

Leading the way in online learning

The story of NALA's
eLearning website
from 2008 - 2019



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

About this research

This report tells you about WriteOn.ie, NALA's eLearning website that provided learning and certification for many adults from 2008 to 2019.

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Executive summary

1. WriteOn was a unique, powerful and empowering teaching and learning resource. It not only reduced barriers to access, supporting greater participation, but it also provided learners with opportunities to recognise their prior learning, work towards learning new skills and have these certificated initially at Level 2 and subsequently Level 3. The **Recognition of Prior Learning** (RPL) tool used online assessments, mapped to learning outcomes at levels 1-4 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and allowed learners to obtain qualifications for previously uncertified learning. This facility was the only method of RPL available to adult literacy learners in Ireland (UNESCO 2014). WriteOn provided the first and only 'end to end' online learning provision for adult literacy learners in Ireland. It built on NALA's internationally recognised distance learning service (DLS) which has been cited as an 'exemplary form of high quality, easily accessible and equitable adult learning' (CEC, 2012, p 5). It has not been possible to find evidence of a 'like for like' equivalent of WriteOn, internationally.
2. WriteOn was developed to meet the needs of adult literacy learners who were not engaged in face-to-face provision. Through research evidence, (International Adult Literacy Survey, 1997) NALA recognised the growing need to give adult literacy learners a serious choice in deciding how to learn literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Over its eleven-year existence, it continued to build on its success, informed by national and international research, the views of users, and was supported by national policy. It retained at its core, the needs of adult literacy learners in Ireland.
3. WriteOn was a successful, highly visible and highly valued brand in the adult literacy provision landscape. It has conceptually transformed adult literacy distance learning provision by challenging the view that distance learning equates to deficit learning. Many students who have used and benefitted from WriteOn actively chose distance, online learning over face-to-face provision.

4. Drawing on a range of previous NALA research, (2012, 2014, 2015, 2019) has provided opportunities to explore learners' views of WriteOn. These reviews show that WriteOn has fulfilled many functions for learners. Not only has it provided pedagogic affordances for adult literacy learners, but it has also supported them to fulfil their learning ambitions, in terms of literacy, numeracy and ICT, by providing a very positive and satisfying learning experience. It has also opened up the possibility to adult literacy learners of adopting a positive learner identity. A positive learner identity is recognised as crucial to engaging adults in literacy programmes as well as lifelong and life wide adult learning. This is in contrast to what some adult literacy learners have described as negative and adverse early learning experiences. These adverse early learning experiences can contribute to learners' fractured learning identities (Gee 2007, Solomon 2009) which discourage learners from participating in learning by fostering identities of exclusion.
5. Data from the site and learner testimonies present a very positive picture of learner engagement with WriteOn. Learners using WriteOn studied either independently, as part of an ETB or in in centres from the community and voluntary sector such as special schools blended learning programme or as part of NALA's distance learning service. Historically, 71,269 learner accounts were set up on WriteOn, however, some learners had more than one account. Per year, there were on average 5k-7k accounts created with the lowest, 536, in 2008 and a peak of 7,550 in 2012.

Data showing QQI learner certification at levels 2 and 3 of the National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) provide a clear understanding of the demographics of learners choosing certification, but not their deeper stories of motivation and benefits of participation.

Introduction

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) has a well-documented history of developing and supporting creative and innovative projects to meet the needs of adult literacy learners (NALA 2011). WriteOn was set up in 2008 to provide free online learning across the country, for those adults who could not access existing provision, as well as to facilitate literacy development and certification for adult learners, initially at Level 2 and later at Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications of Ireland. NALA is also committed to ensuring that Irish adults have access to as many opportunities as possible to develop their literacy skills, including online learning.

80% of Irish households have access to the internet and 84% of Irish adults use the internet daily for personal purposes, including almost 2 million daily Facebook users (Deloitte 2019). NALA acknowledges the link between social inequalities and literacy and numeracy difficulties and recognises that the above statistics mask inequalities in terms of access to the internet for many adult literacy and numeracy students and potential students.

The move from WriteOn to the new learning platform, Learn with NALA, starting in 2019, takes place at a time when online, distance and blended learning is high on the agenda for students and tutors. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for digital literacy for both teachers and students who need to take advantage of learning opportunities. The forward pivot to digital learning is unlikely to go backwards, and so the timing of this important move from WriteOn to Learn with NALA is most apposite.

This story of WriteOn is timely for a number of reasons. It was carried out in the Autumn of 2020, at a time when the pandemic has seen the continuing expansion of online and blended learning for adults. Much of the adult literacy learning that had started as face-to-face in classrooms has had to be pursued online.

Many face-to-face adult literacy classes use online learning for their students, but unlike WriteOn, it is usually not the main focus of the class. The speed with which education providers had to respond to the pandemic, has forced many to place access to remote learning front and centre in their future planning for provision (ETBI 2020). In a recent survey on their response to the pandemic, Donegal ETB (2020) reported that many students highlighted how lack of access to ICT equipment, varying levels of digital literacy and poor internet connectivity limited their ability to engage with remote teaching, learning and assessment. Staff also reported the same difficulties with access to resources at home and varying levels of digital literacy as factors which further compounded difficulties. As such, the crisis has provided a powerful test of the potential of learning online. However, it has also highlighted some of its limitations, including the prerequisite of adequate digital skills, computer equipment and internet access to undertake online learning (OECD 2020). The Donegal ETB report above and Elizabeth Waters' (An Cosán), statement below also highlight this point,

'As a nation we hold a top ten position globally in our proportion of STEM graduates from third level. That is an amazing statistic, but that needs to be set against the fact that only 48% of individuals have at least basic digital skills, which means that 52% do not. This is one of the lowest levels in the EU. The EU average is 57%. We are facing a divide of catastrophic proportions.'

Elizabeth Waters, An Cosán, Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills Debate, November 2019

Alongside the current intense focus on online learning, SOLAS is consulting on the development of a new ten-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy for Ireland. It is significant that the focus on this latest strategy differs from the previous one in that digital literacy is emphasised as the third basic skill, along with literacy and numeracy.

The five themes outlined in its strategy consultation paper are:

- Theme 1** Different meanings of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for adults.
- Theme 2** Improving awareness of and access to literacy, numeracy and digital literacy support for adults.
- Theme 3** Bridging the digital divide.
- Theme 4** Priorities and actions.
- Theme 5** Measuring success.

These themes are directly relevant to WriteOn in that, during its eleven years in existence, it has contributed to supporting the aspirational aims implicit in these broad themes. For example, one of the strategy themes is around providing greater ease of access to literacy, numeracy and digital skills for adults with an unmet need, as well as delivering high quality, flexible and relevant literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning opportunities (SOLAS 2020). WriteOn has been enabling this for eleven years.

These issues of greater access to a different type of literacy, numeracy and digital skills provision along with supporting the unmet need of many learners are at the heart of the WriteOn story. These were significant factors in NALA moving from solely being a campaigning, policy influencing, research focused, teacher supporting organisation into a provider of literacy and numeracy programmes through its distance learning service which came into being in 2000.

‘The idea of the NALA Distance Learning Service (DLS) came about from the stark realisation that the number of people participating in face-to-face services was comparatively very small when you looked at the numbers of people in Ireland estimated to have low levels of literacy and numeracy.’

Dr Inez Bailey, former CEO of NALA, November 2020.

The DLS used media and technology to attract more adult literacy learners. Alongside a variety of television programmes aimed at raising awareness and reducing fears about becoming a literacy learner, NALA put in place a telephone tutoring service that provided answers to individual learning challenges (Hegarty and Feeley, 2011) and by 2007 the unique system of telephone, postal and online tutoring began to take shape.

Each NALA intervention proved successful in reaching a cohort of people. This allowed NALA to demonstrate that using different approaches to those that were available could increase access and participation.

It was perhaps inevitable, to some extent, that WriteOn would emerge eight years into the life of NALA's highly successful and internationally recognised DLS (NALA 2013). Tom O'Mara, former Distance Learning Co-ordinator at NALA, came to the role with a background not only in teaching, but also in television production and eLearning. He had worked on one of the successful DLS TV series.

'I knew we needed a simple solution to have more engagement with the people who needed support. And the one size fits all of a book, didn't seem enough. I knew we needed a website.'

Tom O'Mara, former DLS co-ordinator NALA, November 2020.

This was the beginning of the WriteOn story which unfolds in the next section of this report.

Background to the development of WriteOn

In order to understand how and why WriteOn came about in 2008, there is a need to go back further, to the particular set of circumstances from which NALA's Distance Learning Service emerged in 2000, and to include the purpose and function of NALA itself. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established in 1980 by volunteers, as a membership organisation 'to act as a coordinating body for all involved in adult literacy work, to raise awareness and to lobby for funding and recognition' (www.nala.ie). Since then, NALA has been advocating on behalf of those with unmet, new or changing literacy needs in their personal, social or working life.

When the results of the OECD (1997) International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) were published they were 'met with shock' (NALA 2020) as it showed the extent of the level of need in Ireland. The IALS provided the first comparative analysis of the numbers of adults in many Western industrialised populations who had difficulties with everyday reading tasks. It showed that one in four or 25% of Irish adults had literacy difficulties and Dr Inez Bailey, Former CEO of NALA, recalls,

'This data provided, for the first time, a validated number of people in Ireland with a literacy and numeracy need. Alongside this, NALA published research into access and participation in adult literacy provision and I was struck by not only such low participation rates in programmes, but by the absence of particular groups of people, like unemployed adults, from existing literacy provision.'

In 1997, approximately 5,000 adults participated in adult literacy classes out of a potential target of 500,000 (Bailey 2006). The publication of the Irish Government's Green and White papers, informed by NALA research (1998), highlighted the need

for enhanced access and raised participation rates. NALA identified the potential for technological solutions but there was an absence of available funding, at that time. Inez Bailey:

‘I met colleagues at a European level and they were all grappling with the same problems. It wasn’t just us that had access issues. NALA looked for low-tech solutions to meet the need for higher participation and increased access.’

