

# Learning for work

The benefits of improving  
literacy, numeracy and  
digital skills for work



**NALA**

National Adult Literacy Agency  
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

# About this research

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This research shows the benefits to adults of taking part in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills learning, and the benefit of this learning for their work and personal life. The research was commissioned by the National Adult Literacy Agency in 2019.

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The views expressed in Learning for work are not necessarily the views of NALA.

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## List of abbreviations

DLS – Distance Learning Service

FET – Further Education and Training

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

NALA – National Adult Literacy Agency

NEETS – Not in education, employment or training [young people]

NFQ – National Framework for Qualifications

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland

PIAAC – Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

PRSTRE - Problem-solving in technology-rich environments

SfW – Skills for Work

SOLAS – An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UP – Upskilling Pathways

## Executive summary

Research tells us that engaging in lifelong learning can generate a range of possible benefits to the individual, to society and to the community. These benefits can manifest themselves in increased self-confidence and self-esteem, positive family interactions, improved health and increased wellbeing (UNESCO, 2016). Benefits of learning can also be realised through gaining qualifications and employment skills, including increased earnings and opportunities (NALA, 2020a).

The primary objective of this research is to add to the knowledge base on the benefits of taking part in lifelong learning, to the working lives of adult learners.

## Research methodology

The research adopted a mixed-method approach to study the benefits of engaging in literacy and numeracy tuition among adult learners. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques was used and included:

- An online survey that was administered to and completed by 22 adults using the NALA Distance Learning Service.
- A focus group discussion was carried out with three men taking part in the Skills for Work Programme.
- An interview with a Distance Learning Service learner
- Focus group with an employer and Skills for Work coordinator.

## Main findings from the research

### • Findings from the online survey

Most of the survey respondents were aged 45 – 54 years of age, and over half had completed lower secondary education. Slightly more men than women took part in the survey.

The main findings from the survey were as follows:

- The predominant reasons for joining the DLS was to help to upskill for a job or to help the respondents get a job

- Significantly, nearly 60% of the learners reported that their literacy or numeracy needs had stopped them going for the job they wanted
- Even more significant is the finding that eighty five per cent of the learners reported that they have turned down a promotion or training opportunity due to their literacy and numeracy needs
- The biggest reported benefit to returning to education was an increase in confidence, particularly in the work place.

### **Main findings from the Skills for Work interviews**

- The employer reported that there are many benefits to the company from its participation in the SfW programme. Primary among these is that a significant number of the workforce are now familiar with the technology that is used on the factory floor
- The employees have increased their technical skills, and the employer has also noticed an increase in their overall confidence
- The SfW programme has provided some workers with an opportunity to return to education that they may not otherwise have had or availed of
- The employees report that they are more adept and confident at using technology on the factory floor

### **Main findings from individual interview with distance learning service learner**

In this vignette the learner relates how her journey back into education had enabled her to pursue her life-long ambition of getting a job in an office. The benefit of engaging in adult learning was felt keenly in her work life but it also had a positive impact on her personal life including an increase in her self-confidence. It has reinforced in her the importance of updating her skills and the belief that anything is possible regardless of your age, background and educational attainment. In fact, she sends a clear message to employers to take into consideration skills that are beyond those provided by an education qualification, for example, hard work, perseverance and the will to succeed.



## Recommendations

NALA aims to improve outcomes for adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties in Ireland by using research to show why literacy matters to Irish society and to campaign for further investment in raising adult literacy levels in Ireland. We believe these findings are of significance to practitioners and policy makers and employers and will inform current debates and strategies on the importance of improving basic skills among the Irish population and highlight the important role that adult learning plays in this.

### As a next step we suggest

- The need to carry out carrying out a large scale research project that will build on the findings from this report. In particular the role adult literacy services can play in upskilling and training of people with literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs.
- The need to map existing workplace education and training activities to help establish what more needs to be done to support the development of workplace education and training through;
  - Promotional activity
  - The curriculum
  - Continuous Professional Development (CPD) assessment
  - Accreditation and quality assurance
- The impact of COVID 19 on the Irish economy and labour market is not fully known. With this in mind we recommend that SOLAS convene an advisory group, to include education and employment stakeholders, to drive further developments in workplace education practice and provision.

# Introduction

This report presents the findings from research, carried out in 2019, on the benefits to adults of engaging in lifelong learning – in particular, adult literacy and numeracy learning, and the benefit of this learning for their work lives. NALA maintains that the workplace is one of four main areas that are central to counteracting the long-term effects of poor literacy. The other areas are health, the family and the community (NALA, 2020).

NALA notes the potential ‘life-wide’ outcome of engaging in lifelong learning and how it can positively impact a person’s work aspirations. (NALA, 2020b). This point was also emphasised in recent family literacy research where learners engaging in lifelong learning reflected on their further development opportunities “I want to go back to work now. Something like this has really helped my language development and I have also learner a lot about what other courses are available for me” (SOLAS, 2020)

In Ireland, there are gaps in our knowledge as to the benefits of adult learning. Over recent years, the National Adult Literacy Agency’s (NALA) research projects have captured literacy and numeracy practices among practitioners and have recorded views and experiences of adult learners. Our research findings convey the message that learners are reporting major transformation and achievements in their learning experience, and they attribute this to their participation in adult education .

With this research NALA seeks to add to the knowledge base on the benefits of taking part in lifelong learning, in particular benefits to the working lives of adult learners. The views adult learners hold about returning to education, their educational needs and their expectations are of keen interest to NALA and one of the primary reasons for carrying out this research.

As part of this research we garnered the views and experiences of:

- 23 adults learners in the Distance Learning Service (DLS) delivered by NALA; and
- three adults taking part in the Skills for Work Programme (SfW), the employer and the SfW coordinator. The Skills for Work Programme is aimed at providing educational training opportunities to help employees deal with the basic skills demand of the workplace.

With these learners, we explored:

- The perceived benefits of engaging in adult literacy and numeracy tuition;
- Their views on the benefit re-engagement has had on their working lives and their overall well-being.

We also discussed the benefits of the Skills for Work Programme with the SfW employer and the SfW co-ordinator in a factory.

## Research methodology

The research adopted a mixed-method approach to study the benefits of engaging in literacy and numeracy tuition among adult learners. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques was used and included:

- an anonymous online survey,
- a focus group with the SfW learners,
- a 1:1 telephone interview with an adult learner engaged in NALA's Distance Learning Service, and
- a mini focus group with an employer using the Skills for Work Programme and a coordinator of a Skills for Work Programme.

### Anonymous online survey

A questionnaire, using Survey Monkey, was administered to adults using the NALA Distance Learning Service (DLS). This method was deemed to be the most appropriate way to garner the views of distance learners, given the requirement for

confidentiality and anonymity. The learners completed the questionnaire with the help, where required, of their DLS tutor. The questionnaire included demographic questions, and questions about their educational attainment and their employment history.

Learners were also asked to identify their reasons for returning to education, the main benefits of returning, and to identify the areas in their lives where education had the greatest benefit, including their overall well-being, and in particular their working lives.

### **Focus groups and individual interview**

The focus groups and individual interview discussion with adult learners were semi-structured and covered the same topics as in the survey. The discussions allowed us to explore in detail the views of the learners as to the benefits of engaging in adult literacy and numeracy tuition, and where in their lives it has had the greatest benefit, including the areas outlined above. Throughout the report, we illustrate the views of the learners using quoted excerpts. To maintain learners' confidentiality, we attributed quotes as follows:

- Adults learning in the Distance Learning Service (DL learner)
- Adults learning on the Skills for Work Programme in a mini focus group (SfW learner, FG)
- Employer using the Skills for Work Programme (Emp)
- Skills for Work coordinator (SfW Co)

### **Research participants**

A total of 26 adult learners, one employer and one SfW coordinator took part in the research.

- The online survey was administered to and completed by 22 adults using the NALA Distance Learning Service.
- A focus group discussion was carried out with three men taking part in the Skills for Work Programme.

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- An interview with a Distance Learning Service learner
- Focus group with an employer and Skills for Work coordinator.

## Limitations of the study

This research sought to elicit the views and experiences relevant to this particular group of participants, including adult literacy learners. As with any study, care should be taken in generalising the results of this research to all adult literacy learners. The study size is relatively small, and there may be bias in the type of learner who was willing to participate in the research. This research is a starting point and we would argue raises the need for further study in this area.

