs will not be solved in one budget cycle. Accurately identifying students and their needs, along with devising and delivering the appropriate responses will take time, continuous creativity and flexibility. For this reason, the strategy should also include an **innovation fund** as happens in other education sectors.

### 3. Participation and provision

Over the next 10 years, the strategy should **significantly increase the provision of literacy learning opportunities, access points, accessible services and providers**. The most disadvantaged adults need to be encouraged and offered opportunities to improve their confidence in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. This means reaching out to adults who require support, particularly vulnerable and marginalised groups and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The new strategy should provide them with personal development supports and learning opportunities tailored to their needs. The 10-year strategy should include the following measures under the following 3 areas:

1. Enhancing literacy and numeracy learning opportunities
2. Improving digital literacy
3. Removing barriers and offering supports for participation

#### 1. Enhancing literacy and numeracy learning opportunities

- **Enhanced investment and provision**

The strategy should provide significantly scaled up investment at Level 1 to 4 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), in addition to drawing on existing programmes and recently announced budgetary measures. There should be a phased approach to increasing funding, assuming that programmes and capacity will need to expand gradually if the strategy is to be successful in reaching the hardest to reach and the most excluded.

**Each Government Department will need to invest in relevant literacy, numeracy and digital literacy initiatives.** The overall investment in adult literacy should continue to be reviewed in light of demand, the level of success experienced and the innovation needed, so that funding can be increased if necessary in the lifetime of the strategy.

The strategy's **level of non-capital investment** should be in accordance with the Houses of Oireachtas Joint Committee's 2006 report on adult literacy<sup>15</sup> that proposed to quadruple the adult literacy tuition budget from €25 million in 2006 to €100 million in 2013 (7 years) with an additional €25 million for improving ancillary and support services.

Given the current adult literacy expenditure of €30 million per year, this would require **at least €120 million investment by 2027 for adequate resourcing in the Further**

---

<sup>15</sup> Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science (2006). [Fourth Report on Adult Literacy in Ireland](#)



**Education and Training (FET) sector alone.** These figures exclude the cost of promoting or providing digital literacy for those without an underlying literacy need. Furthermore, the €120m investment does not include capital spending or investment on literacy initiative from other government departments.

Ultimately, in the context of a greatly expanded FET service, capital needs will arise for the creation of new adult learning buildings. As a first step, every effort should be made to work in collaboration with other actors in the community to make full use of whatever learning facilities are available through other groups. State-funded schools and community premises should be required to make their premises available to the FET sector when they are not in use. This would be subject to suitability, service agreements and provision being made to cover the **additional costs associated with the use of school and community premises** outside of normal opening time to cover light, heat, care-taking, technical support and insurance.

The extra funding across the FET system, allied with refocusing existing programmes (such as Skills to Advance, Skills to Compete, Back to Education Initiative) towards those most in need, should enable learning opportunities for those at Levels 1 to 4 of the NFQ to be expanded significantly. The local adult literacy services will need **additional resources and staff for literacy development** to deliver a service that responds to and meets the needs of students.

The scale of **learning options** should be greatly expanded in a variety of settings across the community. The staffing structures within the literacy service in the ETBs should be reviewed to explore how best the future strategic needs of the ETBs can:

- Expand the existing literacy services in adult learning centres.
- Provide for an agile and mobile service in different locales outside of these centres.
- Supplement existing vocationally oriented programmes where the emphasis on basic skills may be lacking.
- Provide additional supports for students with a literacy or numeracy need who are struggling to progress within mainstream programmes.
- Engage in outreach, creating new partnerships, service agreements and innovative models of programme content and delivery.

- **Flexible provision** is needed offering:
  - short to intensive programmes at Levels 1 to 4 of the NFQ,
  - full-time or part time,
  - a range of settings,
  - classes in the day time, night time, weekends and summer time, and
  - distance and blended learning options.

**Family literacy, media literacy and critical thinking skills, financial literacy, health literacy, workplace literacy, ESOL** (English for speakers of other languages) should form part of the service offered in every ETB area. In addition, the scope for developing a national programme in climate and environmental literacy should be explored with relevant partners. The local centres should also offer **a drop-in literacy support service**, where it is not necessary to join or enrol in a class or course but where adults have access to a person to get help and support to perform specific literacy tasks.

Each ETB area should also offer a **continuum ranging from one-to-one tuition for those who do not want to or are not ready to join a group, to class groups offered by paid tutors and then progression to mainstream FET options**. The volunteer structure could play a useful role in this continuum.

The strategy should expand on **blended, distance and online learning options**. It can build on the current work and good practice happening in local ETBs and NALA's distance learning supports. For example, Learn with NALA supports students both directly and indirectly in their learning journey by providing:

- 1:1 personalised learning over the phone with expert tutors and learning support workers.
- Online learning between level 1 and 4 in reading, writing, maths and technology. Students can work towards and gain a qualification through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
- Learner workbooks, worksheets and resources to practise their skills and for use by centres and tutors to support learning.
- An online co-branded learning platform with content, RPL, QQI certification options and resources for use by centres in a blended learning context. Centres can use the platform in their own way (for certification, for RPL, for in-class learning, to reinforce learning outside of the classroom) as a resource to support their students.

Other blended, distance and online opportunities are needed to support **beginner readers** who are not able to or cannot access face-to-face services. The [Citizen Literacy](#) project in Scotland has developed and is currently testing an App to help adults learn to read. This is and will be available free to adults and might be a useful resource for adult literacy services in Ireland.

Peer-to-peer learning programmes should also be explored, for example, for young people who are unemployed or people who are homeless.

- **Assessment**

Many students with unmet literacy, numeracy or digital literacy needs do not engage or move on their needs until a key life event happens, such as unemployment, a job change, a promotion, the need to help with their children's learning or read health information. The strategy should allow for a **mechanism so that adults can regularly check their skills, and identify their needs**. They should then be able to avail of additional tuition or self-directed learning.

The [Learn with NALA](#) website offers potential in this regard. NALA and the ETBs are currently co-operating with partners in Norway and Malta on an EU funded CITO (Check in, Take Off) project to develop a skills checker and information app to assess students' skills and identify learning pathways available to them. On the Learn with NALA website students can work independently, use it as an ETB literacy student, or receive help on the phone from a NALA Distance Learning tutor. It is anticipated that the Learn with NALA platform will, over time, help adults to assess their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

- **Guidance**

An **expanded adult guidance service** and enhanced links with the employment services should be put in place. Both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)<sup>16</sup> and European Commission report on adult literacy<sup>17</sup> highlighted in Section 5, give a central role to guidance in ensuring adults with literacy needs are given information about where to go next to access learning options to meet their needs. As mentioned above the CITO skills checker tool could give adults an initial assessment of where they are at and refer them to an adult guidance service.

---

<sup>16</sup> OECD (2019). [Getting Skills Right](#) : Engaging low skilled adults in learning

<sup>17</sup> December 2016 [EU Council Recommendations on Upskilling Pathways](#): New Opportunities for Adults (Official Journal of the European Union 24.12.16 (2016/C 484/01)

- **Quality and co-ordination**

Reaching out to potential students where they are will involve a wide range of actors in programme delivery. At the same time, learning opportunities need to be provided within the context of QQI quality assurance requirements. Therefore, it is vitally important to ensure that there is **area based co-ordination of delivery** with the appropriate networks for professional development and sharing of best practice.

There is a need for a **programme development budget** to assist in the development of new courses and curricula, methods and materials – for example in climate and environmental literacy. Programme delivery should use holistic and creative approaches.

A programme of **professional development for literacy staff, underpinned by research, resources, models of best practice and evaluation should be offered**. This should include training of new tutors and volunteers, formally certified higher education long cycle qualifications incorporating flexible delivery and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) such as Waterford Institute of Technology's programme for literacy professionals and short courses, online and blended learning opportunities.

The strategy should promote a **learning culture** where resources and good practice are shared, and where the results of research and evaluation are widely disseminated and electronically accessible. There many examples of good practice, tools and systems in place across the sector. There is scope to collate and share access to tools and resources at a national level.

- **Accreditation**

**National certification** should not be mandatory as this might discourage those most in need. However **certified learning options** across a wide range of disciplines should be greatly expanded at Levels 1 to 4 of the framework. These should be available free, with the necessary **travel, meal and other allowances**, as provided in other education and learning programmes.