Radio, Bailey states, was an obvious and cheap solution to the access issue. When the radio’s distance learning programmes proved successful in attracting an audience of learners, Dr Inez Bailey recalls that,

‘We got really ambitious and instead of worrying about technology – we moved to distance learning using TV. Everyone had a radio and TV. This was backed up by the government White Paper which had identified distance learning using TV as an effective means of attracting learners, so that gave us credibility because it was linked to policy.’ Dr Inez Bailey continues, **‘What was really important was that each intervention in this space proved very successful in reaching a cohort of people’.**

These new ways of providing learning for adult literacy learners were recognised internationally as innovative. The TV series ‘Written Off’ was selected as one of only sixteen projects from across the EU-27 that demonstrated a model form of adult learning. Provision of one-to-one distance tutoring and the by now availability of certification, were singled out as special features of innovative adult learning practice. Praise for NALA’s DLS also came from a number of EU organisations, UNESCO and the National Research and Development Council in the UK.

NALA's DLS was repeatedly asked to speak about innovative distance and online learning approaches to audiences in Europe and as far away as Brazil. Despite this continuous change and considerable recognition, the DLS ethos remained and still remains as one that is learner-centred and dedicated to making free, high quality literacy learning experiences available to those who want them.

The success of the radio and television programmes proved that people were interested in distance learning and this gave NALA the confidence that it could do more. Although radio and TV proved popular there were limitations too. The format of TV lent itself more to motivation and awareness raising than pedagogy. Dr Inez Bailey acknowledges that there was a limit to the amount of time on TV that a programme could be in a pedagogical context. 'You just couldn't get enough time in prime time TV to teach people'.

However, these successful incremental developments encouraged NALA to move more towards higher tech solutions to addressing issues of access and participation. Importantly, using technology would provide learners with unlimited access to learning and at times which suited learners' lives.

'Our motivation was about reach, and making sure we could provide more learning opportunities to more people. We believed that more and more could be done. We were passionate about that, which probably blinded us to all the pitfalls.'

Dr Inez Bailey

Tom O'Mara developed the WriteOn eLearning platform with Avallain, a Swiss company, who had previously built the similar German website, ich-will-lernen.de. His explanation of how WriteOn came about demonstrates a recurring theme in NALA's history: of always wanting to push for more opportunities for adult literacy learners.

According to Tom O'Mara,

'We wanted to improve the learning experience of students and this involved simplifying the certification process, creating more personalised learning and providing freedom of access for learners. We also wanted learners to recognise themselves in the materials on the site. We wanted it to reflect Irish culture'.

At the same time, it was at a Lit Cam* conference in Germany that Tom met the managing director of Avallain,

As Tom O'Mara recalls, 'At LitCam Ignaz (Heinz) showed me **ich-will-lernen.de site** and I was blown away.'

Avallain won the tender for WriteOn and over a period of time WriteOn was developed jointly by NALA and Avallain. NALA procured a team of authors to produce the content for the site which took approximately 5 months to develop. Tom recalls the process of working with Avallain to create the eLearning platform.

'Avallain were big into a dispersed model of working and periodically we (Ignaz Heinz) would meet up in the UK, spend the day working on WriteOn and then each fly home. I also worked with developers in Nairobi, Cologne, and the Island of Madeira. The carbon footprint of WriteOn was offset by trees planted in Uganda. It didn't feel like work, we were so dialled in to one another.'

WriteOn as an innovative learning tool

WriteOn was launched by NALA in September 2008 to provide free online learning across the country, to facilitate literacy development and certification for adult learners at Level 2. Neil Carrick, who joined the WriteOn team as an instructional designer in 2008 and has worked on the site since, including now Learn with NALA, remembers the early days and how the site developed.

‘In those very early days we worked to get a form of the website up and running and get lessons written at level 2, as well as figure out how to use the authoring system. Then, it was a big development to get the views of users as soon as we could. We brought a group of students together to discuss usability and we changed the design, especially the visual design.’

Neil Carrick, November 2020.

The programme built on the lessons learnt from NALA’s previous distance learning services, namely literacytools.ie (2004) and rug.ie (2007), and up until its closure in 2019, provided online learning across the country. NALA was firstly responding to the needs of people who were presenting with robust Level 2 skills in a number of learning contexts. They hoped at that time that WriteOn would provide a support for learners with spiky profiles to work speedily and effectively on accruing certification. The second impetus for the website was a desire to standardise and streamline content. At that time NALA was annually producing up to fourteen different workbooks for learners and their tutors. With the development of WriteOn a standardised learning programme was created that did not require constant updating and reprinting.

Underpinning these motives was recognition that technology permeates many areas of our lives today and that ICT is an essential literacy that can be harnessed to help develop people's literacy skills. In so doing ICT skills are also enhanced.

In Tom O'Mara's words,

'The things we read, the things we do involve technology. So surely, we should be improving people's reading and writing skills in the context of ICT. The website was the perfect vehicle for that. You are not overtly teaching people how to click on something or use a browser in order to complete a reading exercise'.

The view that adults could use the technology regardless of their literacy levels, is echoed by Neil Carrick when attending a meeting to develop Level 1 provision with a group of learners and their tutors. He recalls,

'All the students (in the meeting) were incredibly competent in using technology – their smart phones and tablets, even though they may have struggled with literacy. WriteOn integrated the tech skills into other learning.'

This approach recognised the emphasis in educational policy papers on integrating new technologies into the teaching and learning process in general and the teaching of literacy and numeracy in particular. Research (Moser 1999, NRDC 2007, NALA 2011) suggests that not only is technology an engagement and motivational tool for learners, but those learners who use ICT for literacy and numeracy learning, double the value of their study time by acquiring two sets of skills at the same time.

Many of the people interviewed cite the development of Level 3 certification as well as content at levels 1 and 4 as significant developments in WriteOn's history.

'Having level 3 awards was a major development to the site, as well as adding, over time level 1 and 4 content. WriteOn was a bespoke website, aimed at an Irish audience and reflecting the Irish context.'

Neil Carrick

Key features of WriteOn

To complement the online learning materials, learners had access to one-on-one tutor sessions via telephone. Learners were able to call a Freephone number and arrange for a tutor to call them back at a time of their convenience, free of charge. The WriteOn tutors as the Learn with NALA tutors, are qualified and experienced adult literacy tutors who participate in a varied and relevant programme of continuous professional development. But not all learners choose to use a tutor, some preferred to work independently.

Recognition of Prior Learning

WriteOn has provided two significant primary services to learners. Firstly, a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) tool that used online assessments to allow learners to obtain qualifications for what they have previously learned but never received formal certification for; this facility is the only method of RPL available in Ireland at this level (levels 2 and 3) (UNESCO 2013). Secondly, for those who did not qualify for certification through RPL, WriteOn offered a suite of online learning materials, complemented by one-on-one tutor support, if requested, for users to improve their skills at levels 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Noelle O'Dwyer, (SOLAS) speaking in November 2020 states,

'WriteOn has been hugely useful and beneficial to learners across a range of settings. It's been innovative in terms of RPL, online learning and certification. The data supports this. WriteOn ticks a lot of boxes for learners. The RPL aspect is huge. The whole end-to-end aspect of WriteOn is very important.'

The RPL feature of WriteOn was recognised by ETB centre tutors as useful for their students. As Helen, a centre tutor explains:

‘We had a group of ESOL students who wanted to improve their English and we were also able to use the RPL tool to accredit their maths and IT skills at level 3. For 6 hours a week over 35 weeks, learners worked on their IT and maths on WriteOn as well as personal effectiveness and other modules to get their full award with 60 credits. Students used Google Translate to support the language of maths. We had great success with it.’

Providing RPL supports for learners is one example of the Social Practice and Wealth Models in practice. It recognises students’ vernacular literacy (Barton & Hamilton 1998) and vernacular numeracy (Broderick 2017) practices and provides a pathway for these to be validated as valuable student resources and increases students’ cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Skills Checker

WriteOn had a Skills Checker feature which was a self-assessment tool that learners could use to determine their level and where to start their learning journey. The Skills Checker (see Figure 1) asked 35 questions covered all of the awards available on WriteOn. These questions were mapped to learning outcomes at levels 1-4 on the NQF. Learners were asked reflective questions, to which they answered Yes or No. This then presented a visual graph of a learner’s ‘spiky profile’ showing learners’ areas of strength and weakness (see Figure 2) with recommendations for study. Learners could return to the Skills Checker at any time and change their answers if they felt their skills had changed. In this way, learners could see a visual picture of skills and competence improvement.

← → ↻ www.writeon.ie/nala/student/index2.do?level=3

Write On 3
helping you improve your reading, writing and number skills

CHAT Marie Doohz Lomakovskz NALA Log out

Nala Skills Finder

Answer the questions below to see a picture of your skills.
If you skip any sections, you will not see results for that section.