## Finally ...

The adults who took part in the research described the benefits they experienced from returning to education. Their accounts provide an invaluable insight into the impact that engaging in adult literacy and numeracy tuition has had on many areas of their lives, but in particular their work lives.

NALA continues to work to raise awareness among the general public, employers and policy makers of the benefits of improving basic skills to the individual, society and the economy. By capturing the views and experiences of adult literacy and numeracy learners, we suggest that this research will contribute to this vital work.

# Section one: Setting the context

## Overview

This section presents the context in which we conducted our research into the benefits of lifelong learning in the work environment. This context starts with this overview and then provides a snapshot of international and national research on the area.

In Ireland, the debate at policy and strategic level acknowledges the importance of lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where science, technology, engineering and mathematics play an ever increasing role in our lives. Recent national skills strategies have highlighted the need for a highly skilled workforce and an active engaged citizenship. The strategies have placed an emphasis on increasing the proportion of population holding a level 3 qualification.

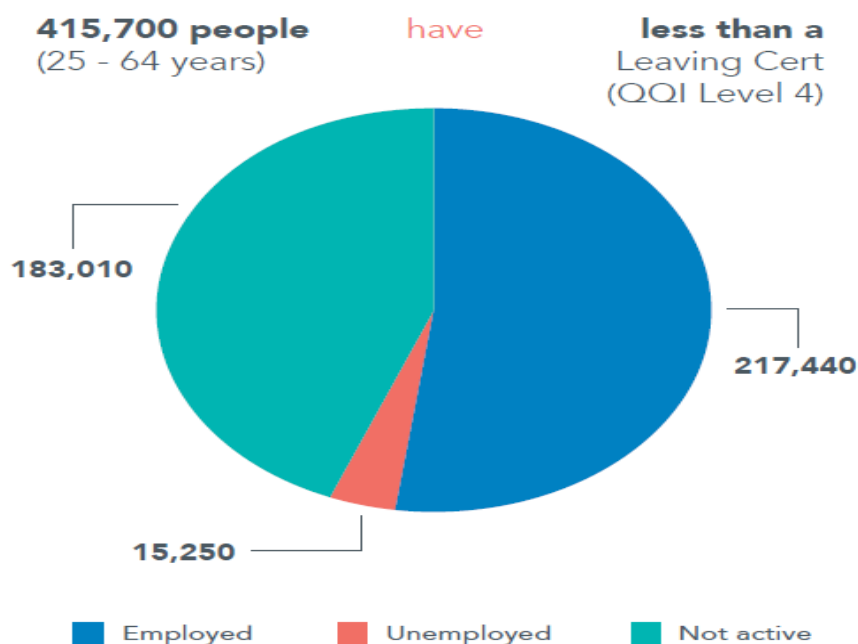
Central to the debate is the necessity to develop policies in which literacy and numeracy are promoted as skills vital for the development of an informed and active citizenship base. Low literacy, numeracy and digital skills impact on social well-being, social participation, financial security and work opportunities (Geiger et al, 2016; Kelly et al. 2012a; Kelly et al. 2012b; Bynner and Parsons, 2006; Paulos, 2000).

Research suggest that the world of work is becoming more complex and uncertain (UNESCO, 2016). As a result, adults with literacy and numeracy need support to acquire new skills to meet the changing demand of the labour market. Unmet literacy and numeracy needs are a serious concern, and, for the Irish economy to grow there is a need for a skilled workforce across all sectors. Skills in the broadest sense refer to what a person 'knows, understands and is capable of doing' (SOLAS, 2018:p5).

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are also changing the types of skills people need in the workplace. Occupations and economic sectors are being impacted to a greater or lesser extent by these new technologies and so called 'lower skilled' workers may struggle to find work in this new environment. The OECD has stated that basic literacy and numeracy skills are of increasing importance, both as a support for further learning and because of growing technical requirements in the workplace (OECD, 2014).

A basic level of literacy and numeracy is essential for even minimal engagement in society as a citizen, consumer, parent or employee (OECD, 2013). Unmet literacy and numeracy needs are associated with negative social and economic outcomes. These outcomes include lower wages and a higher probability of unemployment both short and long term. In relation to the labour market, literacy and numeracy are key factors which shape individual life chances and their impact is critical for employment, earnings and training expenditure (Kelly et al. 2012a; Kelly et al., 2012b).

Recent data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2019) indicates that there are 415,700 people aged 25-64 who have less than a Quality and Qualifications (QQI) Level 4 qualification. This includes 217,440 (52%) employed people.



*People of working age with less than an upper secondary qualification (QQI Level 4 - equivalent of a Leaving Certificate). (NALA, 2020a)*

Having a literate and numerate population is necessary to promote the prosperity of a country and the social well-being of its people. Numeracy is a key factor that contributes to individual life chances and its impact is critical for good health, favourable labour market opportunities, participation in family and community life and active citizenship. In the following section, we briefly review international and national policy and developments in the area of adult education.



# The international context

## A New Skills Agenda for Europe 2016

According to **A New Skills Agenda for Europe** (2016), Europe faces a basic skills challenge. People need a minimum level of literacy, digital and numeracy skills in order to participate fully in society and access good jobs. It suggests that policies that focus only on increased educational attainment are not sufficient and that the relevance and quality of what people learn must now take centre stage. The Skills Agenda is centred around three key work strands:

- Improving the quality and relevance of skills formation;
- Making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable; and
- Improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices (EC, 2016, p:2).

The Skills Agenda proposes that with the right skills people are equipped for good quality employment, and, equally as important, can fulfil their potential as confident active citizens. The role of social partners, including education providers, employers and learners themselves will also play a central role in the successful delivery and implementation of the Skills Agenda. To develop key competencies and skills and to build resilience, the Skills Agenda proposes that formal education and training should equip everyone with the skills that allow for meaningful social inclusion, personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship and employment (EC, 2016, p:5). The publication has placed an increasing focus on literacy and numeracy interventions for low skilled adults.

## Upskilling Pathways

**Upskilling Pathways** (UP) is the main legislative proposal of the New Skills Agenda for Europe. It aims to help adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills. It also helps adults obtain a broader set of skills by progressing towards an upper secondary qualification or European Qualifications Framework level 3 or 4

depending on national circumstances. UP targets adults with a low level of basic skills. These adults may be in employment, unemployed or economically inactive. UP allows for member states, taking into account national circumstances, available resources and existing national strategies, identify priority target groups. Adults with low levels of basic skills have access to UP in three key steps:

1. Skills assessment
2. Learning offer
3. Validation and recognition

Successful implementation of UP will require the active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders including social partners, education and training providers, employers, libraries and local and regional authorities. These will all play a key part in the successful delivery of the UP initiative and in ensuring outreach, guidance and support throughout the overall process.

## The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2012

PIAAC 2012 assessed the proficiency of the adult population in literacy and numeracy in 24 countries and regions. Carried out by the OECD, its primary objective was to collect information relating to adult skills in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments (PSTRE). These three areas reflect adult skills beyond those captured by measures such as educational attainment, literacy and numeracy. Their inclusion in the PIAAC signalled an important departure from previous measures of reading, writing and arithmetic which have been used to describe the skillset of the international labour market. They have also been analysed to understand a range of social, economic and health outcomes in individual countries. The PIAAC shows that low proficiency in literacy and numeracy can impact on acquiring basic IT skills.

After the PIAAC findings were published, the OECD also published ‘follow on’ reports and work that focused on different aspects of the PIAAC data. These reports focus on proficiency in the three domains of literacy, numeracy and PSTRE. Selected highlights from these publications are outlined below.<sup>1</sup>

## Selected highlights from follow on reports from PIAAC

### Characteristics of adults with low proficiency levels

Information from the reports provide comprehensive information about the characteristics of adults with low proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy.

- Age proficiency peaks at around 30 years.
- Gender gaps are more pronounced in numeracy skills with men scoring higher than women.
- Parental education exerts a significant influence on their children’s proficiency as adults in both literacy and numeracy. Adults with higher proficiency have greater chances of being employed and earning higher wages and enjoying good health. Adults who scored at lower proficiency levels were more likely to report poor health, are less likely to have trust in others, feel they have little impact on the political process and volunteer less often or not at all (OECD, 2016).

