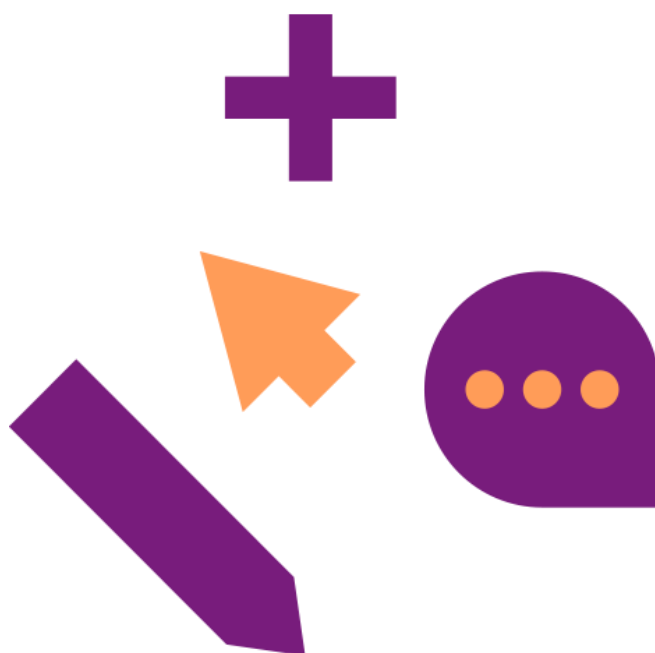


NALA Student Days Report 2022

A snapshot of views and experiences



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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About this report

This report provides a snapshot of views and experiences of adult literacy students.

NALA gathered the information in this report from at the National Adult Literacy Agency's (NALA) annual student days held in Dublin and Cork in 2022. The student days were held later than normal in May and October 2022 because of restrictions with the Covid-19 pandemic. The last in-person student day was in February 2020.

The aim of this report is to share up-to-date insights on student issues, so that we can respond appropriately to the needs of learners and continually improve the quality of our work. This report is for anyone interested or involved in the provision of adult literacy and numeracy services, and or adult education in general.

SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority of Ireland, funds NALA's Student Days. The Irish Government and the European Social Fund (ESF) co-fund adult literacy as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014 - 2020.

NALA, 22 November 2022

Acknowledgements

- NALA wishes to thank all the students who attended or spoke at the 2022 days.
- We would also like to thank the adult literacy organisers and tutors who encouraged and helped students to go to the Student Days.
- We thank our Student Subcommittee members who played an active role at each day, chairing, distributing resources welcoming and encouraging people. Student Subcommittee members that attended the student days in 2022 were from Donegal, Wicklow, Dublin, Tipperary, Offaly, Cavan and Waterford.
- NALA would like to thank guest speakers and workshop facilitators.

A-Z Glossary of terms used in this report

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

AONTAS – National Adult Learning Organisation

CV - Curriculum vitae

ESOL - English for Speakers of Other Languages

ETB - Education and Training Board

FET - Further Education and Training

GPs - General Practitioners

NALA - National Adult Literacy Agency

PPS - Personal Public Service Number

QQI - Quality and Qualifications Ireland

SOLAS - state agency that manages further education and training.

VTOS - Voluntary Training Opportunities Scheme

Background

Since it was set up formally in 1980 NALA has given a high priority to including literacy students in all areas of its work. In the adult literacy movement, as students had such poor experiences of education in the past, the approach had to be very different, based on the voices and views of the students themselves. Students continue to emphasise the fear they feel about returning to education because of past experiences. Often they have low confidence about learning when they first return. There has always been at least one student member of NALA's Board. A former student who sat on NALA's Board in the 1980s pointed out ... "I wasn't put there as a token. I was given an equal voice". NALA's annual meetings became places where students and other members could, and did, voice concerns concerning adult literacy provision throughout the country.¹

NALA research² shows that adult literacy learning is most successful when students are actively involved in the process. Students should be enabled to explore the methods and materials which help them to learn most effectively and to take an active part in planning the learning programme. NALA has ensured the views and experiences of adults with unmet literacy and numeracy needs guide and inform our work. We also pass on student views to other stakeholders. We do this work through:

- Hearing from student members of NALA's Board;
- Having a Student Subcommittee of the Board, with students from around the country that feeds into our Board and encourages student advocates;
- Providing NALA's Student Development Fund to bring students together locally and to create an opportunity for student views to be gathered;
- Organising annual student days, and
- Ensuring student advocacy is a key element in our strategic plans.