	Yes	No
Communications		
I can read short pieces of text including timetables, bills, menus and road signs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
I can read and comment on newspaper articles and books.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can write 5 sentences on a single topic.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
I can write for a range of formal situations.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can use a phone to leave a message, find out information, and ask for directions.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can give a talk or presentation to a group or team.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maths		
I can work out sums with figures up to 100.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can calculate my weekly budget and work out what proportion is spent on bills.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can recognise patterns in shapes, numbers and sounds.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand the difference between 2D and 3D objects and the difference between area and volume.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
I can calculate the volume and area and make a scale drawing of the room I'm in.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
I can understand graphs and charts in opinion polls.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can represent my weekly budget as a pie or bar chart.	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

Figure 2 Skills Checker on WriteOn

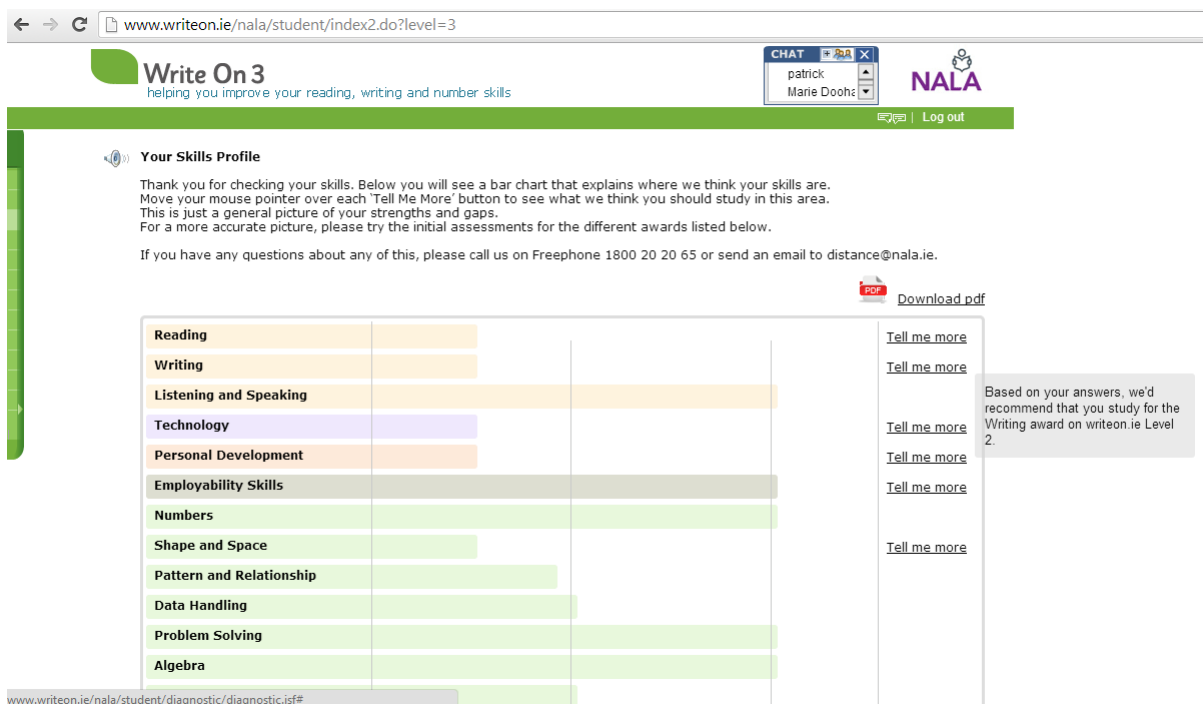


Figure 3 Visual display of learner 'Spiky Profile' on WriteOn

Supporting personalised learning

Providing greater personalised learning was an important part of the development of WriteOn. Noelle O'Dwyer stated,

'Honouring learner ambitions' is at the forefront of SOLAS' approach to adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Whether that is with certification or not. SOLAS' chief responsibility is to fund programmes. NALA's dual role sits easy with SOLAS. There was a need and a gap for a different approach and NALA saw it and responded. WriteOn and *Learn with NALA* meet a need for some learners. These learners want to work for more time than they can get face to face. We need a range of programmes to meet and honour learners' needs.'

This 'honouring learner ambitions' is further operationalised in the concept of personalised learning. Tom O'Mara,

'We developed learning outcomes and learning activities for a series of awards. When all the content was written for all the learning outcomes, we then created it five times over to give opportunities for contextualising across five themes or areas. We used tutors to do this and they did a great job using themes such as: family, health, sport and leisure, work, money and technology'.

This not only allowed tutors to encourage reinforcing of concepts across a range of topics but it helped to personalise the content to learners' interests, in some way.

'I felt this was a really important part of WriteOn'.

Tom O'Mara

Gamification and supporting a positive learning identity

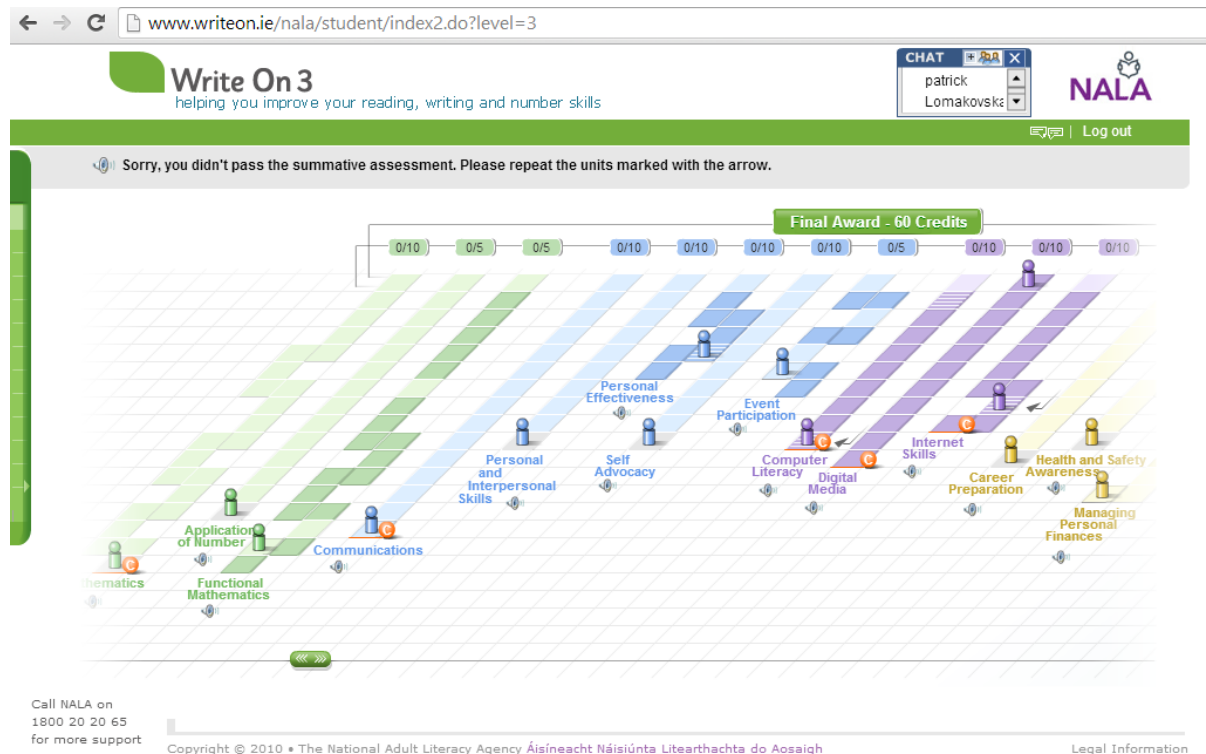


Figure 4 example of gamification on WriteOn

Alongside personalised learning was the use of gamification. Gamification uses games principles to support teaching and learning. This often involves the application of game design elements in non-game contexts. An example of this in WriteOn is using 'the peg' as one student called it, to move up the board and physically see yourself achieving your learning goal, in much the same way, you would in a computer game. Gee (2007), in particular, recognises the importance of gamification as a motivating factor in developing positive learner identities or confident learners willing to take risks with their learning. He proposes that early adverse educational experiences, which many adult learners have gone through, leave them with fractured learning identities- and unable to engage successfully in learning activities. New learning, he asserts, cannot occur until this fractured learning identity is repaired.

As WriteOn learner, Christina, said, 'WriteOn gave me hope in myself, you know. I wasn't upset in myself anymore. It took a few weeks, but then the learning was fun. I enjoyed setting myself against the computer – the fun of it. Getting your 'peg' to move up and then getting a cert. I was so excited.'

Online learning which uses gamification, may provide opportunities for fractured identity repair Christina describes, by encouraging the learner to take a risk and try learning; encouraging learners to put in a lot of effort even if they begin with low motivation; and the learner must achieve some meaningful success for expending their effort.

The use of gamification on the WriteOn site, which students have positively commented on in evaluations and in interviews (NALA 2012; 2015, telephone interview 2020), came from an idea Tom O'Mara and Ignaz Heinz worked on together. It was a concept that Youth Reach learners, in particular, enjoyed. Tom recalls the motivating aspect of gamification for a particular group of young men, who, having attended a full day intensive adult literacy class, carried on working on WriteOn at home, in order to see their 'figure' progress up the board to completion. Tom O'Mara,

'It was the first time these students had done any homework, willingly, and they were so motivated to complete the units of work. I underplayed the gamification aspect of the site, but it had a huge impact. People wanted to compete and get ahead of each other.'

However, other aspects of WriteOn contributed to positive learner identity as well. One such example was the **WriteOn e-Portfolio space**. Pinto (2016) has explained how the use of a tool such as WriteOn's e-Portfolio section, has the potential to invest greater agency in learners and enable them to control creation of knowledge through open-ended tasks that allow for personal meaning making.

Although only mandatory for accredited major awards, tasks such as the following were able to be completed by anyone at any time during the learning process.

- i. 'Take some pictures with a digital camera or phone of the following... or a topic of your choice, and upload to the Files area of your Portfolio'.
- ii. 'Upload 5 pictures of yourself using non-verbal signals to show you are happy, angry, agreeing with something someone said, etc....'.
- iii. 'Start an online chat conversation with your tutor, using the WriteOn chat window or another chat programme such as Skype, Gmail chat or Yahoo! Messenger'.
- iv. 'Writing: (1) A recent holiday or your opinion on any topic of interest; (2) Tell us your reason for going back to education'.

The encouragement for learners to use different digital tools (tasks i and ii, above) and free platforms available through the Internet (task iii) stimulated both cognition and self-regulating learning skills. As a learner engages in these tasks, s/he draws on diverse modalities (visual, verbal, tactile, animation, etc.) while, importantly, also drawing on the kind of knowledge and meanings they may value in their everyday life (Hamilton, 2016; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011; Hamilton and Tett 2019) In this way, vital spaces for identity formation and expression commonly open up.

High quality learning experience

There is still a common assumption that distance learning in general and online distance learning in particular, is a lower-quality, inauthentic learning experience compared to conventional class-based provision (Bayne et al 2019). Adults who have negative experiences of formal learning institutions have found the privacy and autonomy afforded by WriteOn allowed them to successfully fill gaps in their skills. This was either through independent learning online, with telephone tutor support, or in a blended learning situation, face-to-face with a tutor and a peer learner group. Men in particular liked the anonymity of distance learning (NALA 2013) with a telephone tutor available to support if needed.