### Participation in adult education

The data argues that there is an assumption that due to lack of confidence or past negative experiences of education, adults with low proficiency levels are less likely to participate in adult education. The findings show that this is not confirmed by the data. Thirty per cent of this group participates in adult learning and another eighteen per cent wanted to but did not start. The data suggests that there are identifiable barriers to non-participation including time constraints and costs. In order to support literacy and numeracy skills development, more attention needs to be given in Further Education and Training (FET) policies to promote and foster engagement and participation in literacy and numeracy practice (Grotluschen et al, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of these reports are available to download from the OECD website

### **Impact on earnings and employment outcomes**

Across OECD countries, the data shows that literacy and numeracy skills narrow the labour market outcomes gap between individuals with different levels of education, but do not close it completely. In terms of the optimal point of investment for labour market returns, improvement in literacy, numeracy and ICT skills at low and intermediate levels demonstrated the greatest earning gains. Numeracy had an increasingly important earnings impact at tertiary level. Similar results were demonstrated in relation to employment (Lane & Conlon, 2016).

### **Educational attainment**

Educational attainment was the strongest and most consistent predictor of low literacy, numeracy and PSTRE in this study. However, increasing educational attainment alone may not fully ensure an adequate level of proficiency in all three adult skill domains. The OECD has recently highlighted that, although initial vocational training at upper secondary level provides useful skills, in many jobs where skills demand is fast-growing such basic vocational training is no longer enough. The OECD further notes the need for strong qualifications (prepared with the involvement of employers), guaranteed possession of a relevant skillset upon completion, effective career guidance for students based on good data about the labour market outcomes and clear pathways from the vocational programmes to higher and academic education (OECD, 2014).

## The Irish context

### Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025

The National Skills Strategy 2025 recognises the importance of all levels of education and training as integral elements of a framework for lifelong learning and skills development. This starts at early childhood provision, through school years and in learning beyond school (DES, 2016).

The National Skills Strategy 2025 sets out how it will support the development of a well-educated, well-skilled and adaptable labour force. Lifelong learning will be promoted and supported alongside skills development in the workplace. The Strategy's intent is to ensure that Irish people use and develop their skills through civic participation and sustainable employment. However, there is still a challenge to increase the number of people with NQF level 3 qualifications. This figure stands at 15.4% nearly double the 2020 target of 7%. The Strategy proposes that lifelong learning and skills development is a shared responsibility between the State, employers, citizens and FET providers.

### PIAAC – results for Ireland

A total of 6,000 adults aged 16 and older participated in PIAAC in Ireland (2012). These participants had varying levels of proficiency in literacy, numeracy and PSTRE. The percentage of the sample at each proficiency level is summarised in the table below. The shaded area indicates the subsample of adults that scored at or below level 1 and at level 2.

**Table 1: Percentage of adults at each literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology rich environments level in Ireland**

OECD literacy levels:	Below Level 1	At Level 1	At Level 2	At Level 3	At Level 4	At Level 5 (highest level)
Literacy	4.3	13.2	37.7	36.2	8.1	#
Numeracy	7.1	18.2	38.2	29.0	7.0	0.6
PSTRE	18.7	43.8	32.9	4.7	-	-

Source: OECD (PIAAC), 2012. Note: # indicates less than 1% (rounds to zero).

The Irish results from PIAAC show that one in six adults (18%) has literacy skills at or below level 1 and that one in four adults (25%) of adults has numeracy skills at or below level 1. This score ranks Ireland 19<sup>th</sup> out of 24 participating countries.

### Analysis of the PIAAC data

**A snapshot of low proficiency in the Irish labour market** (NALA, 2013) describes the results of the PIAAC survey from the Republic of Ireland in relation to specific aspects of the labour market. This report specifically focusses on low literacy, numeracy and PSTRE within this context and in terms of skills-based occupation classifications and employment based occupational status.

A summary of the main findings showed that:

- Women respondents had significantly higher odds of: low numeracy in all occupations (except elementary occupations); low PSTRE in skilled and semi-skilled (white collar) occupations; and low literacy in elementary occupations.
- Older respondents had significantly higher odds of: low numeracy in all skilled and semi-skilled occupations; low PSTRE in semi-skilled (white collar)

and semi-skilled (blue-collar) occupations; and low literacy in all skilled and semi-skilled occupations.

- Respondents with a higher level of educational attainment had significantly lower odds of low literacy, numeracy and PSTRE within all occupational classifications.
- Within skilled occupations, public sector employees had significantly higher odds of low PSTRE proficiency compared with those in the non-profit sector.
- Within semi-skilled (white and blue collar) occupations, private sector employees had a significantly higher odds of low numeracy proficiency compared with those in the non-profit sector.
- Within semi-skilled, white collar occupations, service worker, shop or market salespeople had significantly higher odds of low literacy, numeracy and PSTRE compared with clerks.

The results highlighted that low proficiency in these key skills is predicted by age and gender, particularly within skilled and semi-skilled occupations. While the measures used in PIAAC reflect adult skills beyond those captured by previous measures of educational attainment, this report also illustrates the consistent role of formal education in the literacy, numeracy and PSTRE skills base of the adult population in Ireland (NALA, 2014).

### **Skills use and requirement in work**

- **About 10% (9.9%) of all respondents state that they are not challenged enough in work**
  - 8.8% of men and 10.9% of women
  - This proportion increased from 5.9% among respondents aged 24 or younger to 14.6% of respondents aged 55 and older
  - This proportion is greater among respondents with lower secondary education or less 14.8% compared with 9.0% of respondents with tertiary level – Bachelor's degree

- **Almost a quarter of all respondents (24.6%) report that they need more training**
  - Similar proportions of men 24.4% and women 24.8%
  - This proportion reduces from 23.9% among respondents aged 24 or younger to 16.5% of respondents aged 55 and older
  - This proportion increases from 17.2% of respondents with lower secondary education or less to more than 25.9% among respondent with any form of tertiary education
  
- **A small proportion of all respondents (6.5%) report that a lack of ICT skills affects their career**
  - 7.2% of men and 5.9% of women
  - This proportion is greater among respondents aged 55 and older 9.5% compared with 4.6% of respondents aged 24 or younger
  - This proportion is highest among respondents with lower secondary education or less 14.2% compared with 4.9% or less among respondents with any form of tertiary education
  
- **Unemployed (have not worked in the past 5 years)**
  - 18.8% report that they need more training and 5.9% report that a lack of ICT skill affects their career

## **Moving from Welfare to Work: Low Work Intensity Households and the Quality of Supportive Services**

According to recent National Economic and Social Council (NESC) research, the percentage of people living in households where no one is working **or** where there is minimal attachment to the labour force is higher in Ireland than in most other European countries (NESC, 2018,p:ix). The report suggests that these households experience high poverty rates, there is a long lasting negative impact on children in these households and there are significant costs to the State in order to support the households. The report also found that many people feel that they have no choice but to take part in activation or training programmes on offer to them and some felt



that there were not enough place on sought after courses with good labour market potential (NESC, 2018)

### Main findings from Moving from Welfare to Work

The main findings from the research found that

- There is a need to develop a stronger focus on the household by continuing work to expand activation supports to adult dependents, people with a disability, and carers who wish to enter employment.
- Co-ordination needs to improve and this requires stronger links between the employment support services and employers, and between the wide range of services to support jobless households. Resources for co-ordination need to be provided; and
- The intensity of support to ensure effective outcomes should increase, particularly for those most distant from the labour market, such as lone parents, people with illness/disability; and those with literacy difficulties, poor English, no work experience or contacts, a history of addiction or time in prison.

### Findings for education and training

For Further Education and Training, the report points to the need for:

- Financial support to cover the full costs of those in jobless households attending education and training, including childcare and transport;
- Improving career guidance provision and ensuring it is consistently available;
- Upskilling the low skilled in employment, making greater use of the National Training Fund and Skillsnet(our national agency for workforce learning);
- Stronger links between training and the labour market, by linking training resources to skills needs, and involving employers more in curriculum development, work placement and recruitment;
- Reducing early school leaving further by providing more alternatives to school-based education;

- Supporting disadvantaged groups with higher education qualifications to access appropriate employment; and
- Further research on why people who undertake multiple training courses do not progress to employment.