- **Family literacy**

The 2020 report on [Family Literacy Practices in ETBs](#) recommends:

- An **interdepartmental government group** on family literacy should be set up to steer the development of national family literacy policy. The group should be

representative of practitioners, community stakeholders and family literacy experts. There should be family literacy champions and the strategy should encourage the equality outcomes that intergenerational learning can deliver.

- **Collaborative family literacy partnerships** should be developed in order to facilitate a more systematic approach to family literacy. These would allow FET, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), public libraries and CYPSCs (Children and Young People's Services Committees) to develop provision that harnesses all their skills, resources and contacts with parents who will most benefit from family literacy initiatives. These core groups should meet with other stakeholders and develop a **local, needs-based family literacy strategy**. Other stakeholders will need to participate less frequently and as local circumstances dictate. The partnership building process should be financially resourced and supported.
- **Additional staff** should be employed in outreach, brokerage and development of family literacy provision in each ETB area.

- **Integrating literacy**

Literacy should continue to be integrated into FET programmes in line with NALA's research and guidelines<sup>18</sup> and training for staff on this issue should be provided.

The strategy should also promote and support **integration of literacy and numeracy development into all further and higher education curricula** (where appropriate).

There is also a need for sensitive reaching out to adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs currently in education and training in order to provide adequate supports.

- **Health literacy**

Four out of 10 adults (40%) have limited health literacy which means they may struggle with understanding their health issue and treatment options and may take their medication incorrectly. There are two angles to health literacy development:

1. **Delivering literacy-friendly health services**

- Raise awareness of the issue, extent and responses to health literacy amongst healthcare professionals and services.

---

<sup>18</sup> See more on NALA's integrating literacy work here <https://www.nala.ie/integrating-literacy/>.

- Support healthcare professionals to adopt literacy-friendly practices in their everyday work by offering training and support. The new strategy should ensure that short courses are available on good health literacy practices which are also linked to continuous professional development (CPD) for existing and emerging health care professionals.
- Ensure all health communication (written and oral) is in plain language.
- Review signage in hospitals and healthcare settings to be more literacy-friendly and in plain language.
- Create and share good practice to support a person's unmet health literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in healthcare services.
- Those involved in delivering the new strategy must work with partners in Sláintecare and Healthy Ireland to embed and expand health literacy initiatives, to support better health outcomes.

## 2. Supporting adults with health literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs

- Build individual empowerment to engage confidently with health services by increasing awareness of health literacy and promote the importance of asking questions. Develop a public video and campaign on asking questions for good health such as Ask Me 3®.<sup>19</sup>
- Provide health literacy courses for people, for example Well Now! course.<sup>20</sup>
- Build health literacy into adult education and training curricula.

### • Numeracy

Develop a specific **numeracy campaign** consisting of national, regional and local promotion on TV, radio, print and social media as well as new TV and radio series. It would look at numbers in life, for work, health and family and financial literacy. The campaign should include numeracy champions such as a sport or TV personality to front the campaign and work with partners such as employers and sports organisations. As part of the campaign, wraparound services should be offered such as phone tuition, website with activities, games, fun online QQI level 2 maths course where you can get an award.

---

<sup>19</sup> **Ask Me 3®** is an educational program that encourages patients and families to ask three specific questions of their providers to better understand their health. More information [here](#).

<sup>20</sup> Well Now! is a literacy-friendly health and wellbeing course and the guide is online [here](#).

## 2. Improving digital literacy

Digital literacy skills are increasingly essential in everyday life – for example we need these skills to book a flight or appointment, send emails, pay bills and scan items in the supermarket. As the COVID-19 pandemic made clear, we not only have a digital divide in access to networks and devices but also in ability and confidence.

To facilitate digital services and citizenship, we in NALA would like to emphasise that:

- Technology is constantly evolving and changing requiring all citizens to upskill, yet there is still a substantial portion of the population that **lack the literacy skills to engage digitally**. It is this cohort that we are most concerned with and recommend be the focus of the 10-year strategy.
- Significant **capital and educational investment** is required to support the over one million adults with unmet digital literacy needs. If this investment is not made, the Government will need to consider redesigning and resourcing public services so that adults at literacy Level 1 or less can access essential services and information.

Some adults with unmet literacy needs may first need to develop those skills before they can acquire digital literacy. Other adults may improve their literacy skills as they use technology. It is important that, for those with underlying literacy needs, their digital needs are met by relevant experts who are familiar with adult literacy and digital literacy.

We also note there are many adults with good literacy skills who do not know how to access and use every day digital literacy. The PIAAC survey<sup>21</sup> identifies 555,000 adults with a literacy difficulty, but up to 42% (1.3m people) as having low digital literacy. Given that the PIAAC survey was confined to those under 65, the real figure is higher. The NALA submission and costings are confined to those with literacy and numeracy needs (while addressing their digital literacy needs).

For those without an underlying literacy need, many schools, ETBs and community groups, as well as private training organisations, offer digital training to the general community, often as self-funded adult education programmes. COVID-19 has impacted severely on the delivery of these services.

---

<sup>21</sup> PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) 2012 [Survey Results for Ireland](#).



It is important that the strategy to expand digital learning for those without an underlying literacy need should not displace existing investment. Such services would need to be free for those without the capacity to pay (for example, job seekers, low paid, welfare recipients / dependants, pensioners) but continue to be available on a fee paying basis for others.

To achieve better digital literacy, the 10-year strategy should include:

- A **national promotion campaign** for digital literacy.
- Development of **programmes in bite size chunks** based on identified needs, for example, how to use a smartphone; set up and send an email; search the web; use word processing, spreadsheets, databases; photography; using social media and virtual meetings; online learning; and using the library online.
- **Expanding blended, distance and online learning** options, building on the current work and good practice happening in local ETBs and NALA's distance learning supports.
- A **national volunteer programme of mentors** (such as one to help people access online library services) could operate in a wide range of community settings.
- Establishing **IT clubs** in the workplace, in education and training centres, in libraries and community centres to expand digital learning.
- **More IT training places** being provided.
- Systematic **capital investment in ICT infrastructure** in FET centres should become the norm, allied with the capacity to offer laptops as required to students in need, perhaps on a loan scheme as has been recently piloted in the higher education sector and ETBs.

Extra funds will be needed to kick-start volunteer services (training of mentors, co-ordination, equipment, extra premises costs and so on) and to expand the scale of learning provision. Partnership and sponsorship with private sector IT companies should be pursued. Area based co-ordination will also be needed to organise and train volunteers/mentors, to identify provision and its focus, and to put students in touch with the opportunities available.

### 3. Removing barriers and offering supports for participation

There are many barriers to participation, such as lack of **childcare, elder care** and **transport** that should be overcome. A working group of relevant Departments and agencies should examine how this can be dealt with in the context of national schemes.

Where **specialist expertise, assessments, adaptive equipment** are needed, these should be provided to cater for students with special needs. There should be scope for the provision of laptops, tablets and or mobile devices to students in need. Partnerships with telecommunications providers should be explored and established.

The current extent and process of **data collection** for reporting to SOLAS has been highlighted as a barrier which can affect the development of trust and relationship building between a provider and a student. It has also become very resource intensive for providers. The process should be examined to see how its need and scope can be clarified for students and tutors and the data gathering process simplified.

#### 4. Promotion and awareness

The strategy should **raise awareness** of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy issues in Ireland for adults with unmet needs. Organisations providing goods, services and learning should tailor their programmes and services to cater for these needs. Individuals with these needs are often less aware of education and training opportunities and the strategy should **promote a range of learning opportunities** while raising awareness of society's responsibility to support everyone to achieve these goals.

The 10-year strategy should include:

- One '**big brand**' for the strategy, for example as was achieved by *Healthy Ireland*.
- **Promotion and awareness campaigns** at national, regional and local level that:
  - highlight the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy issues that adults may be experiencing,
  - encourage businesses and organisations to be aware of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy issues in the delivery of services and goods, and
  - promote local literacy services and opportunities, distance learning and community education services. This should be coupled with **regional and local awareness promotion on radio, TV, social media, public posters and outdoor advertising** giving the local contact points of the Education and Training Board (ETB) adult literacy services. Local campaigns should promote the learning opportunities that are available so that a person can see a match or fit between the service and their needs.
- Targeted promotional campaigns for certain **priority groups** such as Travellers, people who are homeless, long-term unemployed, employees with literacy needs, migrants for whom English is not the first language, lone parents, prisoners and ex-offenders, and adults with special needs to encourage them to return to learning.
- **Extra outreach staff and administrative support** to develop tailored responses to specific needs, such as family literacy, workplace literacy and community based literacy, literacy hubs in libraries and so on. Outreach is a vital element of the strategy as those not availing of the current service will be increasingly hard to reach,

and development time will be needed with a wide range of actors before suitable programmes can be initiated and implemented.