Learning online through WriteOn prepared people for a future that allowed them to extend their skills through an increasing range of online learning services. WriteOn demonstrated that it accelerated progress in reading, writing, calculating, IT and work-related skills. Through online learning, people were constantly practising and extending their IT skills.

WriteOn and Centre use as a blended learning tool

WriteOn was not originally intended to be used with learners outside the NALA DLS. It was designed largely for individual learners and the volume of demand in blended learning contexts was not originally anticipated. WriteOn attracted a broader group of users, and was not only used by literacy groups but also by disability organisations, probation service groups, and job clubs. Tom O'Mara recalled how things changed, after WriteOn was in operation.

'I had a call from a centre tutor who had heard about WriteOn and she asked when and how could she use it and it took off from there, with centres.'

Tom O'Mara and Tommy McLoughlin both delivered extensive training sessions for centres and tutors around Ireland. There were occasions when this was a challenging experience, which in part, may have been linked to NALA's changed role as a provider. Tommy McLoughlin initially provided support to tutors on how to use the site then tutors asked for more targeted support on how to incorporate the use of WriteOn into face-to-face teaching as a way of offering students a blended learning experience.

In visits to centres to support tutors, Tom O'Mara recalls observing the benefits of WriteOn first hand for both tutors and students.

'Freed by the WriteOn software from having to introduce subject area content to learners, tutors could dedicate session time to provide greater personalised teaching. For example, in a centre where a group of men were attending a 16-week course, the tutor used WriteOn as a tool to engage and motivate and ultimately give them the confidence to engage in some group work, once they felt confident in themselves.

'The tutor was able to give attention to each student while they worked on their own level on their own choice of subject or she provided direct instruction and answered questions about the online exercises or materials. Every student made progress and achieved their learning goals, which gave them great confidence.'

The flexibility of this arrangement resulted in a qualitatively different engagement with tasks and the freedom for each student to control pace and sequencing and to have some choice in respect to content.

In a previous evaluation of the DLS, (NALA 2013) users of WriteOn said that working online reduced their negative associations with school and eased their way back into learning. The review recognised the added status and in-built privacy in computer-based learning which WriteOn afforded and which supported self-directed learning as well as dispelling negativities in both younger and older learners. At a time when IT skills are highly prized in the workforce, technology becomes both a means and an end in terms of filling skills gaps identified by learners. Specifically, the NALA evaluation (2012) of the DLS which included WriteOn, reported that: centres found that literacy learners were very interested in using ICT to improve their literacy skills; learners ICT skills were able to improve significantly in tandem with improvements in literacy skills; the use of WriteOn to

accompany face to face methods provided an effective means of extending learning time and encouraging independent study; the approach with WriteOn allowed tutors using blended methods to more effectively address individual learning needs.

A tutor who had used WriteOn extensively said,

‘Students are so proud to be able to engage with computers. It’s a huge thing for them. As one student told her tutor, ‘I feel like I’m working in an office, with my device here’.

Tutor, December 2020.

A number of influential groups have supported the approach to blended learning and RPL taken by NALA on WriteOn and suggested that it should be used more extensively. The Expert Group on Future Skills Need Report on Developing RPL (2010), recommended development of an integrated RPL service at levels 1-3. The report described the NALA process of RPL in WriteOn as ‘an effective RPL mechanism’, and recommended ‘the development of an integrated RPL service to be developed and delivered at levels 1-3...with the input and support of NALA’.

In a similar vein, the DES Review of Adult Literacy and Community Education Schemes (ALCES) funded Adult Literacy Provision and the DES Adult Literacy Programme Operational Guidelines for Providers (2013) recommended blended learning should be integrated into adult literacy service delivery through use of WriteOn. Commenting on the launch of PIAAC 2012, the Chairperson of the EGFSN, Una Halligan, specifically encouraged the use of ‘online literacy and numeracy improvement courses available on WriteOn’. As well as the contribution of WriteOn to raising skills levels, in a blended learning context, the website was able to provide a ‘rehearsal’ of many of the digital and collaborative aspects of the workplace that can be challenging for the long-term unemployed person.

WriteOn and learners

NALA has consistently advocated for the views and contributions of learners to be at the heart of all its work. To support this principle, this report includes the views of learners who have used WriteOn over the years. While only one learner was interviewed for this report, NALA has carried out a number of reviews which have included WriteOn, in different contexts, to gather learner views. This report draws on five significant reviews which were carried out to explore students' views and use of WriteOn. These reviews are over and above the usability reviews which NALA regularly conducts. The reviews are:

- Get Connected! Improving literacy and computer skills through online learning (2011)
- Distance Learning Service – Blended Learning Report (2011)
- Distance literacy: Filling the gaps in the time of recession (NALA 2012)
- English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL): Blended learning report (NALA 2014)
- WriteOn for work: Exploring a web-based approach to integrating literacy, numeracy and ICT as part of career preparation (NALA 2010)

Here is a selection of comments on WriteOn from ESOL learners who have used it:

- 'Handy for learning how to type and use the keyboard'
- 'Great for starting out on computers and reading'
- 'Great for learning English as an ESOL learner'
- 'I like WriteOn, it helps with my English. I worked with my daughter (8) and son (7) on WriteOn at home. The kids love it.'
- 'All the pages, doing the exercises, listening to story, I liked the reading exercises, I liked audio (visually impaired), liked all of it, working on computer skills'

WriteOn learner:

'I couldn't even switch the computer on but the tutor really helped me and encouraged me and now I am flying on it. I went on and got Level 2 and mostly managed that myself. Now I am doing Level 3. Sometimes I am up until 2 in the morning. I just have the maths to do now. I am still on the phone with the tutor because I need her support.'

Feeley and Hegarty (2013) in their review of the NALA DLS conducted a focus group with WriteOn learners and stated,

‘One woman explained how to get started and praised the clarity of the voiced explanation at the beginning. They explained that online learning was motivating in that ‘you always want to go on to the next step’. Another woman in the focus group said she had become addicted to WriteOn and often worked late into the night because she just ‘wanted to climb those ladders.’

(Distance Literacy: filling the gaps in a time of recession. An Evaluation of NALA’s Distance Learning Service in Final Report, 2013, p 52)

The Report further states,

‘WriteOn learners were positive about the motivational aspect of WriteOn while others enjoyed the way they became absorbed in topics and were able to manage their time and progress. The removal of ‘failure’ was a popular feature and learners enjoyed being able to retry things that were difficult until they understood them.’

(Distance Literacy: filling the gaps in a time of recession. An Evaluation of NALA’s Distance Learning Service in Final Report, 2013, p 53)

In telephone interviews which Feeley and Hegarty conducted with WriteOn learners, learners stated,

‘I love the site. There is great variety. It makes it easy to learn and allows you to choose the time you study.’

(Telephone interviewee)

‘Online really works for me. I would definitely do more like this ...every so often. I have found my way of learning and will keep going. It keeps you on your toes.’

(Telephone interviewee)

Learners who participated in a WriteOn 4 Work (2010-2011) programme had a successful experience of using WriteOn either as part of a blended learning programme working with a tutor or working on their own on the site. WriteOn 4 Work was a distance learning programme for adults in receipt of a Jobseeker’s payment for longer than three months, who wished to improve their basic skills and gain a qualification at Level 3. Participants worked at their own pace, using WriteOn.

They could enrol directly onto the programme and learn independently online until certification, or could have the assistance of a tutor over the phone. Some participants felt that using WriteOn and gaining certification had a very positive impact on their job seeking skills. One learner said that he ‘... has just been offered a job.’ Others felt it ‘helped in that they put it on CV’ and one felt ‘... he can now expand the type of job he will look for.’

‘I needed some help in getting started. I think people at my level would, you know. It wasn’t easy to get signed up. I felt so upset in myself at first, it was all so new. But after 4 or 5 weeks it was fun. It’s about putting yourself against the computer – the fun of it. I would never have talked to other people. But I had to ask another student for help with the computer. It made me talk. Then, I just wanted to move the ‘peg’ up the board and I was excited to get my certificate.’

Blended learning student, December 2020.

Evidence from Connected! (2011) showed that inclusion, enhanced job opportunities, family and certification were important motivations for students using WriteOn. Learners wanted to be, 'able to do what others can do' in relation to using computers. As one student noted at the time,

'They are everywhere now really. Even if you ring for a pizza they put your details into a computer. You feel very left out if you can't use them.'

Blended learner, 2011.

The report also demonstrated that being involved in learning computers was also seen to be preparation for a future when computers would be even more prevalent in everyday life. Learners hoped that negative memories of exclusion would be left behind through successful engagement with what was perceived as high-status computer learning. This would in turn leave the way open for new beginnings, for a re-freshed learner identity to emerge.

'It is a new literacy, a new chance. Exciting way of learning I'm not getting left behind like the last time'.

Blended learner, 2011.

WriteOn was not without its challenges for learners. Some struggled to get started with using WriteOn and even Christina stated in 2020 that she felt some learners would still need support to access Learn with NALA. Some learners also struggled with navigating the site in the early days and many of these usability issues have been addressed. However, an important aspect identified in the early days was the issue of providing feedback for independent learners. Learners expressed a view that they wished to know not only what they had completed incorrectly but also why the errors may have occurred. The issue of access to technology was also an issue for students. In the early stages of its use, fewer students appeared to have access to the internet and technology at home.

WriteOn in numbers

WriteOn has been very successful in attracting a range of learners who wished to study either independently, as part of an ETB or centres in the community and voluntary sector blended learning programme or as part of NALA's distance learning service. Many of these learners were able to receive recognition of their prior learning and were able to pursue certification. Evidence suggests that WriteOn has definitely met the need for a different type of provision to be available to learners. There is some research (Askov et al 2003, Silver-Paculia 2008, Reder 2008) to show that even if places on face-to-face programmes increased dramatically, they would still, on their own, not address the issue of unmet learner need. Therefore, Learn with NALA will, as WriteOn before it, continue to have an important role in meeting the needs of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills learners in Ireland. Data from the site and learner testimonies present a positive picture of learner engagement. However, it has been difficult to find out how many actual learners have used the site over its eleven years. Historically, 71,269 learner accounts were set up on WriteOn, however, some learners had more than one account. Per year, there were on average 5k-7k accounts created with the lowest, 536, in 2008 and a peak of 7,550 in 2012.