In Ireland's Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020 – 2024³, SOLAS⁴ plans for a vibrant, clearly structured and accessible post-secondary education system or

¹ "NALA: A Living History" p34.

² Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work, National Adult Literacy Agency, Dublin, 2015

³ Department of Education and Skills and SOLAS, Dublin, 2013

⁴ SOLAS is the state agency that manages further education and training.

tertiary education. In SOLAS's strategy⁵ the purpose of further education is to build students' skills, create pathways for learning and to include people. Literacy and numeracy support will be integrated across courses. Developments will be learner and performance centred. There is a focus on quality staffing, good buildings and use of technology and blended learning. The National FET Learner Forums organised by AONTAS will continue. There is a commitment to develop learner surveys. There will be a focus on learners participating in strategic and decision-making structures in FET and a dedicated budget for this. The strategy recognises the need to build capacity amongst learners to articulate their views.

Who NALA means by “students”

NALA uses the terms student and learner interchangeably. For NALA “students” are:

1. Improving your literacy, numeracy or digital skills in an adult literacy centre, or as part of another programme (could be for example a Youthreach programme, a National Learning Network or a Community Training Centre)
2. Learning over the phone with a NALA tutor or using the [Learn with NALA](#) website
3. Improving your English in an adult education centre, where English is not your first language

NALA's work over many years has provided opportunities for students to explore their views. NALA's current strategic plan continues this tradition⁶: “We will support learner independence by facilitating learner-directed events and activities and gather and share learner feedback to help inform governance and decision making in the FET sector.”

NALA uses its **annual student days** to gather and share student's views and satisfaction with their FET programmes, and contribute to this strategic objective.

⁵ 2020 – 2024 Future FET Transforming Learning, The Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy, SOLAS, 2020.

⁶ NALA Strategic Plan 2020-2022.



Photo from NALA's Student Day in Dublin on 21 May 2022

2022 Theme: "We're back again"

In 2022, NALA held two student days, one in Dublin on 21 May and one in Cork on 15 October. The theme for the day was "We're back again" as there had been a break in in-person student days.⁷ This was the first face-to-face student day since 29 February 2020 when 125 students attended - 56% of whom were English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) students.

As detailed in Table 1 in 2022:

- 22 students attended the Dublin student day. Students were from Altrusa in Cork city, from Dublin city and Dublin County.
- 74 students attended in Cork city. They were from Altrusa and Mahon in Cork city, Bandon, Fermoy and also Killarney, Co. Kerry.

Table 1. Location of NALA 2022 student day and number of students attending

| Location of student day in 2022 | Number of students who attended | Number of ESOL learners |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Dublin | 22 | 5 (22%) |
| Cork | 74 | 47 (63%) |
| Total | 96 | 52 (54%) |

⁷ In 2020 NALA cancelled the second student day and in 2021 webinars for students replaced the days.

What happened at the student days?

Student days were held on Saturdays starting at 10 am and finished at 4 pm. The days provided a relaxed and fun opportunity for students from different education centres to come together and meet other students. NALA had a free resources table and students could take home books. At both days we showed the Learn with NALA website.

There were student speakers in the morning, followed by a workshop. Students went to one workshop in the morning and one in the afternoon. Workshops provided a safe space for students to learn new skills and information, and to be able to ask questions and share their experiences. The second workshop finished at 3.30 pm.

Students then went back into the room with the bigger group. Then there was a questions and answers session and an evaluation of the day.



Photo of students attending the NALA Student Day in Cork on 15 October 2022.

Introducing the day

Catherine Devlin, an Education and Training Board (ETB) student from Buncrana, Co. Donegal and member of NALA's Student Subcommittee opened and chaired the Dublin and Cork student days. Catherine spoke very briefly about her own experience of going back to education. Margaret Murray, NALA's Literacy Student and Development Officer, introduced NALA and its core work. She let students know that NALA is interested in hearing their views and that we write a report on the days. The report is available on NALA's website and with members and stakeholders.

Student speakers

At the Dublin Student Day we had three student speakers: Michael Duffy, Mark Daly and Karen Kiernan.

Michael Duffy spoke about his experience of literacy. He was not able to contribute as fully as he would have liked to in discussions about the news of the day. He would only be able to read the pictures in the newspaper. Michael said improving his literacy enabled him to volunteer for an organisation called So Sad (suicide prevention).

Mark Daly spoke in Dublin about dyscalculia and numeracy. He also spoke in Cork about his learning journey. Mark described what it is like having difficulties with numbers. An American doctor diagnosed Mark as having dyscalculia – which is a persistent difficulty understanding maths. Mark campaigns to raise awareness about dyscalculia and students commended Mark for his awareness-raising work.