- **Outreach and collaborative partnerships** with youth services, employment services, employers, trade unions, farming, sporting and community and voluntary organisations should be developed to reach particularly vulnerable groups. This would assist with supporting and raising awareness of the issue, and being a referral point to other services.
- **Literacy champions** (people and organisations) to support and front new and inspiring promotional campaigns and new television and radio series. The series should be part of a bigger campaign offering additional services and supports.

## 5. Performance, research, monitoring, reporting and evaluation

The strategy should **use qualitative and quantitative research**, to ensure that goals, programmes and funding decisions are based on robust evidence and best practice approaches for those most in need.

All actions should be clearly identified, have assigned responsibilities and realistic resources and timescales. Activity must be monitored and evaluated across the various levels of the strategy. This means **developing indicators** and **setting measurable targets**, along with a robust data-gathering and reporting process, to monitor progress. All progress, cross-sectoral commitments and actions should be defined and quantified. There should be **systematic monitoring and evaluation** of implementation of the 10-year strategy, through an inter-agency committee.

In NALA's report, [Literacy Impact](#), we recommend the use of an outcomes framework for measuring the impact of improved literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.<sup>22</sup> Monitoring structures should use a range of **hard and soft indicators**, for example:

**Hard indicators:** achievement of national certification, progression to employment or further learning.

**Soft indicators:** improved engagement in civic and social activity, volunteering, better confidence, health and well-being, achievement of learning goals, benefits for family learning and improved financial and technology capability.

Given the time it takes to advance from one level of the NFQ to another (for example movement from level 2 to 3 is theoretically equivalent to a student completing three years full-time education at second level), it is important that the softer but vitally important benefits from programmes can be identified.

---

<sup>22</sup> NALA (2020). [Literacy Impact](#)

There is a need for **ongoing research and evaluation** on:

- **Benefits and costs**

The last Cost Benefit Analysis<sup>23</sup> in 2009 showed that expenditure on literacy training generates high economic returns. It also found that improved literacy was associated with a wide range of non-economic or social gains such as intergenerational effects, civic and cultural engagement and better health. There is a need for updated new cost benefit analysis.

- **People's needs**

The strategy should

- make provision to liaise with communities to carry out analysis to identify their needs, the most appropriate learning opportunities and support, their awareness and access to literacy supports, access and participation to activation training programmes and the resulting outcomes and areas of motivation and interest; and
- ensure comprehensive collection and analysis of data on people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in particular sectors, for example job seekers and employees in low paid, casual or precarious work and people not active in the labour market.

- **Teaching and learning**

The strategy should

- develop research partnerships to study how adults best learn to read and write and learn maths and investigate new and innovative ways to teach these skills.
- based on the research evidence, update initial tutor training and support ETBs in continuous professional development in this area.
- conduct an action research project to investigate the benefits and outcomes of a 270-hour intensive tuition model delivered in a number of ways (face-to-face, 1:1 and group, blended, online, distance and peer-to-peer). The evaluations would inform the optimal design and delivery for future courses.
- identify the need for new teaching modules for tutors on areas such as teaching beginner readers, numeracy, family literacy, digital and media literacy and climate and environmental literacy. The need for ongoing continuous professional

---

<sup>23</sup> NALA (2009). A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training: [Research report](#)

development (CPD) was identified in the SOLAS funded research on numeracy and family literacy.

- **Assessing needs and progress**

The strategy should:

- survey particular vulnerable and target groups such as Travellers and people with disabilities in the next Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies due to take place in 2021 (results due in 2023)
- include questions on adult literacy in the CSO Quarterly National Household Survey on Adult Education.
- in partnership with a third level institution develop a longitudinal segmented study of students who return to literacy learning and track the impact on the individual, family, community and society. This could be based on a model such as The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA).



## Section 3. NALA's contribution to the 10-year Strategy

NALA is privileged to be a partner in the development and delivery of the 10-year strategy and intends to engage in the following supportive and collaborative activities:

- Conduct research to inform promotion, best practice in teaching and learning, and to provide cost benefit analysis to evidence **investment** in adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy development and services.
- Promote national **awareness** campaigns to promote an understanding of literacy issues and encourage those with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to seek help.
- Enhance and resource the national **referral helpline** through which students can be referred to local ETB literacy services or to NALA's distance learning service.
- Promote **quality** by developing **models of best practice and resources**, providing **professional development** for tutors and volunteers and engaging in **research and evaluation**, through working in partnership with the Education and Training Boards and other agencies.
- Represent the **student voice** in adult literacy issues through its consultation and feedback fora.
- Promote the use of **plain language** across the public and private sectors to make information accessible to literacy students. This includes training for staff, plain language editing of documents, and promoting a plain language quality mark. Initially, as the strategy begins, it is expected that there will be increased demand for NALA training in this area for government departments and agencies and other organisations. However, over time, as trainers have been trained, the responsibility for leading a Whole-of-Government approach will increasingly rest with national departments and agencies. Other organisations will also, over time, have trained staff to deal directly with this need.

- Provide a **distance learning service** over the phone to meet the needs of adults who do not want to or cannot attend an adult learning centre at that time. NALA will continue to support those with literacy needs who want to learn at a distance and until such time as they are ready for face-to-face tuition. However NALA's role in the direct delivery of tuition to students is limited, and is aimed only at those for whom the ETB service is unavailable in their area or unsuitable to their needs. Where other gaps exist, NALA will work in partnership with others to address those gaps.
- Engage with our national broadcaster, RTÉ, and other **television and radio providers** to explore new programmes to promote and support adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. Work in collaboration with partners including the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) to develop new television and radio series.
- Operate the learning platform [Learn with NALA](#). The scale and scope of Learn with NALA will, subject to funding, continue to expand. It is a national resource for the adult literacy services. It is intended that the capacity for independent students to use the service to identify their own skills levels and to learn either alone or with support from the ETBs will continue to be developed.
- Continue to manage the website [www.helpmykidlearn.ie](http://www.helpmykidlearn.ie) and provide useful content to help parents learn with their child.
- Play a key role in **monitoring and evaluating** literacy, numeracy and digital literacy developments and in promoting best practice.

## Working in partnership

In the delivery of the 10-year strategy NALA will work in partnership with government departments, state agencies, social partners and civil society to ensure everyone in Ireland has the right to literacy.

### Government departments and agencies

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and SOLAS, the further education and training authority, will take the lead in co-ordinating the implementation of the strategy. Each government department will need to examine and as agreed with the Interdepartmental Stakeholder Group, revise its:

- **Investment** in relevant literacy, numeracy and digital literacy programmes or initiatives.
- **Communication** approach with the public to ensure that they are accessible to those with literacy and numeracy needs and those who lack digital literacy skills. This applies not only to the use of plain language, but also to the mode of communication. Podcasts, video, recordings and material in other languages may be needed. In spite of the move to online services, there are many in the population who are not in a position to avail of these, or who continue to experience connectivity problems. It is a huge barrier to individuals with literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs, that there has been an increase in the number of organisations who provide website and email contacts, but no phone numbers. An inclusive approach providing a range of options is needed.
- **Staff education and training** on plain language in public services. Each Government Department and state agencies should train staff on the use of plain language training, and ensure that learning is transferred throughout the organisation. For organisations with a specific education remit, such as financial literacy, media literacy, health literacy, programmes need to be adapted to be accessible to those with literacy needs. This could be done in partnership with ETBs, or with advice from NALA.