### The report's recommendations

The main recommendations from the report are:

1. Tailored supports to help more vulnerable groups to progress. Vulnerable groups include Travellers, African migrants, lone parents; people with an illness or disability; those with literacy difficulties, poor English, no work experience or contacts, a history of addiction or time in prison.
2. More **intensive** literacy and numeracy education is required for those with low literacy levels, as well as vocational literacy supports to ensure better access to employment and training.

### The role of further education and training

Future FET: Transforming Learning The National Further Education and Training Strategy (2020-2024) is aimed at transforming learning over the lifetime of the strategy. The strategy is based around three strategic pillars:

- Building skills;
- Fostering inclusion; and
- Facilitating pathways.

The central premise of the new strategy is that FET is for everyone especially those who will benefit from its provision including:

- The school leaver;
- The lifelong learner;
- The employee looking to upskill;
- The marginalised who want to reengage in education; and
- The employers and the communities which FET helps to serve.

According to the SOLAS strategy the FET system must continue its efforts to address the significant base of adults with and numeracy needs in Ireland. FET balances the needs of skills for work with the just as critical skills for life. FET needs to ensure that supports are available to allow any individual, regardless of formal education level or background, an opportunity to learn and develop (SOLAS, 2020).

Research suggests that unmet literacy and numeracy needs are associated with poor outcomes that include a lower likelihood of engaging in FET, school non-completion rates, low paid employment and unemployment (Eivers, Shiel & Short, 2004). Unemployment is most often associated with previous educational attainment, and, in recent times, youth unemployment has grown significantly (Sweeney, 2013).

In an OECD report published in 2014, the OECD states that in Ireland there is a rapid increase in the levels of people under 25 years of age not in employment or education or training (NEETS). Ireland also has one of the lowest participation rates of labour participation by lone parents in Europe (Chzhen & Bradshaw, 2012). Research shows that there is a high level of turnover in many 'lower' skilled jobs in Ireland and that a significant number of workers may be trapped in a 'low pay, no pay' cycle. The research suggests that the FET sector has a major role to play assisting the 'low' skilled and low paid becoming disconnected from participating in a thriving economy (SOLAS, 2018).

Research confirms that people with unmet literacy and numeracy needs who are unemployed are more likely to move into long-term unemployment. However, when they do participate in a labour market training intervention they benefit more than other participants with no literacy and numeracy needs (Kelly et al, 2012).

FET provision for the skills development of those in employment is mainly limited to the **Skills for Work Programme**. Alongside mainstream literacy and numeracy programmes, Community Education and English Speakers of Other Languages

(ESOL) programmes, the **Back to Education Initiative** is also available to those in employment and the unemployed.

## Skills for Work Programme

The Skills for Work Programme is aimed at providing educational training opportunities to help employees deal with the basic skills demand of the workplace. Nearly 3,000 employees participate on the programme each year and the duration of the programme is generally 35 hours.

## Back to Education Initiative

The Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) provides part-time courses for over 16s, aimed principally at those who have not completed a Leaving Certificate (or equivalent) qualification. It gives individuals the opportunity to combine a return to learning with family, work and other responsibilities. Anyone who has left full-time education can take part in a course, but priority is given to those with less than upper second level education. Courses are run on an ongoing basis and normally run for 17 hours per week.

## Summary

In summary, the literature in this review highlights the critical role that lifelong learning can play in helping to develop the workplace skills of adults both in employment and for those who are unemployed.

It is apparent from the existing research that the Further Education and Training sector has a vital role to play in the providing lifelong learning opportunities for both unemployed and employed adults. Participation in adult education can enable adults to develop and enhance their existing skills in order to meet the challenges of a changing and complex labour market and workplace.

## Section two: Findings from our research

This section presents findings from our research in 2021. We present these here in two tranches:

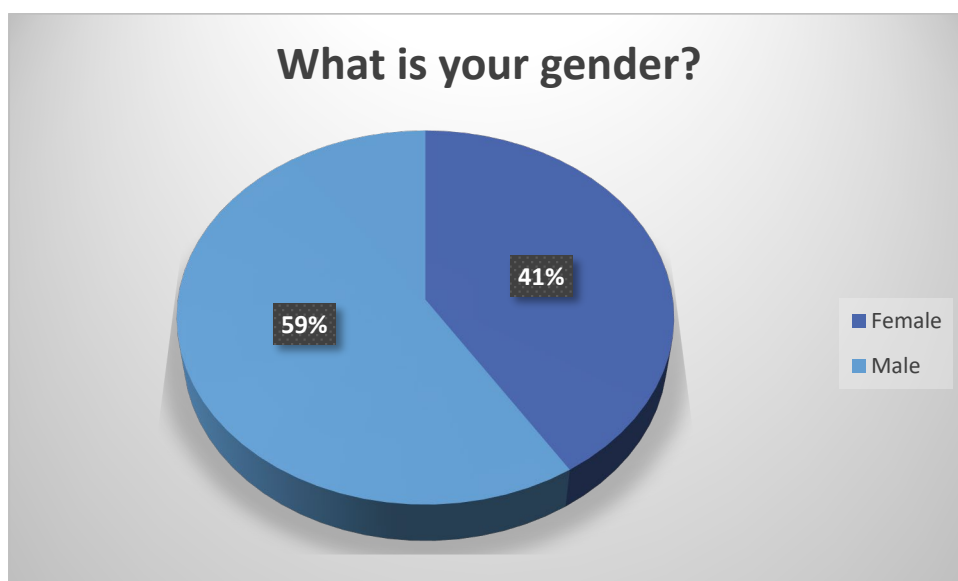
- Findings from our survey with 22 NALA's Distance Learner Service (DLS) learners,
- Findings from focus group with workers on a SfW, as well as input from the 1:1 interview with an adult distance learner of NALA's Distance Learner Service.

### Findings from survey with DLS adult learners

#### Survey participants

NALA developed an online survey using Survey Monkey and sent it to learners who use its NALA Distance Learning Service. Twenty-two learners completed the survey. The data was transferred to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. The charts below present a profile of the learners who participated in the research.

Chart 1: What is your gender?

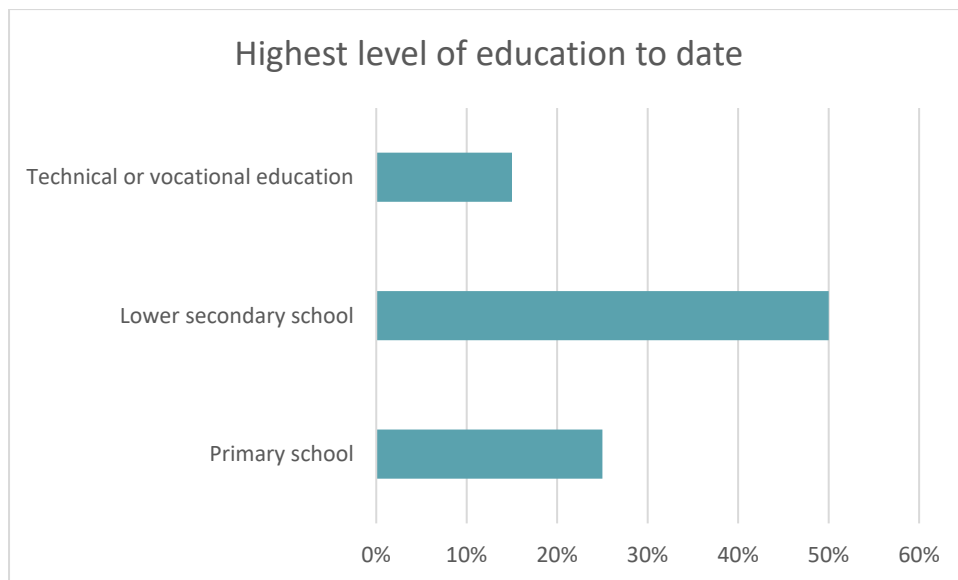


More males (59%) than females completed the survey.