Barriers to entry

There were 49,495 accounts with one or less logins. Learners could not trial the website or get an idea of what was involved without signing up. This figure indicates that many may have registered to check the site out. There was significant evidence of duplicate accounts where learners may have forgotten their password and created new accounts. It also suggests that there was a drop off rate where learners signed up and for one reason or another and did not return.

Since 49,495 accounts had 1 or less login, we can infer that there were 21,774 learners who used the site to take a programme or course while acknowledging that a portion of the 49,495 may have had their needs met with one session. Some may have registered a duplicate account in error and some may have registered just to have a look and see if it was for them. Equally, we can infer that more information initially, about what is involved, along with some sort of trial option and a clearer login process would be more beneficial for learners.



Figure 5 Numbers for learner account, courses completed and gender

Course popularity

The most popular courses, that is, the courses with the most enrolments were the level 2 courses, level 2 Major Award in General Learning. On WriteOn, learners registered for all level two courses in one go. They were not available for registration on an individual (Minor Award) basis. Level 2 courses were available on the site before level 3, 1 or 4.

The courses that learners were most successful on, that is, the learner reached the summative assessment, in order of popularity, are shown in figure 6 below.

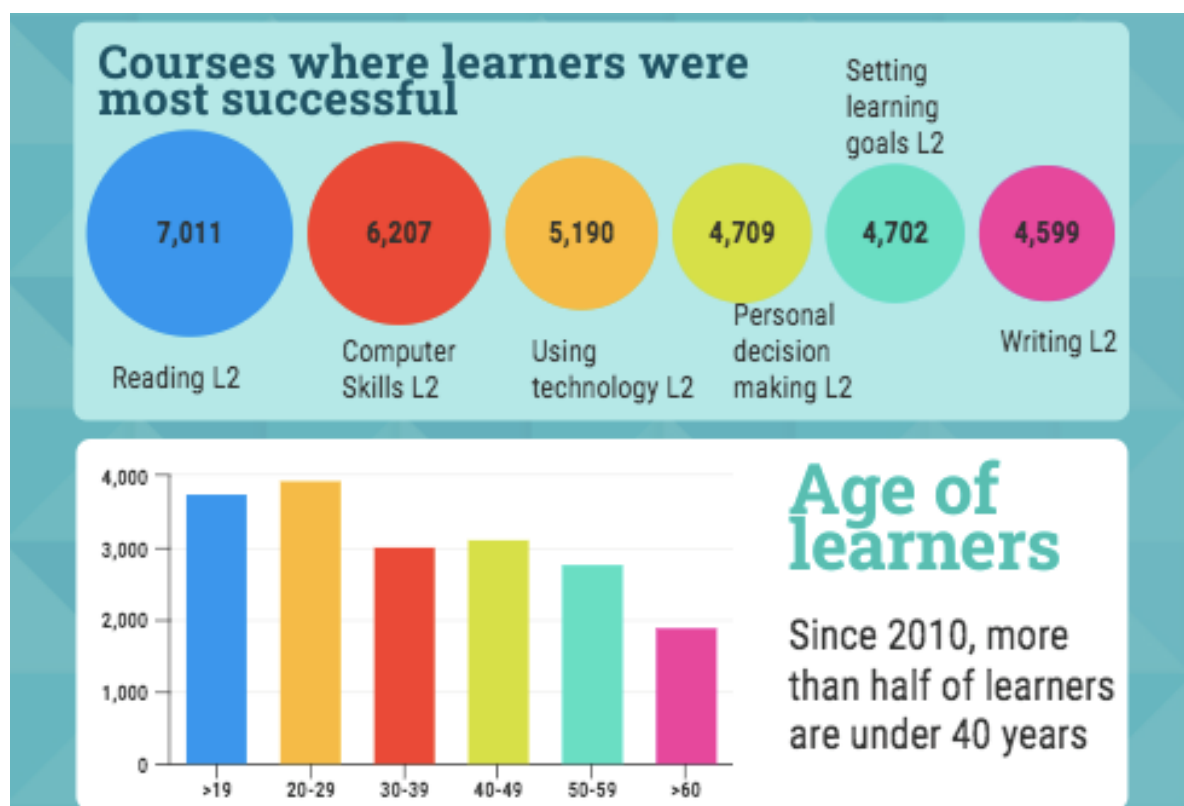


Figure 6 most successful courses and age of learners

Between 2010 and 2019, the average percentage of male and female learners achieving certification was 54% to 46%. In terms of age, there were learners represented in all the age categories, ranging from under 15 years to over 65. However, it is worth noting, in figure 6 above, that learners under the age of 40, account for more than 50% of learners gaining certification in any given year. Understanding the demographics of the new site are important for NALA to plan for any future content changes.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning was available on WriteOn for all learning outcomes in all level 2 and 3 courses. RPL for all learning outcomes on a full course (Minor Award) was achieved 13,661 times on WriteOn with 1,574 at level 3 and 12,087 at level 2. This is where a learner received a grade of 99-100% on the initial assessment and allowed the learner to advance from the initial assessment to the summative assessment for the course. RPL on parts of a course (Minor Award), per learning outcome was also available and very successful on WriteOn at levels 2 and 3. For example, learners received a grade of 90%-98% on initial assessment 50,128 times. Learners were most successful in achieving RPL in the level 2 Technology course (average score 83%) and least successful on the level 3 Functional Mathematics course (average score 38%).

While there may be some difficulty in quantifying individual learner numbers from WriteOn, there is, however, a strong set of validated data relating to students who have used WriteOn to complete courses and gain QQI certification.

WriteOn in numbers 2008-2019



Summative Assessment

- **72,574** times when learners reached the summative assessment stage
- **60,040** summative assessments successfully completed
- **42,190** awards issued
- **17,850** learners successfully completed a course, did not receive an award



Certification

- **42,190** minor awards at Level 2 and Level 3
- **34,343** awards at Level 2
- **7,847** awards at Level 3



Certificated learners

- **11,593** total certificated learners
- **7,668** centre learners
- **2977** independent learners
- **355** working with NALA tutors
- **593** unknown learners

Figure 7 Summative assessment, certification and type of learner

During the summative assessment process, learners were asked to complete a form to confirm that the work was their own before submitting for certification. The data evidenced that this was a barrier to success with 45% percent of learners not ticking the box and therefore not going forward for certification.

It is clear from Figure 7 that the vast majority of learners, 66%, who used WriteOn to gain certification, were doing so as part of a blended learning programme in a centre, thereby increasing their access to provision through use of the site. The table also shows that certification at Level 2 was achieved by 73% of learners. It is worth noting the number of NALA learners who achieved certification over the eleven-year period. This equates to 3% of all certified learners.

From 2008 – 2019, a total of 31,739 learners completed at least one course on WriteOn and 23,969 learners completed more than one course on WriteOn. In terms of awards, 42,190 minor awards were achieved at levels 2 and 3. This then equates to 19,131 QQI awards achieved by WriteOn learners at levels 2 and 3, with 14,908 minor awards and 4,223 major awards. These awards were achieved by 11,593 certified learners over the eleven years.

There is evidence to show that of those learners who were registered with a centre, the majority of centres were based in the Dublin area.

The data shows a wide spread of the use of WriteOn in 190 centres across Ireland over the 11 years. 13,071 learner accounts were registered across these 190 centres. It was not mandatory at registration for learners to indicate a centre and indeed 79% of registered learner accounts did not indicate if they were learning independently, with NALA or with a centre.

When a centre was indicated, the data shows that these centres were both ETB centres and, in the community and voluntary sector and spread across Ireland. 128 centres were in the disability, community and voluntary sector (special schools, community projects and local partnerships. 6,709 (51%) of centre learners were registered in these centres while 49% (6,362) were registered in one of 69 ETB centres. 15 out of the 16 ETBs had centres registered with WriteOn (all bar Donegal ETB). The ETB with the most registered learners on WriteOn was Galway and Roscommon (GRETB) with 1,883 learner accounts registered to it.

There were 12 awards available at QQI Level 2 and 14 awards available at QQI Level 3 on WriteOn. Tables 1 and 2 below show the level 2 and 3 award trends over the periods 2008-19 and 2011-19, respectively.