## Education and Training Boards

NALA sees the Education and Training Boards as the core adult literacy service and primary mechanism through which adult literacy services will be expanded. They will:

- Raise local **awareness** of programmes and encourage people to seek help.
- **Employ staff** for tutoring, brokering partnerships with community organisations and outreach work, with appropriate administrative support.
- Provide **continuing professional development** of literacy practitioners.
- **Work closely** with local employment services, area based partnerships, health services, community projects, library services and schools offering family literacy programmes.
- Develop **referral networks** linked to a wide range of statutory, community and voluntary organisations who can provide information on where those in need can get help.
- Provide of a range of **flexible programmes** including innovative programmes and testing new models and approaches.
- Recruit and train **tutors for one-to-one tuition** for those unable to take part successfully in a class group setting.
- Use the online learning platform **Learn with NALA** to optimum effect.
- Work in partnerships with others to widen the availability of learning options in **media literacy, health literacy, family literacy, financial literacy, workplace literacy, climate and environmental literacy** and other emerging and new literacies.
- Develop local relationships so local premises can be used more through service agreements, to enable literacy services to be expanded.
- Continue and expand the work of the **prison education programmes**.

- Develop enabling **progression paths** to mainstream FET options.
- Provide expanded **digital technology training**, based within the literacy services for those with a literacy and digital need and in the broader FET system for those who already have literacy skills.
- Support **area based co-ordination** to ensure that the quality assurance criteria of the QQI are met by providers.

### Community organisations, workplaces and private training providers

OECD advice is that the needs of hard to reach students are best addressed at the places vulnerable students frequent. This could be done through ETBs providing a **flexible service** to locales outside of the formal adult learning centres. It could be done through a service agreement under which ETB learning is provided in those settings, through other partnership agreements, or through, in some instances, direct provision by the community group or workplace. However, it is important that all literacy and digital learning providers be in a position to comply with the quality assurance criteria of the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI),

It is envisaged that **digital training** for literacy students will continue to be offered via the ETBs and their partners. For technology training for those with literacy skills, it is recommended that services are free for pensioners, the unemployed and welfare recipients or their dependants, and that a modest fee should be charged for the rest. This could be supplemented by IT clubs and community mentors who could demonstrate how to use particular aspects of technology in bite size chunks.

Trade unions and employers can play a key role in supporting the development of **workplace learning**. Workers with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs are most at risk of skills obsolescence, of unemployment, of being replaced by automation, or of having their job outsourced. An upskilled workforce is a more productive workforce, with social and economic benefits for the surrounding community. Regional or sectoral training should also be encouraged.

## Public spaces and library services

Learning through unstructured interaction has increasingly been recognised as central to innovation, and the role of public spaces of various sorts in promoting learning and innovation has been argued to be crucial.<sup>24</sup> Alongside the ‘high end’ world of innovation in the spaces of universities and high-tech regions are local, friendly and less intimidating worlds of learning in **public spaces** – with, for example, libraries potentially playing a key role. Programmes such as the Communiversity,<sup>25</sup> for example, build on participation in libraries to create paths to third level education.

The new public library strategy 2018-2022<sup>26</sup> will promote literacy supports and provide space for adults to learn and develop. The Right to Read national programme is working with many partners, including NALA, to promote literacy and reading development for people of all ages and backgrounds. The new 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy should have **libraries** as a key working partner.

## Civil society and other groups

Wickert and McGuirk discuss a number of cases in Australia where partnerships among community organisations, service providers and educational institutions enhanced community learning.<sup>27</sup> These partnerships are built around projects that were primarily focused on social service provision. Ireland’s large community and voluntary sector makes this an important potential pathway to literacy improvement.

The strategy should develop existing and new partnerships through organisations such as:

- Pobal and the range of programmes it supports such as Local Development Companies, Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP).
- Family Resource Centres
- Money, Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) and National Traveller MABS
- Community and voluntary sector organisations
- Structures such as Public Participation Networks (PPN) and Local Community Development Committees (LCDC)

---

<sup>24</sup> Lester, R. and M. Piore, 2005. *Innovation: The Missing Dimension* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Barter, D (2018). “How the Communiversity introduces people to higher education” RTE Brainstorm, January 2018.

<sup>26</sup> [Our Public Libraries 2022](#), Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities.

<sup>27</sup> Wickert, R., and McGuirk, J. (2005). *Integrating Literacies: Using Partnerships to Build Literacy Capabilities in Communities*.

## Section 4. Conclusion

Literacy changes lives and benefits individuals, society and the economy. Research has shown that the positive impact of further education carries beyond individuals, families and into communities – a ripple effect that produces broader social benefits.<sup>28</sup>

Ireland needs a new vision for the next decade to support people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs. This requires investing in people who have not benefited from our education system during bust or boom. A new strategy needs to be prioritised and aligned more precisely with policies and strategies across different government departments. Finally, this requires new thinking and solutions to support adults through a Whole-of-Government strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

A new strategy and vision and working collaboratively together will ensure all adults have the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for today and the future. Investing in adult literacy and lifelong learning is investing in people and communities and will help build a more equal, more resilient and happier society. Investing in literacy provides individuals with an intrinsic human right.

NALA appreciates the opportunity to contribute to and collaborate with SOLAS on the development and implementation of this important and transformative strategy.

---

<sup>28</sup> Duckworth V. and Smith R. (2019), Transformative Teaching and Learning in Further Education



## Section 5. Appendices

### The importance of literacy

For those of us who picked up literacy skills relatively easily, we may take it for granted how and where these skills serve us in our lives as social beings. Language and literacy allow us to connect with others and with structures that play a large part in our daily lives. Literacy allows us to be fully included in all types of social practice. Without literacy skills we, and those who depend on us, may miss out on much of the richness of life to which language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are the key. Think about people who do not have strong literacy skills and ways in which life can be limited where education did not serve them well.

From the outset, it is important to outline and explain the principles from which NALA works. NALA believes that literacy is necessary to enable people to lead their lives to the full.

The European Pillar of Social Rights states that ‘everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market’. This identifies literacy as a right and necessary to access other human rights. People with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are restricted in accessing services, taking part and seeking promotion in work, accessing lifelong learning opportunities and participating fully in society.

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

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

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

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

## Defining literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

Literacy is a life skill that involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate, access services, and make informed choices.

Literacy is relevant to all parts of life and should be addressed in different ways, in different settings for different purposes.

The definition of literacy is changing as the concept of 'literacies' becomes more widely understood. This concept recognises that there are different literacies associated with different areas of life. The ways people use literacy, for example, in technology, at home, in a learning environment, as part of a social or sports club, or in our community life, varies enormously. If a person needs to develop confidence and skills, in particular aspects of literacy, it does not mean that they have difficulty with all of the basics. Equally, if a person has a qualification, it does not always mean that they have high levels of literacy. Some will have left school confident about their numeracy and reading skills, but they find that changes in their workplace and everyday life make their skills inadequate as the literacy demanded by society is in constant flux. Some adults who have not used their literacy for a number of years lose confidence and skills.

Literacy is a part of lifelong learning and it enables adults to develop personally, become increasingly empowered and engage fully in modern life.



## **NALA defines literacy, numeracy and digital literacy as:**

**Literacy** involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communication; it also has personal, emotional, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, to explore new possibilities and to initiate change.<sup>29</sup>

**Numeracy** involves the use of maths ideas effectively. 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.<sup>30</sup>

It is a life skill that involves the competent use of mathematical language, knowledge and skills and the confidence to manage the mathematical demands of real-life situations.<sup>31</sup> Numerate adults have the confidence to manage the mathematical demands of real-life situations. For example, everyday living tasks (shopping, paying bills), work-related settings and in further education. Numerate adults are able to make effective choices in today's evolving technological and knowledge-based society.

**Digital literacy** is a life skill that involves 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.<sup>32</sup>

Digital literacy are used in everyday life – we need them to book a flight, send emails, pay bills, scan items in the supermarket and connect with others. These digital skills require a minimum level of literacy and numeracy. The OECD says: “Given that text-based and numeric information occupies a considerable portion of the digital world, access to that world depends not only on information and communication technologies (ICT) skills but also on basic proficiency in literacy and numeracy. In other words, the digital divide may also reflect a literacy and numeracy divide.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> NALA (2012). [Guidelines for good adult literacy work.](#)

<sup>30</sup> NALA (2018). [A review of adult numeracy policy and practice in Ireland.](#)

<sup>31</sup> NALA (2012). [Guidelines for good adult literacy work.](#)

<sup>32</sup> NALA (2020). [Literacy for Life.](#)

<sup>33</sup> OECD (2016). [Skills Matter: Further results from the survey of adult skills.](#)

## Extent of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs

Ireland ranked in 17th place in adult literacy and 19th in adult numeracy out of 24 countries in the most recent international adult skills survey – Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).<sup>34</sup> Almost 6,000 adults aged between 16 and 65 participated in the survey.