## What is your age?

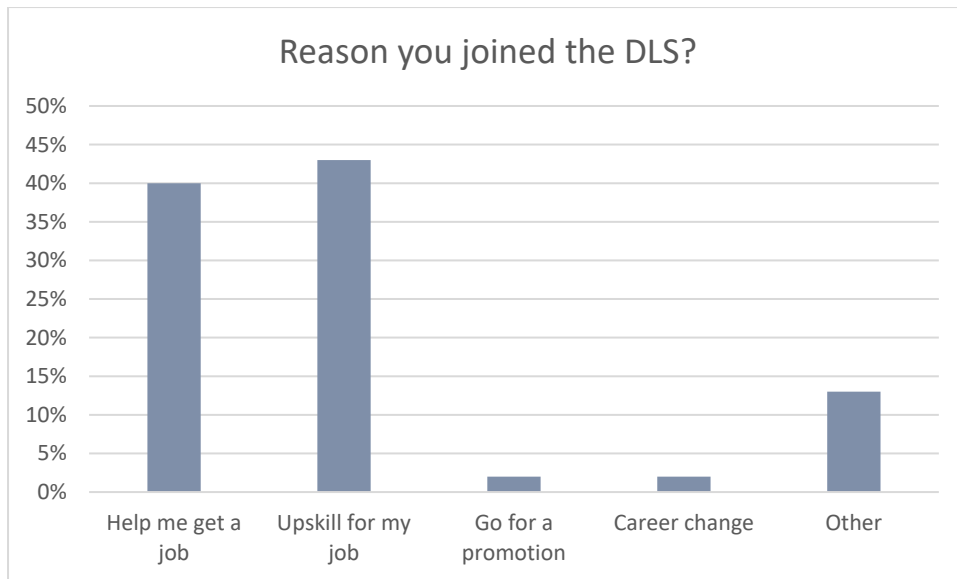
The learners ranged in the 34 – 65+ age group. The majority 59% were in the 45 – 54 age group with 23% in the 55 – 64 age group. A smaller number of learners (14%) were found in the 35-44 age group and 4% in the 65+ age group.

Chart 2: What is your highest level of education to date?



As shown above, half (50%) of the learners completed lower secondary education and a quarter (25%) completed primary school only. Another 15% reported that they took part in technical or vocational education.

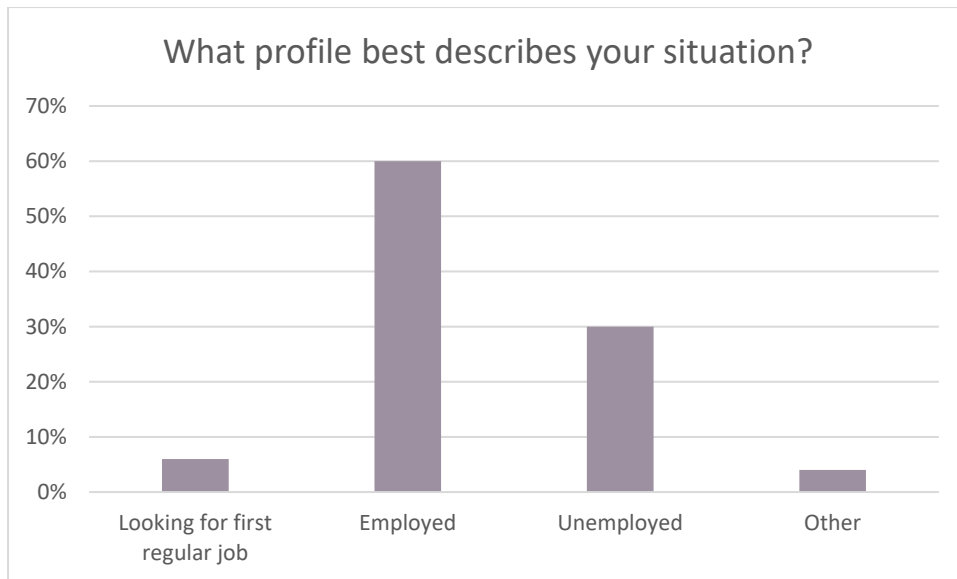
Chart 3: What was your main reason for joining the Distance Learning Service?



The learners had a number of reasons for joining the DLS.

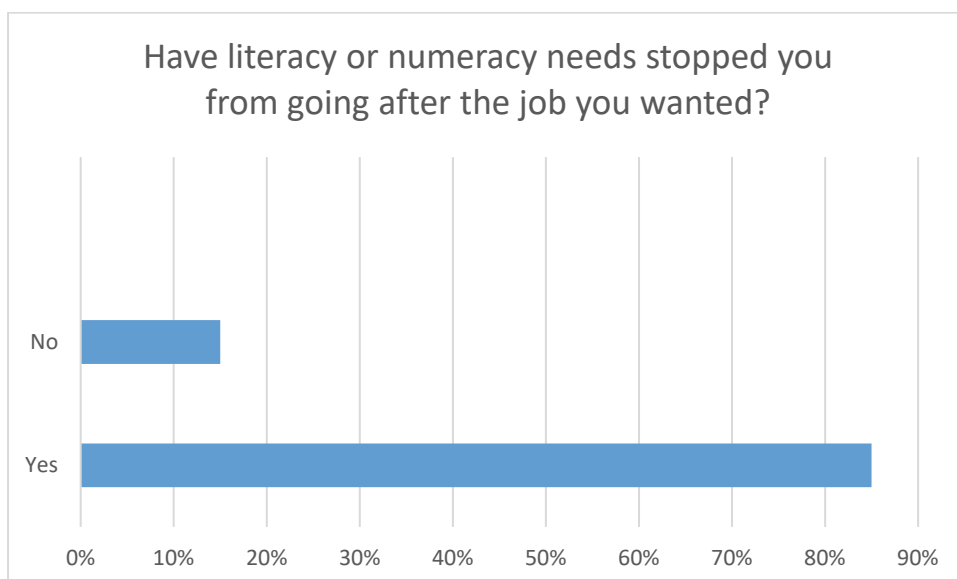
- Forty three per cent reported it was to help them upskill for their job.
- Forty per cent said it was to help them get a job, while 2% said it was to go for a promotion.
- Another 2% reported it was to help them with a career change.
- Thirteen per cent reported it was for other reasons, including the desire to improve their reading skills, to improve reading and writing skills, 'mainly to read and write and to help me figure out what skills I have,' 'to get some 'self-worth and push myself into getting ahead', 'to read and write to better myself.' One learner reported that 'my local centre closed down and I did not have transport to another centre.'

Chart 4: What profile best describes your situation?



Sixty per cent of learners reported that they were employed and thirty per cent said they were unemployed. Six per cent said they were looking for their first regular job and four per cent reported that they were retired, disabled or in receipt of illness benefit. The learners in employment reported that they worked in a number of sectors including retail, healthcare, childcare, factory work and catering and construction.

**Chart 5: Have literacy or numeracy needs stopped you from going after the job you wanted?**





Eighty five per cent reported that their literacy or numeracy needs stopped them from going for a job they wanted or were interested in.

A further 15% learners reported that they did not pursue a job they wanted for a variety of reasons including a lack of self confidence in their ability to 'read, write, spell and understand figures'.

The lack of education holds me back, a lack of confidence and not being able to fill in forms properly (male, 45-54 age group)

I always wanted to do better but I can't read very well and it takes me a long time to understand things. My brain won't take it in and then I get flustered and the spelling is really bad ... Siri has helped me spell all this ... it really gets me down (female, 45-54 age group)

I get a complete block every time I'm asked to write about something in work. I have no problem with figures. As soon as I'm asked to prepare a draft of something or send an email I just shut down (female, 45-54 age group)

Not being able to read and write held me back in everything in life. In relationships, in everything. Any job that involved reading I wouldn't even think about (male, 45-54 age group)

Grammar, reading and spelling held me back (female, 45-54 age group).

I wanted to do a Cert course to work on the boats, like Irish Ferries, but I couldn't do it because of difficulty in literacy (male, 45-54 age group)

One learner cited health problems with epilepsy, as having 'held' him back in terms of his employment and education.