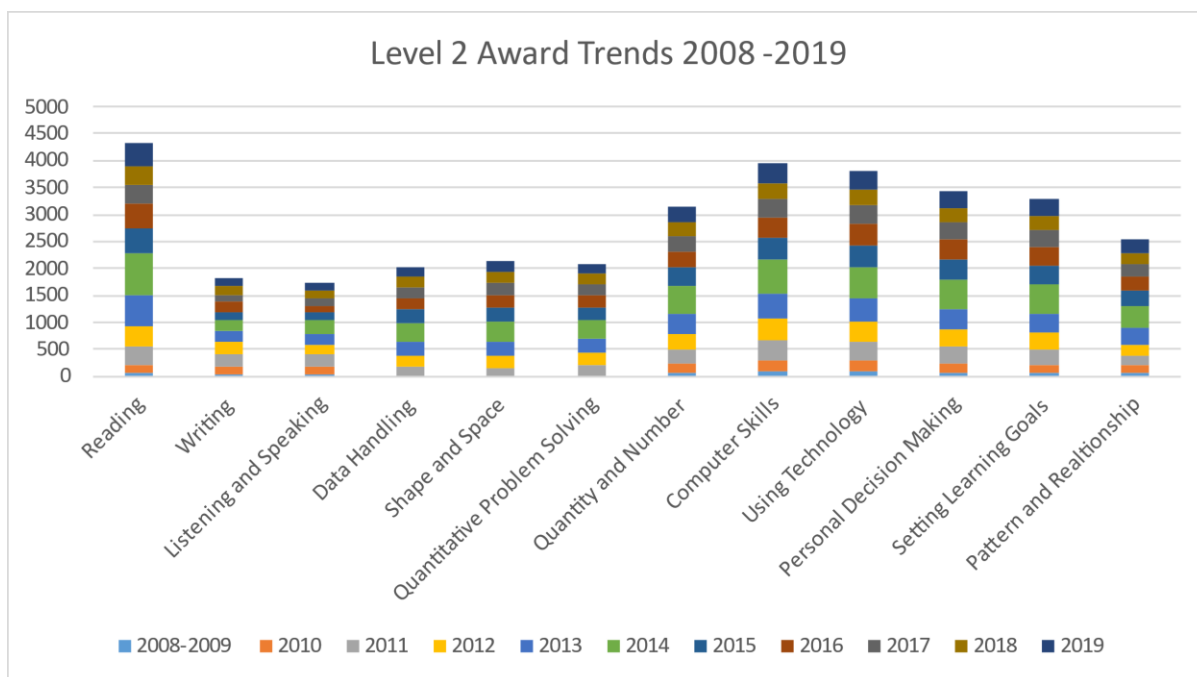


Table 1 Level 2 award trends 2008-2019

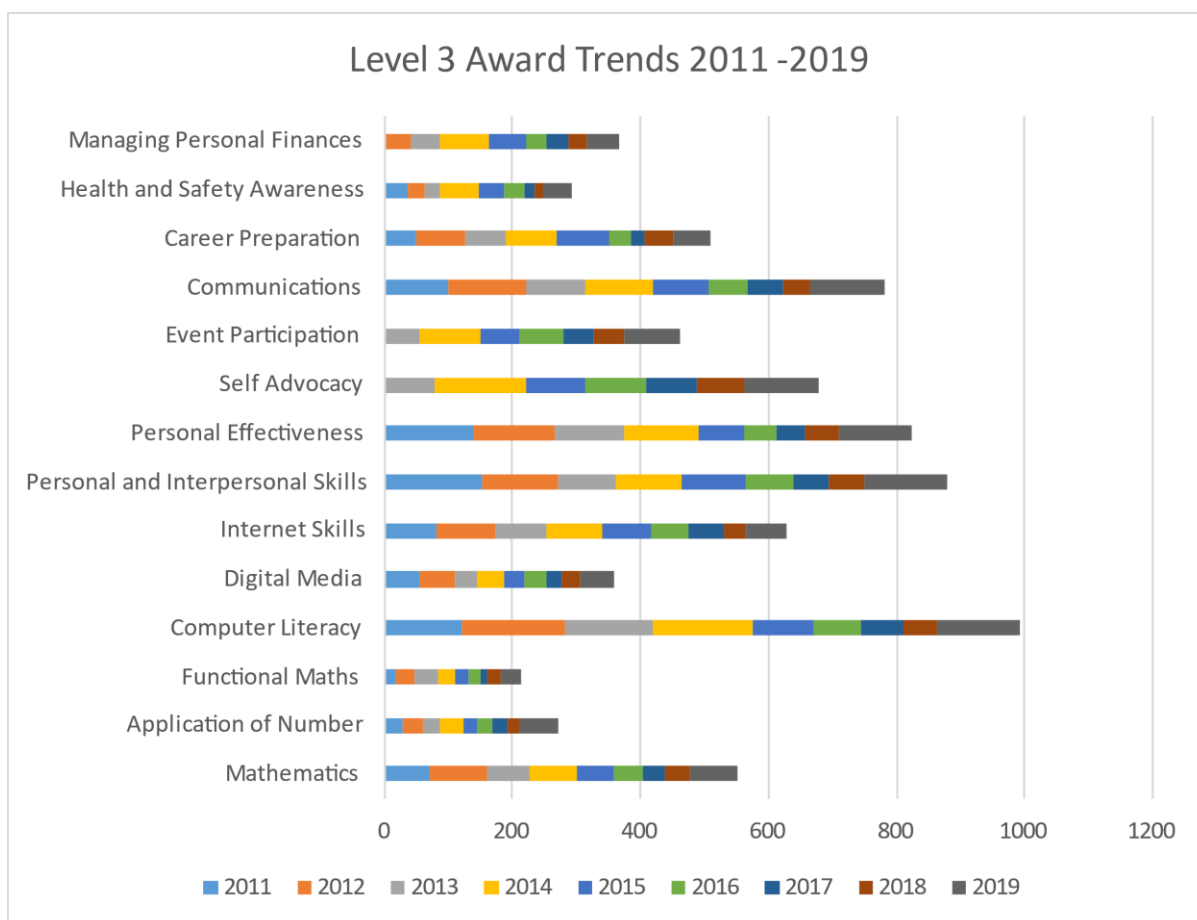


Table 2 Level 3 award trends 2011-2019

The issue of data collection and analysis has been addressed for Learn with NALA and therefore accessing and understanding the data about learners will be more straightforward in the future. As Tommy McLoughlin explained,

‘The move to the new site will give learners a more modern and contemporary feel. It’ll look and feel like the websites they are more familiar with. And the move to a licence model of provision for Learn with NALA will mean some changes to access too. There won’t be the big numbers of accounts not recognised as being linked to a student. We’ll know our learners and centres will know theirs as well.’

Tommy McLoughlin, NALA, November 2020.

For example, the data for 2020 learner engagement with Learn with NALA, shows there were 576 centre learners, 232 NALA distance learners, 1,032 independent learners and 125 home-schooled learners.

Conclusion

WriteOn has been very successful in attracting a range of learners who wished to study either independently, as part of an ETB or other blended learning programme or as part of NALA's distance learning service. Many of these learners were able to receive recognition of their prior learning and were able to pursue certification.

WriteOn has successfully met the need for a different type of provision to be available to learners. There is some research (Askov et al 2003, Silver-Paculia 2008, Reder 2008) to show that even if places on face-to-face programmes increased dramatically, they would still, on their own, not address the issue of unmet learner need.

In 2008 when it was developed, WriteOn was recognised as being 'at the cutting edge' (NALA 2011) of online literacy developments. It has achieved both national and international recognition and has played a major role in providing access, choice and pathways to certification for thousands of learners. However, currently, fewer than 10% of adults with an unmet literacy need are in some form of provision. WriteOn has handed on the baton of responsibility to Learn with NALA, which now has a major role in rising to the challenge of meeting these learners' needs. It seems appropriate to end with Christina's words, 'WriteOn gave me hope in myself, you know. I wasn't upset in myself anymore. It took a few weeks, but then the learning was fun. I enjoyed setting myself against the computer – the fun of it. Getting your 'peg' to move up and then getting a cert. I was so excited.'

Appendices

Appendix 1

Report Methodology

This section explains the research aim and objectives as well as the methods of data generation and analysis used for the report.

Research aim

The aim of this research is to review and analyse existing data including evaluations of WriteOn.ie and other relevant national and international data with a view to identifying what worked with WriteOn.

Research objectives

The research objective is to tell the story of WriteOn.ie.

Based on the research aim and objective the following exploratory questions were identified to guide research activity.

- What were the circumstances (educational, political and social) that led to the development of WriteOn? Who were the key actors involved in this development and what insights can they offer on WriteOn's development, which are not already widely known?
- How has WriteOn been received by key stakeholders (national and international) over its eleven-year history?
- What are WriteOn's key achievements?

Data generation methods

In order to answer the research questions the following research activities were undertaken. These were:

- (1) A literature review to underpin critical engagement with a range of relevant national and international literatures was carried out. The review focused on WriteOn and online learning for adults across a range of contexts.
- (2) Semi-structured, 1:1, online and telephone interviews with key stakeholders. These stakeholders were identified in discussion with NALA to include: current and previous NALA staff who were involved directly in the site design, development, materials development and implementation of WriteOn; a member of staff from each of SOLAS and QQI; WriteOn tutors and students. A total of ten interviews were carried out.
- (3) Engagement and support from NALA colleagues to access and interpret key quantitative data related to WriteOn from 2008 – 2019.

Data generation – literature review

The process for carrying out the literature review involved identifying key search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria and appropriate databases to maximise the retrieval of relevant literature and data. In particular the NALA database of research and policy documents has been invaluable. Other sites accessed include, Google Scholar; Science Direct; ERIC – both public and subscription; Directory of Open Access Journals; IBSS and ProQuest. For European perspectives the EPPI Centre Database of Education Research; Eurydice; OECD Education iLibrary.

The initial scoping of the literature generated academic literature; practitioner-focused publications; government reports; large-scale representative surveys and case studies. Previous NALA research reports which included references to WriteOn, although they may not have had WriteOn as their main focus, have also been examined. The reviews generated significantly more qualitative empirical research, which was then supplemented with quantitative data that was primarily generated from official documents as well as WriteOn analytics. Accessing quantitative data was important for the current research because there is a need to draw on both qualitative and quantitative research to answer the research questions.

Data generation – semi-structured interviews

Alongside the literature review, the views and insights of those stakeholders who have been directly involved with the design, development and delivery of WriteOn were gathered. Creating opportunities for dialogue is at the heart of qualitative research practice. The purpose of interviewing for educational research has been stated variously as (i) to find a way in to understand the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of those experiences (Kvale and Brinkman 2009); (ii) to provide rich and detailed answers from the interviewees' perspective (Bryman 2008) (iii) to enable interviewees to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007). What these views share is the 'importance of interaction for knowledge construction', (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). My view of interviews supports the stance that interviews are useful for gathering information while at the same time they are practical sites of interaction in which knowledge and meaning is co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee. To facilitate the interview process, all participants were given the interview questions, a minimum of two days prior to the interview. A full list of interview questions for each stakeholder is available in Appendix 1.

Data generation – interrogation of quantitative data

In consultation with NALA colleagues a set of questions was generated which related to the quantitative data needed to support the report. NALA colleagues provided all quantitative data for the report.

The questions used are available in Appendix 2.

Data analysis

A thematic data analysis approach, using both inductive and deductive analysis was used. Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research and focuses on examining themes or patterns of meaning within data. This method can identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report the topics found in a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Its main advantage is that it provided a more accessible form of analysis. Having a thorough familiarity and understanding of the data generated, allowed for relative ease of coding which in turn enabled the key themes and findings to be identified. These themes and findings, examined in the report, form the remaining structure of this report.