Below are the results from the survey based on the population numbers from the Census 2016. The population between 16 and 65 in 2016 was 3,100,259.<sup>35</sup> There were also 637,567 adults 65 and older who were not part of the adult skills survey.

| Adult Literacy Survey results <sup>36</sup>                                                                                                                                                                              | Number of adults |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>One in six (18%) of the adult adults struggle with reading and understanding everyday text. For example, reading a bus timetable or understanding medicine instructions.</li></ul> | 554, 946         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>One in four Irish adults (25%) has difficulties using maths in everyday life. For example, basic addition, working out a bill or calculating percentages.</li></ul>                | 793,666          |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>42% of Irish adults struggle with basic digital tasks such as looking up a website or sending an email.</li></ul>                                                                  | 1,302,108        |

Note: the majority of people who have difficulties with digital literacy have underlying literacy issues.

---

<sup>34</sup> CSO (2013). [PIAAC 2012](#) - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results from Ireland.

<sup>35</sup> Central Statistics Office (CSO) Census 2016 data.

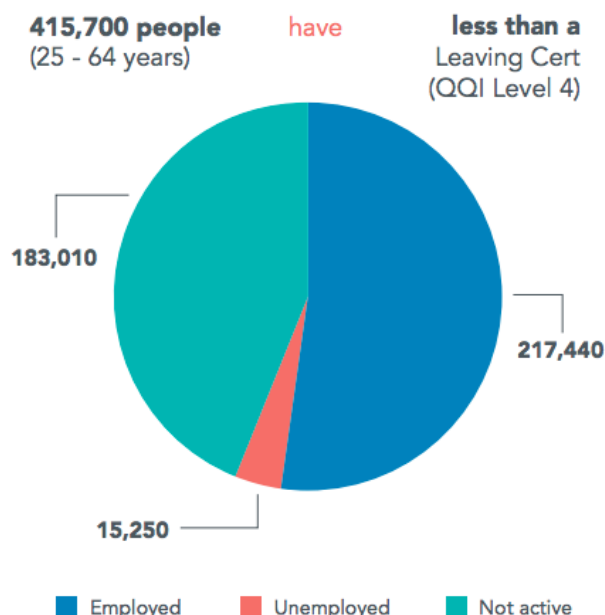
<sup>36</sup> CSO (2013). [PIAAC 2012](#) Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: Survey Results for Ireland.

According to Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) the results showed that in Ireland adults between the ages 25 – 34 have the highest literacy score while adults aged 55 – 65 years have the lowest score. Similar for numeracy adults aged 25 – 34 have the highest score while adults aged 55 – 65 have the lowest score.

Recent data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO)<sup>37</sup> shows us there are currently 415,700 people (aged 25 to 64) who have less than a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 4 qualification (equivalent to a Leaving Certificate).

These include:

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



## The cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

Unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs costs everyone – our society, economy and environment - financially and democratically. The cost of unmet literacy and numeracy needs to the global economy is estimated at £800 billion<sup>38</sup> (€936 billion). Low literacy costs individuals in terms of less life chances and the economy in terms of increased costs for public services and social transfers every year.

Strong literacy, numeracy and digital literacy allows citizens to engage effectively with public institutions, understand and act upon new information and policy changes; use technology; and advocate for themselves and their communities in relation issues like climate change, access to public services. With better skills, people can retain current employment seek new and better employment opportunities, especially as job markets change.

<sup>37</sup> CSO (2019). [Education Attainment Thematic Report 2019](#).

<sup>38</sup> World Literacy Foundation (2018). The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy.

## Literacy and equality

Literacy is a barometer of **equality**. Equal societies are happier, healthier and wealthier. Adult learning and education (ALE) promotes “sustainable development, healthier societies, better jobs and more active citizenship.”<sup>39</sup>

However only some members of our society have the literacy they need to flourish and thrive. Those who do not have the literacy they need are more likely to be from communities that lack resources.<sup>40</sup> Having unequal access to the literacy that is needed to develop our full potential can have a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities.

NALA frequently hears from adult literacy students that their unmet literacy needs mean they experience low levels of **confidence**. They tell us this prevents them from realising their full potential. Social exclusion is a high cost to the individual. It also means that communities are deprived of strengths and resources from which they could benefit. We are all interdependent. One person's educational neglect impacts on us all. It is important to note that many adults returning to education bring with them a lot of emotion. That emotion can come from negative experiences in school or their difficult life experiences. These often need to be acknowledged before progress in learning can be made.

People with higher levels of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy, are more likely to have better health and a longer life, be employed and earn better incomes.<sup>41</sup> Research also shows us that these skills are linked to positive outcomes such as volunteerism and greater participation in the community.

Wilkinson and Pickett state that: “greater equality is the gateway to a society that is capable of improving the quality of life for all of us.”<sup>42</sup> Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are part of the solution to creating a more equal and resilient society.

---

<sup>39</sup> UNESCO (2016). 3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education.

<sup>40</sup> Feeley, Maggie (2007) 'Redefining Literacy from an Egalitarian Perspective', *The Adult Learner* 13-25.  
European Literacy Policy Network (2016) Literacy in Ireland: [Country Report](#), Short Version. EU: ELINET.

<sup>41</sup> OECD (2013). Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills.

<sup>42</sup> Wilkinson R. and Pickett K. (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*.

## Literacy needs during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people struggled with understanding and accessing information, including key messages about public health information and employment supports. For the over half a million Irish adults with literacy needs, it was especially challenging.

Latest statistics show that COVID-19 has impacted most on workers who have experience of educational and wider inequalities resulting in a lack of educational qualifications. NALA also spoke with many parents who themselves experienced unmet literacy needs. Without access to technology resources or digital literacy, they struggled with supporting their children's learning during lockdown. These inequalities were further compounded by the closing of the library network, except to its online users. Literacy services have made every effort to continue to provide tuition for those in class group settings.

COVID-19 has brought to the fore that finite definitions of literacy, numeracy and technology skills are not fit for purpose. Rather the focus should be on **what an individual needs** from time to time to engage effectively with social and economic life. For example, while there has been a concentration in the past on developing students' knowledge of basic computer applications (word processing, spreadsheet, email and internet), new needs have now emerged in using technology for meetings, for virtual learning, for keeping in touch with family and friends, for taking part in religious services. In addition, more internet banking, ordering groceries online rather than by phone, online tax returns and applications for social welfare, and online interviews for jobs are becoming an increasing feature of everyday life. Sources of misinformation and disinformation have multiplied as have the frequency of financial scams. A basic understanding of digital technology, media literacy and financial security issues have become a necessity across the general population.

This pandemic has shed a light on the pivotal importance of strong literacy, numeracy and digital literacy and **exposed multiple inequalities**. We are living in an information age that requires understanding of how to access and understand health messages and government information about changing behaviours to keep us safe. We are accessing more services over the phone and online and using critical thinking skills to combat misinformation and lies. It is not good enough that one in six Irish adults struggle with these skills and we welcome the development of a 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy to address this.



## Literacy needs among particular groups

From research and anecdotally we know that unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs are more prevalent among particular groups. We do not have enough up to date data on these groups and their literacy needs. NALA recommends that **collecting data, identifying needs and targeted responses** should be a key element of the new 10-year strategy.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, marginalised groups, such as Travellers, migrants and lone parents, have continued to experience high levels of disadvantage. AONTAS reported that they have seen a “significant reduction in this group participating in education, particularly accredited programmes at the early levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (Levels 1-3).”<sup>43</sup> Recent research from AHEAD looked at the biggest challenges learning from home for students with disabilities. One person said:

“I have severe dyslexia and all this online stuff is just going absolutely nowhere for me I’m confused I don’t know what I’m reading I’m not taking any information in whatsoever! I’m really struggling and feel like I’ve missed out a lot”

### Traveller community

For the Traveller Community the literacy issue is even more stark with an estimated half of Travellers having poor functional literacy.<sup>44</sup> UNICEF states that Travellers are still falling between the cracks, with the vast majority of Travellers left education before Junior Certificate level.<sup>45</sup> Pavee Point’s submission to the Oireachtas Special Joint Committee on key issues affecting the Traveller community<sup>46</sup> highlighted the grave educational disadvantages experienced by Travellers including:

- Only 13% of Travellers complete secondary education in comparison with 92% of the general population.
- 28% of Travellers leave school before the age of 13, compared to 1% of general population.
- The majority of Traveller children (67.3%) live in families where the mother has either no formal education or primary education only.
- Half of Travellers have poor functional literacy.