I had epilepsy from a young age and it held me back in my education and this affected my career. Having said that I've no regrets (male, 55-64 age group)

Another learner reported that she has really good listening skills but because of her literacy needs she felt unable to go for a job as a counsellor or 'working with kids'. She told how her literacy needs were oftentimes the reason she would 'drop off' educational courses:

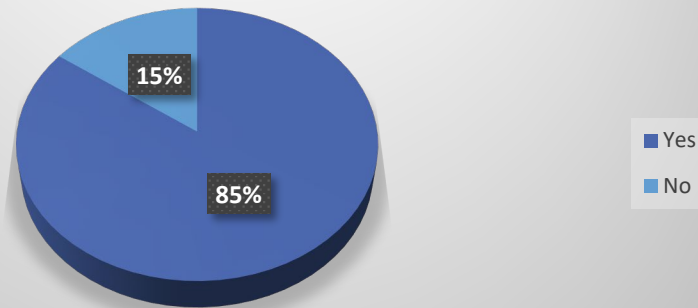
I'm really good at listening and due to a lack of literacy skills I felt I was unable to go for a counsellor job or working with kids in school. I felt it really held me back not having adequate literacy skills. I would drop off courses due to not being able to read the texts, being in a group as I have dyslexia and it's a difficulty being in a room with some many [people] speaking at once. I've also has difficulty with my eyesight since I was two, and my eyesight is getting worse over the years. I would really need one to one [tuition]. I tried several courses but would drop off due to this and just get disheartened (female, 55-64 age group)

One learner outlined her literacy needs and 'her nerves' made job interviews very hard for her to do with any degree of confidence:

Yes, it has held me back. For a long time the thing that worried me the most was the interview portion of any job application. The extra nerves would make me mess up even when the questions that hard (female, 45-54 age group)

**Chart 6: Have you turned down promotion or training opportunities because of your literacy needs?**

## Have you turned down promotion or training opportunities because of your literacy needs?



Most respondents (85%) reported that they had turned down promotion or taking part in training opportunities offered in the work place. The learners cited the following reasons for turning down promotion or training opportunities:

I turned down jobs several times. One time I went to a tyre centre and they were busy. I drove in myself and changed all four tyres. The owner approached me and tried very hard to get me to work for him. I couldn't tell him I wouldn't be able to do the bookwork. A friend who's a neighbour, he told me I have skills that no one else has. He told me I could get a job anywhere in the city. What stops me is I couldn't read signs to go places. I hope to learn how to work Google Maps (male, 45-54 age group).

I'm an assistant at the moment, but I would prefer to work in administration, and I feel I can bring more to the team. I just don't always feel confident in what I am saying. I would also like to get more qualifications. I end up messing up the interview portions of my application due to my lacking literacy skills (female, 45-54 age group).

I left [training] courses because of it [literacy needs] and due to my Dyslexia and eyesight. I had no confidence (female, 55-64 age group).

I didn't turn down a chance, I got as far as the interview and presentations where I did ok but not enough to pass both of them. I put it down to my ability to find words under pressure. Also I struggle with comprehension (female, 45-54 age group).

### Benefits of returning to education to work life

The learners were asked how participating in the NALA Distance Learning Service has benefited their work lives. They reported that the main benefit to them was an increase in confidence in the workplace.

### More confident at work

Learning has increased my confidence in my supermarket job. I get into a routine and I know what to do in my job. The DLS remote learning replaces my local learning centre that closed but learning in person was preferable as I got to meet people. I use Writeon [**NALA's online service up to 2020**] to continue getting awards online, and I will use Learn with NALA [**NALA's current distance learning service**] when level 3 is available on it. The main benefit to me has been technical support on my iPad, laptop and Smartphone. I would like to continue to get help to be able to read more fluently and improve my writing capabilities (male, 55-64 age group).

It has helped me be more confident when sending emails (male, 35-44 age group).

One learner reported who returning to education was helping to prepare her to go work into the workplace. He also praised the tutors for their caring and understanding and how returning to education was 'changing his life' for the better.

### **Helping to prepare me to go back to work**

It's helping me prepare to go back to work. The lack of education held me back and over the phone learning has helped. It's changing my life I'm very happy with phone learning. The tutors are very caring and understanding, phone learning is a massive help. I am more confident now. Thumbs up NALA (male 45-54 age group).

Another told of how she is studying to get a higher degree in childhood care in order to progress in her chosen profession. She also reported how her tutor had created a Zoom group so that the learners had a forum where they could talk about different topics.

### **Helping me works towards higher learning**

I am currently hoping to get a higher level degree in early childhood care. I have a level 6 and I'm hoping to get a level 8. I am hoping this will help me get a higher position in work. I find this (DLS) to be brilliant and a big part of this was due to my teacher. She is absolutely fantastic. She suggested a lot of free resources that really helped me out. She also created a Zoom group where we can converse about different topics which helped raise our conversation skills. It really helped my understanding. I found everything to be quite good. But I found NALA's website to be lacking. They have the very basic resources for people just starting to learn, but nothing for people at around intermediate level or higher (female, 45-54 age group).

### **Benefits of returning to education for learning**

When asked how participating in the NALA DLS had benefitted other areas of their lives, the learners reported that the main benefit to them was an increase in their **general confidence and self-esteem**.

### **More confidence**

It gives me far more confidence and makes me feel I know more. Learning makes me feel like I'm doing something with my life and taking control. Feeling yes, I can learn. I can change my life for the better. The main benefit has been confidence. Having control of my life. Taking my place in the world. Feeling I'm worth it. I really appreciate the help I've received. The challenge has been fantastic (female, 55-64 age group).

It made me more confident and to believe in myself. From being confident I was able to speak more and able to read more. I'm also more confident speaking on the phone (male, 55-64 age group).

I like the phone learning and one to one tuition as I live in a rural area. I have more confidence in myself and I think it's [DLS] a brilliant service and helps a lot of people young and old (male 65+ age group).

Other learners noted how returning to education has had a positive impact on their confidence and self-esteem and has **improved their reading, writing and spelling** skills. They reported how an increase in their self-confidence was helping to prepare them for learning in a classroom setting, get a better job in the future and how reading in particular, has given them confidence to text message friends and family.

### **Better skills improve social and family relations**

It's really helped with reading and confidence in social situations. With the help of my tutor my confidence is improving. The main benefit has been to

my spelling. I hope to help myself to get a better job in the future (male, 45-54 age group).

I have improved my writing and speaking and I feel really happy. The main benefit I have is I feel more confident in my writing. But, I would now like to learn in a classroom with a teacher (male, 35-44 age group).

I can do a lot more reading now and that helps my understanding. Reading has also helped me keeping in touch with family and friends. I have a lot of friends around the world and I can text them now. Mainly it helps pinpoint what I need to learn and it's better to get one to one help. You get the help you need, a class setting didn't help me. I love the phone tutoring and I've learned a lot, more than I would in a classroom (male, 35-44 age group).

It's still early days I'm only after starting but, it's good having someone to understand (female, 45-54 age group).

One learner reported how returning to education after suffering from a stroke has helped to 'kick start' her brain.

It's helping me to concentrate, to kick start my brain after a stroke. It's given me some normal life especially the one to one lessons as I have a bad hearing problem. I have a very good teacher as I have a lot of hospital appointments and if I have to change a lesson it's no problem (female, 45-54 age group).

The accounts provided by the learners help to show that, for many, returning to education was an opportunity to not only improve their literacy for work reasons, but also to complete their education. There was also the additional benefit of instilling in them a sense of optimism and confidence in their ability to succeed. They reveal to some extent how the learners perceived that returning to education

was an important, positive and beneficial event in their lives. This is reflected throughout their narratives.



## Laura's story an in-depth look at the benefits of learning for one learner

'Laura', is 57 years old. She left school when she was 13 without any certificates or other qualifications. Her experience of education 'wasn't that great'. She didn't like school and left to go work and 'earn a few bob.' Her first job was in a factory making curtains and she also had a job serving lunches in a local pub. The factory where she worked closed six months after she started working there and she went to work in another factory. Most of her working life was spent in factories working on assembly lines. Of her time in these workplaces she remembers that she was required to use her hands and not her brain. She remembers that as she was growing up her dream job was to 'work in an office, I would have loved to have been a receptionist.'

Her journey back into education started when she was in her fifties when she joined the NALA Distance Learning Service to improve her spelling. Her story is captured in the vignette below.

I was working in a warehouse that shifted office equipment. I developed plantar fasciitis in my foot and shoulder cause the work was very, very heavy. I had to go out sick for a couple of weeks and I was getting a bit better. But, as soon as I went back to work I was back at square one again. So, I went up to the office and told them I had to leave. I didn't want to and I was really upset and I got on really great with the supervisor. The supervisor didn't want me to leave and he said 'look I'll have a chat with the manager and see if there's something else you can do.'