Appendix 2

Definitions

During the review and research for this report it became clear that the terms used to describe online learning and other related learning activities are many and varied and often used specifically and interchangeably by those involved in these and related processes. Setting out the definitions in this section, provides a useful means of mapping the territory that is covered by a particular set of terms as well as ensuring a common understanding of how the terms are used in the context of this report. However, there is a more fundamental reason for setting out definitions of literacy and related terms, and that is the definitions which are used and believed, in circulating discourses, inform how literacy is conceptualised, taught and assessed. For example, the OECD focuses on literacy as reading and excludes writing from its definition of adult literacy for the Survey of Adult Skills in PIAAC. Therefore, with writing excluded from their definition, the research suggests that the estimate of need figures for literacy skills are under estimated.

Another reason for setting out the definitions, especially in relation to emerging and contested concepts, such as digital competence, digital literacy and digital pedagogy, is that NALA can review, perhaps as part of a review of the Guidelines, that the terms it uses, reconcile with its views of literacy, which itself was contested when the Guidelines (1985, 2012) were written.

In short, the definitions set out here serve to remind that the terms which fall into widespread use are never value free. The responsibility is to ensure they fit with NALA's ethos.

A list of terms and their meanings is provided in Appendix 1, where currently multiple interpretations are possible. Where possible, NALA definitions for relevant concepts have been adopted and used in the report.

Digital competence

The term **digital** is nowadays used instead of such previously used terms as information and communication technology (ICT) or information technology when talking about technology-related skills. In this new form, the term digital competence still carries the broad meaning of technology skills, but with other connotations.

Research for this report suggests that the term digital competence is an emerging, broad concept, which connects various domains, in that it consists of something from each domain, and which operates as a loosely defined “boundary concept” amongst policy-makers, practitioners and researchers (Ilomäki et al. 2016). Thus, the literature proposes that digital competence comprises three related (boundary) competences. These include: [1] technical competence, the ability to use digital technologies in a meaningful way for working, studying and in everyday life, [2] the ability to evaluate digital technologies critically, and [3] the motivation to participate and commit in the digital culture.

The term competence is now being used in place of the term skills, reflecting the need for a wider and more profound scope for issues related to skills: ‘A competence is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context’ (OECD 2005, p. 4).

Another reason for using the term competence rather than skill is based on the connection between educational outcomes and assessment practices in general. There is a shift from a content based (and knowledge-based) assessment approach to a competence-based approach, focusing on “new skills for new jobs” (Eurydice 2011, p.7). New suggestions for developing qualification and assessment frameworks based on competences have been linked to the demands of globalisation and the knowledge society (European Commission 2010).

Digital competence has also taken on a political aspect reflecting beliefs and wishes about adults' future skills, thought to be necessary for capable citizens in the 21st century. It has roots in economic competition, an area in which new technologies and knowledge-intensive work are expected to have a major role in the future (Eurydice 2011; OECD 2005; 2010).

The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) (Carretero et al 2017) defines digital competence as, 'involving the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. The digital competence framework consists of 21 competences divided in the following five competence areas:

- information and data literacy
- communication and collaboration
- digital content creation (including programming)
- safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity) and
- problem solving.

SOLAS used this definition from DigiComp in their proposed literacy, numeracy and digital skills strategy.

Digital literacy

The term digital literacy is credited to Glister (1998). He distinguished digital literacy from the more limited technical skills view of digital literacy by explicitly stating that 'digital literacy is about mastering ideas, not keystrokes' (Glister 1998, p. 2). Thus, digital literacy is more than the ability to use digital sources effectively. Eshet-Alkalai (2004) published a conceptual model for digital literacy, which emphasises not only the ability to use software or operate a digital device, but also stressing cognitive and social-emotional skills in order to perform tasks and solve problems in digital environments.

SOLAS (2020), in their consultation for a new literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy, adopt both the Department for Education and Skills definition as well as drawing on Daly's (2015) definition which appears to acknowledge this 'more than technical' skills definition: 'Digital literacy is the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media. It is also described as:

"...a lifelong learning process of capacity building for using digital technology, communications tools, and/or networks in creating, accessing, analysing, managing, integrating, evaluating, and communicating information in order to function in a knowledge- based economy and society". (The State of California 2010 p10, in Daly 2015, p5)

Digital literacy pedagogy or digital pedagogy

There is no unified approach to defining the terms digital literacy pedagogy or digital pedagogy. However, across a range of definitions, some key characteristics have emerged. These are: (i) the study of how digital technologies can be used to best effect in teaching and learning; (ii) digital pedagogy is the use of electronic elements to enhance or to change the experience of education; (iii) a digital pedagogy is the study of how to teach using digital technologies; (iv) digital pedagogy involves understanding the learning theories and the types of learning opportunities technology affords and the learning outcomes that are expected. It is a meshing of pedagogical expertise with digital technologies; (v) digital pedagogy is precisely not about using digital technologies for teaching and, rather, about approaching those tools from a critical pedagogical perspective. So, it is as much about using digital tools thoughtfully as it is about deciding when not to use digital tools, and about paying attention to the impact of digital tools on learning (Frost 2014).

As can be seen above, across the literature, there seems to be some agreement that teachers' technological skills, although important, are not the defining factor for an effective digital pedagogy. Digital pedagogy is about an attitude towards digital technologies. It is more about a willingness to use them effectively in the classroom and to understand how and why they should be used to support effective learning opportunities, including critical digital literacy.

Critical literacy, critical digital literacy and the relationship between them.

NALA's definition of literacy (see below) is influenced by the teachings of Paulo Freire (1972) which has at its core a view of literacy which empowers adults to 'reflect on, question and analyse their world', NALA (2012, p 15). Freire is considered one of the founders of critical pedagogy (Giroux 2010) and literacy, for Freire, was, according to Aronowitch (2009), 'a preparation for a self-managed life'. Critical pedagogy, therefore, provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens. And so, in developing not only the traditional skills associated with reading and writing, those of reflection and analysis, are also important in the critical literacy classroom. As the NALA Guidelines state, 'Freire's view is that developing skills of reflection and analysis enables students to take social action to improve conditions for themselves and their communities.' NALA Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work (2012, page 15).

Critical literacy pedagogy therefore, with roots in Freirean critical pedagogy, is a well-established approach that sees teachers situate the teaching of reading and writing, firmly within the social contexts of students' lived experiences. Learning in critical literacy classrooms is therefore geared towards exploring how everyday textual practices manifest power relations and contribute to symbolic and material inequalities among social groups.

Although critical literacy does not have a universal definition, there is agreement in the literature (Vasquez, Janks, and Comber 2019) about its key characteristics.

Critical digital literacy, however, is a newer term that is much-contested in the literature (Pangrazio 2016). What is not contested, is its importance.

Literacy: NALA definition

NALA defines literacy as involving: 'listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communications: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals, families and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.' (NALA Guidelines 2012)

NALA (2020) advocates an evolving definition of literacy while acknowledging the influence of the autonomous model (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Street 1995; 2000; 2012) of literacy. This is expressed in the following statement in the NALA (2020) Strategic Plan. 'In the past, literacy was understood to be about individuals having the skills needed to read and write. These skills were seen as technical skills that remained the same and were unrelated to the social context in which they were used.'^{*}

NALA (2020) further states that this narrow, reductionist view of literacy is rejected in favour of literacy as a broader concept. 'This means that literacy is understood to be about individuals having the skills needed to fully take part in society. Literacy involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate, access services, and make informed choices. These aspects of literacy evolve and are closely related to social practice which recognises that people use different literacies for various situations, for example people need health specific literacy skills when dealing with a doctor' (NALA 2020, page 5).

NALA views literacy as a changing, socially-situated concept that is necessary for full inclusion in all aspects of society, including work. Literacy now includes a broad range of language and literacy activities in a wide range of contexts: listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using technology.

NALA maintain that there are four main areas that are central to building adult literacy and counteracting the long-term effects of poor literacy: health, the family, the community and the workplace.



Figure 1 NALA representation of literacy in *Literacy Now* (NALA 2020, p 9)

Health literacy: NALA definition

NALA (2020 p 14) defines Health literacy as being concerned with, 'how people engage with services that are essential to their physical, mental and psychological health and wellbeing. Health literacy has two elements:

- Health services communicate clearly and take account of possible health literacy and numeracy needs
- People understand health information correctly and make informed decisions.

Family literacy: NALA definition

The term 'family literacy' was introduced as a concept by Taylor 1983 (NALA 2011) who studied the development of literacy and language use in homes, in the USA. Since then, the term family literacy has been used to describe literacy development work that focuses on how literacy is developed at home, and education courses that support and develop this dimension of literacy development. Research in Ireland (Heggarty & Feeley and at international level reveals similar issues in relation to literacy, schools, children's learning and the key role of parents and carers. In particular, the research highlights the vital role played by parents, grandparents and other care-givers in children's education. According to the research parental involvement in a child's learning can have a positive impact on their educational outcomes. (Carpentieri et al. 2011; Desforges, 2003; Feinstein et al, 2004; NALA 2009; NESF, 2009).

Family literacy describes the uses of literacy and numeracy within families and communities, especially activities that involve two or more generations. Family literacy also denotes education programmes that help to develop literacy and numeracy learning in a family context. (NALA 2004, p 8, 2011 cited in NALA 2020, p 2 and p 28)

Workplace literacy: NALA definition

Literacy for Life (NALA 2020 p 13) defines workplace literacy as 'the mix of skills employees need to complete everyday tasks at work.' NALA lobbied for and helped establish the Workplace Basic Education Fund in 2005 to support employers and employees to improve literacy and numeracy levels in the workplace.

These 30-hour courses are delivered by local adult literacy services in the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

Numeracy: NALA definition

NALA (2017) recognises that there is no universally accepted agreement on a definition of adult numeracy. Within the field of adult mathematics education, numeracy as a term is both important and highly contentious (O'Donoghue 2003; Coben 2000, 2003; Gal 2000; Evans 2000; Wedege 2010). Coben considers adult numeracy, 'a highly slippery concept' (2003, p9) and Gal (2005) states, 'The construct "numeracy" does not have a universally accepted definition, nor agreement about how it differs from "mathematics"'. As Coben puts it,

There is no shortage of definitions but there is, crucially, a shortage of consensus, with the term meaning different things in different educational and political contexts and in different surveys of need.