<sup>43</sup> AONTAS article, 12 October: [AONTAS Calls for Immediate Action to Address Educational Inequality](#)

<sup>44</sup> Department of Health (2010) [All Ireland Traveller Health Study](#). Dublin: Department of Health.

<sup>45</sup> UNICEF Report Card <http://bit.ly/2XCWWND>

<sup>46</sup> Pavee Point (2019) [Submission](#) to the Special Joint Committee on key issues affecting the Traveller Community: Education



## Incarcerated persons

41% of incarcerated people in Ireland left school before the age of 14.<sup>47</sup> As a result of educational and wider inequalities, the average literacy level of prisoners is much lower than the general population. The Prison Adult Literacy Survey<sup>48</sup> from 2003 showed 52.8% of adults surveyed were at literacy level 1 or below. At the time this was more than twice the level of low literacy of the general population (22.6%). The survey also showed they had very poor attendance at school, they disliked it and they left school at the first opportunity.

“People who stay on the landings need to take drugs to survive it, but education can be a way of stopping that.”

The Prison Education Units and Education and Training Boards (ETBs) deliver literacy, numeracy and other education services to people in prison. During the last two years, NALA has been involved in projects aimed at building the literacy skills and confidence of men who are imprisoned.

“Some people won’t go to the prison’s Education Unit to ask for help, but they will come to us.”

NALA was involved in a recent project with Portlaoise Prison’s Education Unit and Laois and Offaly ETB to develop a peer-to-peer literacy ambassador programme. The project involved the students raising awareness of literacy among their peers. They promote how literacy can help build confidence, support relationships, health and general feelings of wellbeing. The literacy ambassadors said that they gained a lot through their participation in the programme. They felt it helped them share the love of learning they had developed during their time in prison.

“Us doing this work is breaking down the stigma about literacy.”

<sup>47</sup> Irish Times article, 5 October 2020: [Highest education level for half of prisoners is Junior Cert or less - CSO](#).

<sup>48</sup> Irish Prison Service (2003). [The Prison Adult Literacy Survey](#): Results and Implications.

## Women

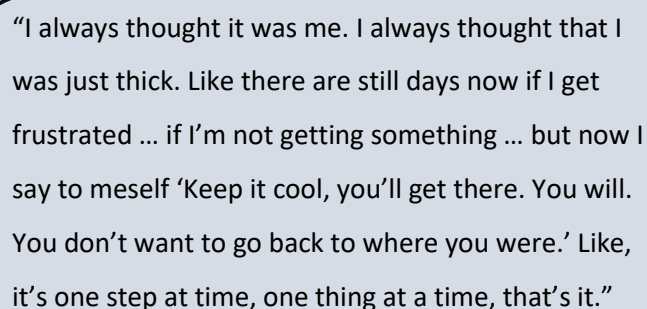
While the adult skills survey shows no statistical difference between the score of males and females on the literacy scale, on the numeracy scale males score higher than females by 12 points. 67,000 adults attended local literacy services in 2019<sup>49</sup>. On average over a number of years, the NALA Distance Learning Service worked with 45% female and 55% male students. In 2019, we had a drop with 33% women working with us however, in 2020 so far we have a greater number at 59%.

Literacy can disproportionately effect women, particularly due to lack of childcare and eldercare. Women are more vulnerable to COVID-19–related economic effects because of existing gender inequalities. Some analysis about the current pandemic has shown a greater impact on women due to the increasing burden of unpaid care, which is disproportionately carried by women. NALA believes that there needs to be further research into the different effects on women and men of having low levels of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

## People who are homeless

There is limited research specifically on the literacy needs and practices of people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness in Ireland. A study from Australia<sup>50</sup> found that homeless people negotiated literacy demands in their lives by tapping into various networks in which they belonged. Within these networks were people who assumed the role of “literacy broker” and whose skills and knowledge were called on to assist.

NALA has recently worked with homeless agencies to support their staff to deliver and integrate literacy development into their work. In a recent NALA research report,<sup>51</sup> we interviewed adults learning in education programmes delivered by a homeless agency and they said:



“I always thought it was me. I always thought that I was just thick. Like there are still days now if I get frustrated ... if I’m not getting something ... but now I say to meself ‘Keep it cool, you’ll get there. You will. You don’t want to go back to where you were.’ Like, it’s one step at time, one thing at a time, that’s it.”

---

<sup>49</sup> SOLAS (2020). [Annual Report and Accounts 2019](#).

<sup>50</sup> Castleton, G. (1998). Examining the accounts of homeless people’s needs to determine a role for language, literacy and numeracy training.

<sup>51</sup> NALA Research Report (2018). [What’s in it for me?](#) The benefits of engaging in adult literacy learning in Ireland.

## **People with disabilities**

Adult literacy services must be inclusive, respond to the needs of students and accommodate people with disabilities. This means removing barriers and providing individual support in discussion with the person and maybe their family or support agency.

## **People with intellectual disabilities**

In 2018, NALA published a revised edition of Guidelines on the inclusion of adults with learning disabilities in literacy services.<sup>52</sup> These revised guidelines are for providers of adult literacy and numeracy services. They suggest broad elements of a strategy that each service can adapt to their particular situation. Literacy and numeracy provision for adults with intellectual disability is usually delivered in small groups, on site and in centres using a lifelong learning approach. For example, using public transport, shopping, making, phone calls (listening and speaking).

## **The needs of English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) students**

In the absence of a national ESOL strategy, ESOL provision has developed organically, on a part-time basis, dependent on the initiative of ETB providers, and in response to demands at local level.

The 2018 SOLAS report<sup>53</sup> on English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants makes a number of recommendations including devising a national framework for publicly funded ESOL provision for adults within the broader context of the Further Education and Training Strategy. It also calls for developing an ESOL plan with targets and building the capacity of providers to scale up the availability of ESOL learning opportunities.

---

<sup>52</sup> NALA (2018). Guidelines on the inclusion of people with [intellectual disabilities](#) in adult literacy services.

<sup>53</sup> SOLAS (2018). [English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants](#).

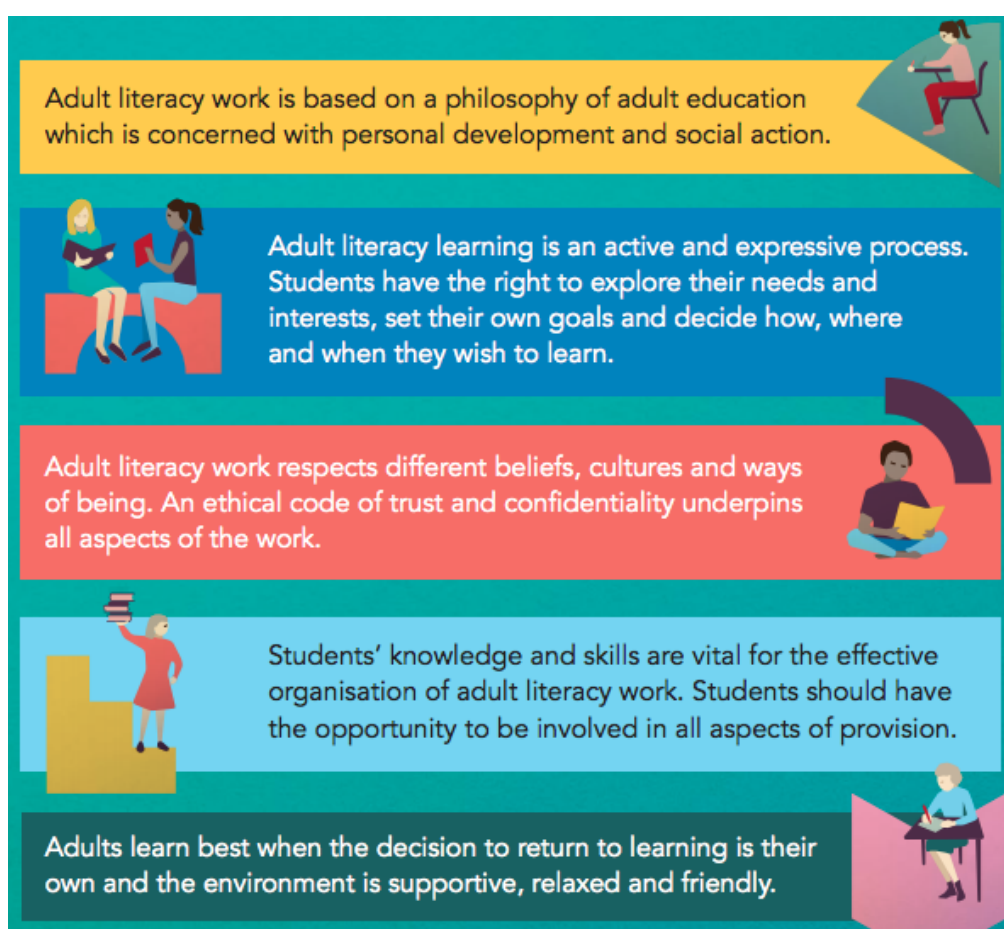
Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1-3 in ETBs.