I was called in by the manager and he said 'look we don't want to lose you, how do you fancy a part time job up in the office in customer services.' So I joined NALA to help me with my spellings and the tutor helped me update my CV cause I needed to do that as well. I knew I'd be fine on the phone but I was worried about emails and stuff like that because of the spellings. So

getting help with the spellings really helped me and I became a lot more confident about the work.

It took me a while to get the hang of things but I found that if I didn't know how to spell someone's name I was getting confident enough to say to the customer can you tell me how to spell that. And even with the emails, like a lot of that was customers phoning in because they were missing something. That was easy enough because the orders were mostly numbers like LK2659 or something. So, it was really all numbers and I didn't have to spell that much.

After a while I was getting better and better at what I was doing so they offered me a full-time job and now I'm working in the office as part of the sales team. I know this happened because I decided to update my skills. I probably should have gone back to education long before this, but getting the office job gave me the push I needed to be able to do this.

I can't believe that at my age I'm now actually doing something I've always wanted to do. And I've signed up to do a computer course that can help me be more advanced in that area.

I never thought I'd be able to get a job like this because I never did my Inter-Cert in school, but I'm doing it. And for me I always think I didn't try for anything like this because I felt I didn't have the education. And I also think how many employers are turning down people for jobs because they haven't got qualifications. But my thing is you can get qualifications and you can be trained or train yourself. Just because you have an education doesn't mean that you are the best person for a job, look at me. I really think that is something that employers need to think about when they're taking people on.

I'm really grateful for where I am now and I know I got it through my own hard work and perseverance. I wish it hadn't taken so long, but now I can say I'm finally working in my dream job.

This vignette aptly reflects how returning to education provided Laura with an opportunity to pursue her life-long ambition to 'work in an office.' It also illustrates an increase in her self-confidence and how the return to education was a positive turning point in her life.

## Findings from focus groups with those involved in SfW programme

In this section we look at the data generated from focus group interviews with an organiser of a SfW programme, an employer using the programme and three workers taking part in the programme.

### Skills for Work Co-ordinator

Joann Power is a Skills for Work coordinator at WWETB. She explains that the SfW programme targets those who have missed out on education or those who have gone into employment with 'low or no qualifications'. Joann says that the aim of the programme is to:

Upskill a particular cohort [of the population] as part of the National Skills Strategy 2025 to bring people up a level, or to give people some accreditation, normally at QQI [Quality and Qualifications Ireland] levels 1, 2 and 3 (Joann, SfW coordinator).

All courses on the SfW programme are provided free of charge through the European Social Fund. Once adults are enrolled on the programme, Joann refers them into the local Adult Literacy Services. According to Joann

The expertise for working with this particular cohort is based in the adult literacy services (Joann, SfW coordinator).

Joann is very clear that the 'target group' is very clearly defined and the aim is to encourage all adults who have missed out on opportunities in education or who have had 'poor educational experiences' to come forward and avail of the service.

### Links with employers

Joann says that as part of her working week she is normally out and about linking in **with companies**. Generally, employers are invited to an event where they come and chat and listen to how engaging in the SfW programme can be of benefit to them and their workforce. This is how Joann came into contact with Seán. Seán is Director of Operations at a packaging plant. The plant employs ninety people. The majority are men and they work on the factory floor. Seán has always been interested in training and developing his workforce:

That's part of my job, looking for value for money and looking at how we can develop our own team and grow our own people all the time. Standing still is not an option for me (Seán, employer, SfW).

Based on this point of view it is easy to understand how Seán, was 'open' to his workers taking part in the SfW programme. Part of this attitude is based on his own workplace experience and how he 'started at the bottom and worked his way to the top.'

Seán tells how he 'pushes' his employees to engage in continuing professional development through education and training. This he says is in large part due to the changing nature of the work environment including the introduction of new software and digital equipment. He explains that he feels a 'duty of care' to his workers and encourages constant training to keep them 'employable.'

I don't want to be in a situation whereby very soon a lot of my guys are going to be unemployable. I want to make sure that they stay at the front line of training, the front line of understanding. When you look at the equipment that's coming online now it's all software based, it's all digital, all robotics. So, my people have to stay sharp in order for us to stay in business (Seán, employer, SfW).

## Workers on a particular SfW programme

Most workers came into the factory as very young men having left school early. Many of them came from backgrounds where 'going to college' wasn't an option and they wanted to work so that they could 'start earning.' According to Seán, some of the workers have grown with the business and some have gone on to become shift managers:

We always see the potential in people and that's why we send them back to education. We're after growing the business from like twenty odd employees to where we are today. We spent a lot of money on a new production line last year and the lads need specific training for the work they do. All of the new equipment is PC [personal computer] driven and a lot of the lads won't know how to do it or will struggle doing it (Seán, employer, SfW).

This statement is supported by the workers on the SfW programme. The employees described how having left school their first and oftentimes only job was working in the factory. The following is an extract from a focus group with the workers:

Employee 1: After I left school I didn't really have anything I wanted to do, so I went straight into the factory.

Employee 2: There was nothing else you could do. There was nothing else there.

Employee 3: I went in because I felt it was something that I'd know how to do. (FG with employees)

Joann agrees that it is important to see the potential in people, not just in terms of upskilling for their job, but their overall personal development and well-being. She says that returning to education as an adult can often offset the negative experiences they may have of education from the first experience of formal education.

I think a lot of them might be vulnerable in terms of past educational experiences. It takes a lot to get them to say yes and to show them that [adult literacy] is learning in a non-threatening environment. I suppose I see education as that transformative piece where they have this dawning, this realisation that 'I can do this'. So I think that self-development is a huge part of what they do as well as the development in skills (Joann, SfW, co-ordinator).

Joann believes that the learner-centred approach embraced by the adult literacy service helps to 'unknit' an adult negative experience of formal schooling and demonstrates to the adult that this is not a replica of their school experience they remember from twenty or thirty years ago.

### **Benefits of taking part in the SfW programme**

According to Seán as an employer, participation in the SfW programme has been beneficial to the firm as much as to their employees:

I think there are many ways that the company benefits. All our new equipment is PC driven. Prior to taking part in the course, a lot of our employees were not comfortable with technology. They wouldn't know how to use it, or they weren't comfortable using it. So, by them now doing this course they are getting more familiar with technology and how to use the computer. And, let me just say, these are clever guys and they're some of the best workers you could get, but their skills level are so low that they're future development is curtailed. So all we're doing is trying to encourage them and them taking part in the computer course is one way of doing this. (Seán, employer, SfW).

The majority of the workers taking part in the SfW programme are on computer courses. These courses are instrumental in helping the workers become more

confident in their digital and IT skills. In turn, this increase in skills and confidence has been of particular benefit to the firm:

We like them to start off with basic skills, basic computer skills. We have a weakness there. The lads are taking part in a 10-week programme, but because they do shift work and can only go every second week it's a twenty week programme. So that's a big commitment. (Seán, employer, SfW).

Joann as a SfW co-ordinator agrees that the development of digital and IT skills has been beneficial to the men across a number of environments, including the workplace and the home environment:

What they're learning they are taking home, they're using their phones more, they're using tablets, they are using computers more. And they're no longer side lined or marginalised within their own families because of their inability to use IT (Joann, SfW, co-ordinator).

### **What employees on the SwF programme said**

In the following excerpt from the focus group with three male workers, the men recount how they use their 'new' knowledge at home.

Employee 3: Well at home I'm using the computer more I'm going on the internet and looking stuff up.

Employee 1: Well the kids are starting to use computers in school, they're already computer savvy, but it's good to be able to sit down with them and go through things with them and understand what they're talking about (laughs).

Employee 3: They're growing up surrounded by technology, they know the computer inside and out. Like even my little one she'll take my phone she



knows how to unlock it and I've had to change my password I don't know how many times. (FG with employees)

### **A big commitment...**

The computer course is a 10-week course. Usually it runs once a week for two hours. But because the men do shift work they can only attend once every two weeks. Seán acknowledges that the duration of the programme and the commitment to it can take a toll on the workers, as the men do the learning on their own time rather than company time. He knows that this can be a big 'ask' of the employees, and, therefore, he checks in regularly with them to find out how things are going and if they are attending the course regularly.

He reports that mostly employees are positive about the course and the skills they are learning. He relays how one employee told him that if it wasn't for the opportunity to attend the SfW computer course he would never have returned to education:

One of the lads he said to me only the other morning, "I would never have done it Sean. I would never have done it if it wasn't for you pushing me to do it. It's great, sure I'm learning new things." ... I have to say I'm retiring next year and if I walk out of here with nothing but that comment, I know I'll have achieved something (Seán, employer, SfW).