(Coben 2000, p 35)

In her research report, **A review of adult numeracy policy and practice in Ireland**, Byrne (2017) states, 'It is generally accepted that 'numeracy' refers to the ability to be able to perform not just the four basic mathematical operations, but also the skills of measurement, interpretation of statistical information, use of shape and form, and the ability to think critically about mathematical and quantitative information. This view is endorsed in Gal et al, 2005; Tout & Schmitt, 2002).' In NALA's Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work, numeracy is viewed as an integral part of literacy as all adults face a range of mathematical demands in everyday life.

The Guidelines define numeracy as: A life skill that involves the competent use of everyday mathematical language, knowledge and skills, and the confidence to manage the mathematical demands of real-life situations (NALA, 2012, p.8).

This definition reflects a shared understanding and broad consensus among Irish adult numeracy tutors that numeracy is the application of mathematics in everyday situations, and that numeracy practices need to support learners' confidence to critically use numeracy in real world contexts and situations (NALA, 2013).

ESOL: NALA definition

NALA (2020, p 14) defines ESOL as 'English for Speakers of Other Languages. ESOL learning is important for non-native English speakers in order to live and navigate daily life and experiences in Ireland. It is an important resource for migrant communities. In 2012, the Department of Education and Skills Adult Literacy Operation Guidelines prioritised ESOL provision at QQI Level 3 for target groups including low-income EU immigrant workers. The Adult Literacy Review (2013) recommended that the DES should re-emphasise this priority and that ESOL learners should be provided with tuition that will bring them to a level of functional competency or QQI Level 3.

The Adult Literacy Review found that in 2011 nearly 900 ESOL learners achieved certification at QQI Level 3 and that over 400 learners achieved certification at Levels 4 and 5. The Adult Literacy Review also recommended that: Access to distance and blended learning should be integrated into all service delivery and these options should be promoted for all students in Adult Literacy programmes in order to increase access to learning opportunities.

Distance Learning Service:

Distance Learning in NALA is defined as occurring when learners and tutors are separated by either space or time. This broad definition reflects the fact that distance education can involve people studying in a range of personal contexts using a number of learning or communication technologies.

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

Online learning: a definition

Terms such as eLearning, online learning blended learning and ICT learning are often used interchangeably in the media and policy discourse. However, there are important differences between them.

Online learning (often referred to as eLearning) refers to the use of digital materials to support learning. It does not necessarily take place at a distance. It can be used in physical classrooms to complement more traditional teaching methods; in which case it is called **blended learning**.

In this brief, the term **online learning** is used mostly to refer to learning through digital resources that is carried out at a distance. This is particularly the case when discussing measures taken in the context of the COVID-19 crisis during which most face-to-face learning was interrupted to enforce physical distancing.

Blended learning

Blended learning is about facilitating learning using a variety of approaches, best determined by the needs of the learner and the capability of the provider. It may or may not involve computers. It is simply a way of creatively matching different approaches to learners, content and contexts. (NALA, 2009)

Mobile learning or m-learning (mLearning)

The concept of mobile learning can be understood, at its simplest, as learning enabled by mobile devices. Mobile learning (m-learning) has also been defined as “learning that occurs when learners have access to information anytime and anywhere via mobile technologies to perform authentic activities in the context of their learning” (Martin and Ertzberger 2013).

Spiky profile

Spiky profile is the term used to describe the different levels in listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and digital skills that one student may have.

Appendix 3

Questions for interviews

- When and how you started using WriteOn.
- How have you used WriteOn with students?
- Your views of the strengths and weaknesses of the WriteOn site.
- Any developments to WriteOn you are aware of, over the time you've been using WriteOn.
- Are you familiar with the new Learn with NALA site? If yes, how do you think it differs from WriteOn?
- The new site has a tutor CPD section; what particular type of CPD would you like NALA to include?
- Anything else you wish to say about WriteOn or Learn with NALA.

Questions for interviews 3 and 4

- At what stage in WriteOn's development/life did you become involved with it? Where was it at, when you joined NALA?
- What was your role during the time you were at NALA as it related to WriteOn?
- Were there any significant changes to WriteOn during the time you were involved with it?
- I know you did a lot of support work for tutors, with training them in using WriteOn. Maybe discuss your perception of tutor needs in relation to WriteOn?
- And anything else you want to say in relation to WriteOn or indeed Learn with NALA!

Questions for interview 5

- SOLAS and its role (historically and currently) in relation to adult literacy and numeracy in general including the forthcoming 10-year literacy and numeracy strategy; a little about its relationship with NALA.
- WriteOn's role in relation to the previous literacy and numeracy strategy and how will Learn with NALA fit into the new Literacy and Numeracy strategy?
- Do you have a sense of how Learn with NALA could address/support the unmet adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills need?
- Would SOLAS set enrolment or achievement targets for NALA in relation to Learn with NALA?
- Learn with NALA will have a tutor CPD element. What would SOLAS like to see from NALA in relation to adult literacy and numeracy tutor CPD.

Questions for interview 6

- Your role as it relates to WriteOn and the Learn with NALA site.
- Key developments/changes to WriteOn, over time you were involved with.
- WriteOn's strengths/weaknesses, in your opinion.
- Differences and similarities between WriteOn and new site - Learn with NALA
- The benefits to students/tutors/NALA of Learn with NALA site.
- Anything else you feel you would like to say about WriteOn/Learn with NALA

Questions for interview 7

- How would you describe the broader context (political, educational, social, cultural) within which the development of WriteOn.ie took shape and emerged?
- What barriers did you face in realising the vision?
- How was the ambitious vision realised?
- How does NALA reconcile its two roles, as a provider of learning opportunities as well as a 'think tank'?
- How was WriteOn received by other providers when it was launched?

Questions for interview 8

- What did your role as DLC involve, prior to WriteOn?
- Can you remember how WriteOn emerged as a idea/vision within NALA? What were the key factors that led to its development at that time?
- Could you explain your involvement in WriteOn's development during your time at NALA?
- Do you think there's a place for mobile technology on the new Learn with NALA site?
- What would you think of a Learn with NALA app?
- What makes for effective digital learning?

Questions for interview 9

- When did you start using WriteOn?
- How did that come about?
- How long have you been using it?
- What courses are you/have you done on WriteOn?
- Tell me about how you use WriteOn? On your own at home? In a class as blended learning? As part of a class etc?
- How often and when would you sign on to use WriteOn?
- What do you like about WriteOn?
- If you were to think back to when you were last doing some learning, before WriteOn, what would you say the differences are between that learning experience and using WriteOn?
- Why do you think WriteOn works for you as a learner?
- What would you say to other students and maybe tutors who haven't tried or are a bit reluctant to try online learning, like Learn with NALA?
- Have you tried the new site, Learn with NALA? If yes,
- How are you getting on with that?
- How is it different to WriteOn?
- What do you like about it?
- What course/s are you using it for?
- Are there any things you would like the new site to have, that are not there at the moment?

Appendix 4

Questions to generate data

Potential data needed for review of NALA's Write On.ie digital learning platform report

Data about student use

1. How many students have engaged with WriteOn since its launch?
2. Breakdown across years, subjects, levels, gender, age, location (urban and rural ?) and if possible whether as individual student or as part of a class.
3. How many and/or what percentage of students achieve a qualification, at each of the levels?
4. How many students achieve a qualification, at what level, in which subjects?
5. Numbers (subjects, gender, age, level, location, and if possible whether as individual student or as part of a class) since move over to Learn with NALA
6. Numbers since lockdown in March
7. Breakdown of numbers since March (lockdown) in terms of subject/gender/age/ hours per week in learning?
8. Are we able to distinguish between learners using WriteOn as part of a class in a Centre; those who are using it as a Distance Learning Student with a Distance Learning Tutor and those who are completely self-directed?
9. If yes, then comparing a range of data across the categories would be very useful. For example, which of the categories of student, outlined in question 8, attempt certification and achieve? At what level, in which subjects etc.

Questions about tutor use

- 10. How many tutors use/have used WriteOn/Learn with NALA?
- 11. What can we find out about their use, from the data available?

Other potential questions:

- 12. What was the course completion rate for registered users on WriteOn, overall and per course. (these learners may have finished the course content but not completed the assessment for an award).
- 13. How many learners went onto do an additional one, two, three and so on courses after completing the first one?
- 14. How many learners progressed from one level to the next? E.g. Level 1 – 2 – preparing for level 3 – 3 – 4.
- 15. What rate of learners immediately dropped off / bounced off the courses, e.g. logged in only once, dropped off after / during initial assessment?
- 16. Where did the highest level of drop off rate happen in each course?
- 17. What courses were learners most successful on? – highest completion rates and highest qualification rates.
- 18. What courses were learners least successful on?

[←](#)
[→](#)
[C](#)
[H](#)

[writeon.ie/nala/student/login_new.jsf?1438468944000](#)



Write On

helping you improve your reading, writing and number skills







If you have a password, enter it here.

OK



I would like a new Password

If you would like to find out about Level 1 before going into the site, please click the button below.



Level 1





Hi, my name is Aine. To use this website you need a password. But you can check out Level 1 before getting a password if you like by clicking on the button to the left.



There are **12** other learners online at the moment.



Write On has **47014** learners.



2,573 learners have now achieved 12,045 minor awards and 1,216 major awards at Level 2 and 2,434 minor awards and 172 major awards at Level 3.



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Acronyms

ALCES	Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme
CEC	Commission of the European Communities
Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Department for Education and Skills
DLS	Distance Learning Service
EGFSN	The Expert Group on Future Skills Need
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Board Ireland
EU	European Union
Eurydice	Education Information Network in Europe
IALS	International Adult Literacy Study
IBSS	International bibliography of Social Science

ICT	Information and Communication Technology
Lit Cam	Literacy Campaign. Started at Frankfurt Book Fair in 2006 and campaigns for equality in education.
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OE	Online Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PD	Professional Development
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PLSS	Programme and Learner Support System
QOE	Quality of Online Education
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna Further Education and Skills Service
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Cultural and Scientific Organisation

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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.



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