## Good adult literacy work

Adult literacy work in Ireland is developing and evolving all the time to meet the changing literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills we need. It is based on a philosophy of adult education that is concerned with **personal development** and **social action**. Adult literacy learning is an active and expressive process. Students have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how, where and when they wish to learn.

Adult literacy work respects different beliefs, cultures and ways of being. An ethical code of trust and confidentiality underpins all aspects of the work. Students' knowledge and skills are vital for the effective organisation of adult literacy work. Students should have the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of provision. Adults learn best when they are successfully motivated to learn and the environment is supportive, relaxed and friendly. These values are drawn from the Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work and should be reflected in the 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy.

Adult literacy work is based on five principles.<sup>54</sup>



<sup>54</sup> NALA (2012). [Guidelines for good adult literacy work](#)

## Learning care and relationships

It was clear early in the adult literacy movement that because many students had poor experiences of education in the past, the **learning approach** had to be very different and based on the voices and views of the students themselves. Students continue to emphasise the fear they feel about returning to learning because of past experiences and their low **confidence** about learning when they first return.

Learning is not only cognitive but also emotional and relational. Good adult literacy practice includes **learning care** and this can make a huge difference to the learning journey and progress of the student. Examples of learning care include:<sup>55</sup>

- forming and maintaining good learning relationships;
- following up with students who miss class and trying to support them back to learning;
- creating warm, adult friendly and welcoming places to learn;
- devising individualised learning programmes; and
- working like literacy detectives looking for clues and solving challenging learning situations.

Adult literacy services and practitioners use time, effort, emotion and skill to learn about the adults they meet. They actively work to undo past damage and create new more positive learning stories and identities. This learning care work must be recognised, respected, and resourced in terms of the time, effort, and the skill it requires.

## Student voice and agency

NALA is a membership body and includes literacy students in all areas of its work. Since we were set up in 1980, we have ensured that the views and experiences of adults with unmet literacy and numeracy needs guide and inform the quality of our work, and are heard and taken into account by our stakeholders. We do this work through:

- Student members on our Board;
- A Student Sub-committee [of the Board];
- A Student Development Fund;
- Annual Student Days; and
- ensuring student advocacy is a key element in our strategic plans.

---

<sup>55</sup> Feely, Maggie (2014). *Learning Care Lessons: Literacy, Love, Care and Solidarity*.

NALA uses its annual student days to gather and share students' views and satisfaction with the FET programmes and to contribute to policy and new approaches.

As part of our consultation for this submission, we consulted with our members, many of whom are students, and our Student Sub-committee. We also reviewed student feedback and comments from student days and student fund reports and incorporated their points into our submission.

### **Key points raised both at Student Days and in Student Development Fund from feedback 2014 – 2019**

- **Tutors** have a **vital role** in all aspects of literacy and numeracy education.
- We still need to **build awareness** of adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in society.
- People need **clear information** about how to get help with literacy as an adult.
- Students need **good support** at all stages of learning.
- Adequate and reliable **funding** is essential.
- Tuition and accreditation must be **voluntary**.
- Adult literacy students are very interested in meeting, building a sense of community and **being involved** in all aspects of literacy provision.
- Students' emphasis on **technology** as part of literacy is increasing each year.
- **Plain language** is very important.

### **Student agency**

We recently looked at overcoming barriers to accessing services and students identified some issues including:

- The importance of the ethos of person-centred learning. For example, not every student is ready to join a group. There is huge value and necessity for one-to-one tuition for participants with very low skills who are unable to survive in a class group setting.
- The benefits of learning centres not being too formal. Students regularly comment on the importance of the first meeting they had with an Adult Literacy Organiser.
- New systems and processes in place are turning some people off returning to learning and need to be better explained. For example, the **Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) form** which asks for personal information such as PPS number. It is not always clear where this information is stored, the purpose and who has access to it.

## Key recommendations in recent international reports on literacy

### OECD 2019 Getting Skills Right: Engaging low skilled adults in learning

The report identifies mega trends such as new technology, growing automation, population ageing with longer working lives and the need to avoid skills obsolescence, globalisation involving complex skillsets and interpersonal skills and more off-shored work, and the growth of non-standard work. It identifies low skills as being (a) below Level 2 in PIAAC and (b) those with less than upper secondary education.

The report recommends

- **Reaching out to adults in the places they frequent**, including workplaces, family learning, community and mobile settings. Work with the actors that have established links with these groups, and build their capacity to encourage the take up of learning opportunities
- **Developing holistic advice and guidance services** specifically targeted at the low skilled, setting up one stop shops and partnerships with other organisations. Ensure guidance services are trained to tailor their offers to individual needs.
- **Creating interesting and relevant learning opportunities** that are practical, problem oriented and closely linked to user's needs (for example, work), adult friendly, modular and flexible. Include blended learning. Make learning enjoyable.
- **Recognising existing skills through flexible and modular accreditation and RPL.** Use employers to raise awareness of recognition procedures and guidance services to help adults through the procedures. Provide adults with micro credentials that they can combine to achieve a full qualification. Give adults the opportunity to choose modules from different types of provision to create their individual learning path.
- **Giving people time off to participate in learning** – for example, the right to education and training leave by law or by agreements with employers. Compensate students and employers for income foregone, either partially or in full. Include provision for non-standard employee relationships, notably the self-employed.

- **Providing financial support for all costs of training.** This includes direct costs, indirect costs and compensation for lost income / benefits. Inform adults about the supports available. Provide targeted financial incentives for low skilled adults that steer their training choices towards skills in demand.

The December 2016 EU Council Recommendations on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults<sup>56</sup> recommended that member States offer all those with less than upper secondary education the opportunity to acquire a minimum level of literacy numeracy and digital competence and/or a wider set of skills for lifelong learning, social participation and participation in the labour market, by making progress towards an EQF Level 3 or 4 qualification (IR L4 and 5 /upper secondary).

It proposed a 3-stage approach:

1. Skills assessment to identify existing skills and needs
2. A tailored and flexible learning offer and
3. Validation and recognition, including RPL and the opportunity to gain credit on a modular basis.

---

<sup>56</sup> December 2016 [EU Council Recommendations on Upskilling Pathways](#): New Opportunities for Adults (Official Journal of the European Union 24.12.16 (2016/C 484/01))



## New vision and approach

Ireland needs a **new vision and approach** for the next decade to support people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs and prioritise the **furthest behind first**.<sup>57</sup> This will help towards building an equal, resilient and happier society. Increasingly our international counterparts, who are successfully addressing the skills divide, have taken a more holistic and cross-departmental approach,<sup>58</sup> which NALA believe, would work in Ireland. This marks a slight departure from previous work and national strategies that focus primarily on addressing literacy, numeracy and digital literacy only in primary, secondary education, and some further education and training settings.<sup>59</sup>

People's lives and society have changed drastically in the last year during this pandemic. Even before that, the tradition of attending a face-to-face class on a set day or time was changing. People have adapted to connecting and learning more using technology. NALA has had students ringing our Freephone looking for very specific help with one skill area and that was all they needed at that time. So one of the new ways we need to design literacy supports for adults is to **meet people where they are at** – the “just enough, just in time” model.

## Joining forces

It is time to join forces and come together with the Government (national and local), state agencies and organisations, employers, trade unions, civil society and communities to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy over the next 10 years.

Currently NALA is working bi-laterally with nine government departments and their agencies on policies aimed at building literacy and numeracy competence across a number of areas including health, community and finance. However, there is no **coordination** or **alignment** of this work across departments. Interdepartmental work that might happen often depends on the knowledge and goodwill of people working in different sections or areas. This new 10-year strategy gives us an opportunity to coordinate, share and align to maximise our efforts to improve and support adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

---

<sup>57</sup> [Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

<sup>58</sup> See the [Letter to Parliament](#) about ‘Joining forces for a higher skill level in the Netherlands 2020-2024’.