Karen Kiernan had epilepsy and this affected her education. She was 32-years old when she went back to education. She needed help with maths. She was very grateful for support she received from the Central Remedial Clinic and from tutors in Klear in Kilbarrack.

At the Cork Student Day we had three student speakers. Mark Daly as above, Maurice Sammon and Catherine Pattison.

Maurice Sammon is a student from Tramore, Co. Waterford and a member of NALA's Student Subcommittee. Maurice spoke about how he had gone too far with alcohol and

then how he turned his life around and went back to education. Maurice was extremely encouraging to other students to keep going with their education.

Catherine Pattison was a guest speaker and chairperson of **Cork Further Education and Training Learner Voices Group**. She was interviewed in a questions and answers format by Catherine Devlin who chaired the day. She said the biggest achievement of her group was how they had raised the issue of a student card successfully with Cork Education and Training Board (Cork ETB). Cork ETB now has a student card⁸ for adult literacy and other students. Also, students in Mallow, Co. Cork successfully campaigned for more wheelchair parking at their centre. Cork ETB now have staff who as part of their work link with the Learner Voices group so as to actively listen to the needs of learners.

Workshops

Table 2. 2022 workshops held in Dublin and Cork

| Dublin workshops | Cork workshops |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Being wise online | Being wise online |
| Plain English and the pandemic | Plain English and our everyday lives |
| Tips for living well | Tips for living well |
| Creative writing | |

Students said the workshops were the best part of the day

From the verbal feedback on the days and from the evaluation forms, there was overwhelming satisfaction with the workshops.

On the evaluation forms, 59% of students said the workshops were the best part of the day. Next most popular was hearing the student speakers 47%.⁹ Third was being able to bring your issues to NALA 35% and fourth was meeting other students 25%.

Being wise online

Tony Daly of 80:20 Education and Acting for a Better World, facilitated this workshop in Dublin. **Kay O'Regan from Altrusa Literacy Scheme** facilitated this workshop in Cork. This workshop was about students exploring their thinking skills and looking at

⁸ See <https://csn.ie/supports/isic-international-student-identity-card> for more information.

⁹ Students ticked more than one answer to this question.

ways we can better handle online information. Students heard up-to-date, real world examples of how information can mislead. They also got ideas of how to be responsible and wise online.

Facilitators of this workshop encouraged students to:

- stop and check information before sharing on to other people.
- ask questions such as “Is this true and can I check against reliable sources?” Also, “Do I agree with what has been said? Does it sit well with what I value?”
- say what social media they used and
- discuss what a digital footprint is. What is tracked, why and how?

The facilitator in Cork said:

- A few students attending thought the workshop was about security and shopping online using credit cards. She gave a few pointers on this when it came up, about secure websites that have the https:// with an S after the http.
- Most people did not know about what was being tracked and were not aware of so many social media platforms. Where they used social media, some students were not thinking about how many they used and for how long.
- A workshop on paying for things online and using government services would be an idea for a future workshop.

“Plain English and the pandemic” (Dublin) and “Plain English in our every-day lives” (Cork)

Seán Driver, Editor, NALA’s Plain English Service facilitated workshops on plain English in Dublin and Cork. Students heard about what plain English is, who NALA works with in plain English and the NALA plain English mark. Students said:

- They got information from: radio – the BBC World Service, school, TV, Newspapers, the Internet and TV News (RTE News)
- They felt RTE News changed a lot (changed too much)
- They wondered how to cut down on fake news
- A lot of people said they were unable to use the internet
- Local news still very important

- During the pandemic a lot fear was created, unnatural fear and panic (especially for older people)

Students said organisations could improve their communication by:

- Using short sentences, keeping it simple
- Not spreading wrong information
- Not overloading people with information. For example, did we need to know the death toll and case number every day during the pandemic (on every bulletin)? Organisations need to be contactable. Don't overwhelm people

- Have better leadership

Students said NALA should work with banks, TV News and Government on plain English. In Cork, one student felt the workshop was more for ESOL students.

Tips for living and feeling well

Maggie O'Sullivan Graham, Life Coach, facilitated this workshop in Dublin and Cork.

The workshop explored how to look after your mind and become more aware of your inner critic. The facilitator also examined ways to look after your body and how your habits and sleep, food and comfort relate to this. One student added to the evaluation form "I could stay listening to Maggie all day". The facilitator said:

- People said that they were experiencing negative thoughts, self-critical thoughts. The techniques raised by the facilitator seemed helpful to students and give practical tools to build resilience and positive mental health
- Students were very interested to learn about their brain architecture and how learning happens at that level
- A session on the factors that lead to success in learning (motivation, for example) could be good for a future workshop

Creative Writing workshop in Dublin

Colm Keegan, poet facilitated this workshop. This workshop covered the difference between poetry and prose and how to write from the heart and what a line break is.