The employees also agree that doing the course requires a significant commitment on their part:

Employee 2: We go on our roster day off. It'd be good to be able to do it during work hours and have your day off to yourself, but it doesn't work out that way. (FG with employees)

As stated above the men attend the compute course once a fortnight for two hours. They said they would prefer to do the course on a weekly basis, but they can't because of the way the roster works.

Employee 3: I'd rather do more of it, like every week, but you can't because of the roster (FG with employees)

### **Worth the effort**

Seán points out that one of the best things about the SfW programme is that it is free, 'I'm always looking for the best bang for your buck.' He says that once people are trained if they decide to move on, or if they are 'poached' by other companies, it is not so bad because his company has not spent a large amount of money on training.

Joann has a slightly different take on the benefits to employees of engaging in the SfW programme. Her view is that the SfW programme is not only about acquiring skills to use in the workplace it also has benefits to the individual and their families. She highlights the overall benefits of adults engaging with the literacy service and the impact this has on their overall confidence and self-esteem:

I see it as not only skills for work I see benefits across the home, the community, and I would see huge developments around self-esteem and self-confidence. I see those that come back into the adult literacy service ... within a very short space of time ... with the right supports, the right staff that I can see confidence build as well as morale in the workplace, and an increase in work skills and better engagement. (Joann, SfW, coordinator).

The employees themselves describe how upskilling has helped them become more adept at using technology on the factory floor. In the following excerpt one of the men tells how he now 'fills in' for his supervisor when he has a day off. This is

something he would not have been able to do before taking part in the computer course:

Employee 1: sometimes when my supervisor has a day off I fill in for him and that's when I get to use the skills I've learned. Like before I couldn't understand the spread sheets and the different formulas, but now I do, and I can fill in for him when he's not there. (FG with employees).

The men expressed how returning to education has enhanced their prospects for advancement within the firm or if they were to interview for another job:

Employee 1: Doing this course it makes me think that I could be a supervisor someday meself one day.

Employee 2: It's always going to look good on your CV, isn't it? Like if I was to go for an interview and they say: "Oh did you do any courses?" I'll be able to say: 'yeah I've done a computer course in spreadsheets. Hopefully, I won't be doing an interview anytime soon, but if I do it'll look good all the same (FG with employees).

The excerpts above have explored and presented the experiences and perspectives of workers and an employer of engaging with the SfW programme. They were very positive about their participation on the programme and valued the learning the course provided. They welcomed the positive benefits to their work and personal lives.

## Section 3: Discussion and recommendations

This report reviewed international and national research and reports on the benefit of returning to education on adult's working lives. It presents findings from an online survey with NALA's Distance Learning Service learners and findings from interviews carried out with employees and an employer engaged in the Skills for Work programme.

The literature shows that across Europe adult basic education is offered in a range of contexts, from education and training institutions to community or workplace settings. The results from PIAAC and other OECD publications make a strong case that countries are likely to benefit from policy and practice changes that increase the skills level of their populations.

One of the key messages from the literature is that adults with low basic skills are more likely to be unemployed or in low paid employment, have poor health, low levels of civic engagement and are less likely to improve their skills through adult education and training (OECD, 2013). However, the literature also suggests that taking part in adult learning can improve lives **and** economies. Adults that continue to learn enjoy better health, are more active citizens, are more employable and earn more.

Research suggests that the world of work is becoming more complex and uncertain and as a result adults with literacy and numeracy needs require support acquiring new skills to meet the changing demand of the labour market. Our findings show that employees who upskill for their jobs report that they are more adept and confident when using new technology in the workplace. They attribute this to their participation in adult learning, namely taking part in the Skills for Work programme, delivered by the adult literacy service. Research also suggests that a basic level of literacy and numeracy is essential for even minimal engagement in society as a citizen, consumer, parent or employee.

## Overview of our findings

Our findings suggest that in the past literacy and numeracy needs have been a significant barrier in preventing adults for going for a job they wanted, a promotion that was on offer or turning down a training opportunity. However, when they returned to education the learners reported an increase in confidence, particularly in the workplace and taking up an offer of promotion. This is more than aptly reflected in 'Laura's' story and her journey from the 'factory floor, to her dream job' in an office.

The following points sum up the main findings that emerged from our research data.

### Findings from the online survey

Most of the survey respondents were aged 45 – 54 years of age, and over half had completed lower secondary education. Slightly more men than women took part in the survey.

The main findings from the survey were as follows:

- The predominant reasons for joining the DLS was to help to upskill for a job or to help the respondents get a job
- Significantly, nearly 60% of the learners reported that their literacy or numeracy needs had stopped them going for the job they wanted
- Even more significant is the finding that eighty five per cent of the learners reported that they have turned down a promotion or training opportunity due to their literacy and numeracy needs
- The biggest reported benefit to returning to education was an increase in confidence, particularly in the work place.

### Main findings from the Skills for Work interviews

- The employer reported that there are many benefits to the company from its participation in the SfW programme. Primary among these is that a significant number of the workforce are now familiar with the technology that is used on the factory floor
- The employees have increased their technical skills, and the employer has also noticed an increase in their overall confidence
- The SfW programme has provided some workers with an opportunity to return to education that they may not otherwise have had or availed of
- The employees report that they are more adept and confident at using technology on the factory floor

### Main findings from Laura's story

In her story 'Laura' relates how her journey back into education had enabled her to pursue her life-long ambition of getting a job in an office. The benefit of engaging in adult learning was felt keenly in her work life but it also had a positive impact on her personal life including an increase in her self-confidence. It has reinforced in her the importance of updating her skills and the belief that anything is possible regardless of your age, background and educational attainment. In fact, she sends a clear message to employers to take into consideration skills that are beyond those provided by an education qualification, for example, hard work, perseverance and the will to succeed.

### Recommendations

NALA aims to improve outcomes for adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties in Ireland by using research to show why literacy matters to Irish society and to campaign for further investment in raising adult literacy levels in Ireland. The findings from this research show that adult learning has demonstrable benefits including increased confidence and skills development. We believe these findings are of significance to practitioners and policy makers and employers and will inform current debates and strategies on the importance of improving basic skills among the Irish population and highlight the important role that adult learning plays in this.

As a next step we suggest

- The need to carry out carrying out a large scale research project that will build on the findings from this report. In particular the role adult literacy services can play in upskilling and training of people with literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs.
- The need to map existing workplace education and training activities to help establish what more needs to be done to support the development of workplace education and training through;
  - Promotional activity
  - The curriculum
  - Continuous Professional Development (CPD) assessment
  - Accreditation and quality assurance
- The impact of COVID 19 on the Irish economy and labour market is not fully known. With this in mind we recommend that SOLAS convene an advisory group, to include education and employment stakeholders, to drive further developments in workplace education practice and provision.

## Finally

### **Investing now will increase employment prospects and the economy**

Literacy and numeracy needs, among the adult population if left unmet, will continue to have a negative impact for:

- The individuals in terms of their employment prospects,
- They can also prove costly to an economy that relies on a skilled workforce in order to continue to thrive.

Investment in raising the level of literacy and education among the adult population can help meet these challenges. It can also contribute to achieving the goals of the National Skills Strategy 2025. Investment in adults, particularly those at or below Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) level 3, will help address the challenge of

meeting the 2020 target of 7% and will support the development of a well-educated, well skilled and adaptable workforce as laid out in the Strategy.

This study with a limited number of adult learners has gone some way towards exploring the benefits to adults of engaging in learning in an Irish context. The findings show to a large extent the positive benefits that returning to education has had on their work lives.



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

To find out more about improving literacy, numeracy and digital literacy, Freephone NALA on **1 800 20 2065** or see **[www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie)** for more information.

Visit **[www.gov.ie/TheRightCourse](http://www.gov.ie/TheRightCourse)** for further details on training courses for employees.

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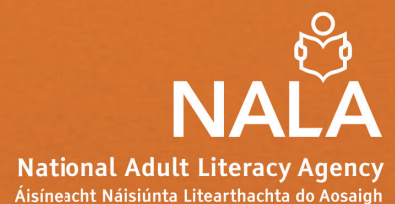
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