<sup>59</sup> More details about current adult literacy programmes in [Literacy Now](#): The cost of unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in Ireland and why we need to act now. NALA (2020).

## Government Departments with policies involving literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Education and Skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Action Plan for Education Framework 2016–19</li> <li>– FET Strategy 2014–19</li> <li>– National Skills Strategy</li> <li>– Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland</li> <li>– The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020</li> </ul> | <b>Health</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Healthy Ireland</li> <li>– Health literacy policy and implementation (Health and Wellbeing Directorate)</li> <li>– Sláintecare: Action Plan 2019</li> </ul>                   | <b>Communications, Climate Action and Environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Digital Skills for Citizens</li> <li>– Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and the Media Literacy Network</li> <li>– Sustainability Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020 and the Voluntary National Review (VNR)</li> </ul> |
| <b>Children and Youth Affairs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Family literacy in DEIS schools</li> <li>– School completion programme</li> <li>– First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028</li> </ul>                                                                                                       | <b>Business, Enterprise and Innovation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Action Plan for Jobs</li> <li>– Workplace literacy in particular around sectors identified by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs</li> </ul> | <b>Employment Affairs and Social Protection</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– NESC jobless households report and low skills trap</li> <li>– Pathways to Work</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Finance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Competition and Consumer Protection Commission on Financial Literacy</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <b>Justice and Equality</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Prison and probation literacy supports</li> </ul>                                                                                                               | <b>Rural and Community Development</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Right to Read Library Strategy</li> <li>– Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                             |

UNESCO emphasises how countries **need more policies and strategies that integrate literacy within a holistic, cross-sectoral, lifelong and life-wide perspective.**<sup>60</sup>

Bringing all these Departments and agencies together and taking an interdepartmental approach would allow for greater cohesion, bring opportunities for innovative development, enable people to share current and best practice and be more strategic and cost effective.

<sup>60</sup> UNESCO (2019), UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) Draft for On-line Forum Consultation. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

## Literacy for Life

A recent NALA report [Literacy for Life](#) suggests that a new policy framework concerning the different forms of literacy should go beyond focusing solely on literacy as a skill.

Literacy is a human right and is necessary and beneficial to individual wellbeing and society as a whole. It is 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.



We believe a new framework should include:

- A **cross-departmental and holistic approach** to adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy policy;
- A **monitoring framework** for adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy across policymaking bodies; and
- **New outcomes and indicators** for the impact of adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning. NALA's recent report 'Literacy Impact'<sup>61</sup> presents an outcomes framework based about eight domains.

The new framework would facilitate a **joined-up policy approach** across multiple departments while retaining the link between improved literacy, health, critical thinking, job market participation, productivity, and alleviating poverty.

## Collaborative partnerships to support literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

We use literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in everyday life in various ways and forms. If we want to meet the person where they are at, then we must offer varied opportunities for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy support alongside face-to-face tuition. This pandemic has catapulted most people into the world of video technology and local education and training services have responded extremely well to this. Therefore, in designing a new strategy for improving adult literacy, we need **collaborative partnerships** working cohesively together to achieve stronger literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for all adults.

---

<sup>61</sup> NALA (2020). [Literacy Impact](#)

## Accessibility and provision of literacy services

SOLAS's Annual Report said that 67,000 adults attended local literacy services in 2019.<sup>62</sup> This is an increase of 2,000 in 2018. However it is less than 10% of those with unmet literacy needs.

Over the years in Ireland we adopted measures to increase the number of individuals accessing adult literacy services, but there remain fundamental obstacles to access for many people with unmet literacy and numeracy needs. We know the “context” of adult literacy programmes is equally as important as the programmes themselves and drop out and retention rates are another concern.

As the proportion of adults in the population with higher education qualifications continues to rise, and as the changing environment demands an increasingly complex mix of skills, those with lower literacy and education levels fall increasingly behind. The OECD PIAAC Survey of Adult Competencies 2013 showed that in Ireland only 28.3% of participants with a literacy level below Level 1 participated in education or training in the year prior to the survey. The figure for those with the highest literacy levels (Level 4/5) was 75.3%. This trend was mirrored across the countries surveyed. In the CSO Adult Education Survey 2017, only a quarter (24.7%) of those who had a primary level of education or below participated in lifelong learning whereas 71.7% of those with a higher education honours degree did so. Furthermore, across Europe, the Continuing Vocational Training Survey indicates that 40% of those who took part in training were offered essential health and safety training only, rather than the type of programme which would help them prepare for the future of work.<sup>63</sup>

For the 10-year strategy to be effective, a sea change in investment levels is needed, prioritising those **furthest behind first**. At present, those who need to access education and training the most, benefit the least.

There are no quick fixes in adult literacy, and a one-size fits all approach will not be successful. What is important, as international reports recommend, is that a **flexible student-centred and directed approach** is adopted.

---

<sup>62</sup> SOLAS (2020).

<sup>63</sup> OECD (2019). [Getting Skills Right: Engaging low skilled adults in learning OECD 2019](#)

## Section 6. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

NALA is a registered charity and a membership organisation with 2,300 members. We are committed to making sure people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can access their human right to literacy, fully take part in society, and have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs. The term literacy embraces literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

NALA's work includes:

- Representing the **student voice** in adult literacy issues through consultation and feedback from its membership fora, student committees, student events, student days and a student development fund.
- Promoting national **awareness** campaigns to promote an understanding of literacy issues and encourage those with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to seek help.
- Providing a national **referral helpline** through which students can be referred to local ETB literacy services or to NALA's distance learning service.
- Campaigning for **investment** in adult literacy services through lobbying policy makers.
- Promoting **quality** by developing **models of best practice and resources**, providing **professional development** for tutors and volunteers and engaging in **research and evaluation**, through working in partnership with the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other agencies.
- Promoting the use of **plain language** across the public and private sectors to make information accessible to literacy students. This includes training for staff, plain language editing of documents, and promoting a Plain language quality mark.
- Supporting organisations (including public services, health services and community and voluntary sector) to deliver a **literacy-friendly service**.
- Promoting and adding new content on [www.helpmykidlearn.ie](http://www.helpmykidlearn.ie) – a website aimed at parents to give them ideas for learning with their children.

NALA provides a **distance learning service, Learn with NALA**, which supports students both directly and indirectly in their learning journey by providing:

- Freephone line with instant support from 9.30 am to 5 pm on Monday to Friday.
- 1:1 personalised telephone learning support and tutoring where a team of 13 of expert tutors provide literacy learning over the phone for a minimum of 30 minutes per week. This service is provided during 9am-9pm, 5 days a week with an out of hours services available by arrangement.
- [Learn with NALA](#) (LWN) online learning platform that is available as a national resource for:
  - adult literacy students throughout the ETB literacy service,
  - independent students, and
  - those using the system with support from NALA's distance learning service.

The platform offers online learning between level 1 and 4 in reading, writing, maths and technology. Students can learn in their own way – independently, with support from a NALA tutor or in a registered partner centre. This empowers students to improve their skills and confidence, gain a qualification and get recognition for their skills through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

- An online co-branded learning platform with content, RPL, QQI certification options and resources for use by centres in a blended learning context. Centres can use the platform in their own way (for certification, for RPL, for in-class learning, to re-inforce learning outside of the classroom, as a resource) to support their students.
- Learner workbooks, worksheets and resources to practise their skills and for use by centres and tutors to support learning.
- Online, blended and face-to-face professional development opportunities for practitioners through events, workshops, webinars, resources, guidelines and standalone online courses.
- Online, blended and face-to-face training opportunities for organisations and public services to support their awareness and skills in providing literacy friendly services through resources, guidelines, training and standalone online courses.

In 2019, 220 students benefited from tuition over the phone and 1320 students got Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) certification through the combined distance learning service. In 2020, 454 students benefited from tuition over the phone and 250 students got certificates.

## Contact details

**Colleen Dube**

**Chief Executive Officer**

Email: [cdube@nala.ie](mailto:cdube@nala.ie)

Phone number: 01 412 7900

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

Sandford Lodge

Sandford Close

Ranelagh

Dublin 6

Website: [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie)



**nalairreland**