People taking part shared stories and memories of people who passed away. Students were given help with writing when needed. The facilitator said "Everyone was very comfortable with the relaxed atmosphere and shared their poetry to a round of applause at the end."

Student issues

The student issues listed below were raised during NALA Student Days in 2022 and they give a snapshot of students' experiences.

The student talks where students shared their personal experiences helped create a safe space to discuss issues. Students could raise issues in the morning, through the workshops and at the questions and answers time at the end.

NALA also had an evaluation sheet that students filled in, mostly with tick boxes but also with a space for students to write issues. NALA's student subcommittee members, facilitators and other NALA staff who attended the day also listened out for student issues. They helped students fill in evaluation forms where help was needed.

Trauma from past school experiences

- In Dublin, there was a discussion after the speakers about how staff in schools used to use violence. We also discussed how schools have changed for the better since then. We discussed how now teachers now often use many different ways to teach.

Difficulty getting on the right course

- One student was dissatisfied with her course options. She met with guidance staff but felt she was expected to look up information herself. She found that difficult. She would like clarification on why she couldn't go back to the course she was in before.
- One ESOL student could not do a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) course for a qualification because she did not have a Personal Public Service (PPS) number.

Need help to understand bills

- People need support working out their electricity and energy bills in this cost of living crisis. Some students do not understand bills, particularly the back page. Helplines for vulnerable customers for electricity, phone and gas, do not know about people having unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs.

Need more support on form filling

- Students would like to learn how to fill in forms better. Examples given were the tax form, forms for General Practitioners (GPs), medical cards, forms for renewing your passport and car tax. Perhaps a workshop on this at the student day.

Understanding QQI levels

- Voluntary Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) in Killarney no longer do leaving certificate but Kerry ETB will know more
- People who didn't have the opportunity to do the junior and leaving certificate can look at level 3 and 4 courses or ring NALA's Freephone
- Not all students were clear how QQI levels relate to junior and leaving certificate levels. Students can ring NALA's Freephone for more information and see the rainbow picture of qualifications from QQI

More classes and resources for ESOL learners

- ESOL students would like more courses at different levels, more supports and more help for people having difficulty with the English language
- Some ESOL students at the Cork student day learned about www.nascireland.ie and www.welcomeenglish.ie
- "I think you can do more English courses or conferences to meet people of other countries and improve our English"
- "I would like to know about English free courses in Cork"
- "It would be very helpful if I could attend higher level English course than I do now"

More supports for adults with dyslexia

- Many people have dyspraxia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and are not diagnosed. There is no diagnosis for adults in Ireland and people are not aware where to get support. People may not understand why they need support for learning.

Praise for tutors and organisers

- Students in Killarney said they have a very good system with their tutor (Elaine Clifford). They also wanted it noted that they were so very grateful to the Adult Literacy Organiser Mary Concannon in Killarney who recently retired.

Cork ETB having a student card is fantastic

- Students from Cork were impressed that Cork ETB now has a student card for adult literacy and ESOL students
- Students who attended from Kerry ETB were keen to bring that back to their ETB and said they would “catch-up with Cork!”

Learner voice

- Great that Cork ETB has supported this committee through their staff where the staff support and act on feedback and learner ideas
- Catherine Pattison said the FET Learner Voices Group is looking for more students to join their group
- Some students knew of AONTAS’s work on learner voice with ETBs. Students would like more groups like the Cork FET Learner Voices Group across ETBs

More computers and IT support

- Students would like to do more on computers, have help writing emails and curriculum vitae (CVs), more online courses, internet for dummies and information on education websites and websites that help you know your rights
- Learn with NALA is a great option and should be available in all centres
- One student wanted an iPads. NALA suggested they talk to their Adult Literacy Organiser about getting one through the Reach fund
- “Security, online security for instance and how to deal with online scams”

Confusion over what NALA does and what the ETB centres do

- Students were not clear about who NALA is and what their ETB is. Often students would be saying NALA could fix something when it is their ETB they would need to talk to.

Other things student said they would like workshops on were:

- Numeracy awareness
- Writing
- Travelling around Ireland and international travel for people with disabilities
- How to get involved in local communities

- How to lead your life towards your purpose and passion; more on tips for living well; and
- Energy saving.

One student looked for extra copies of NALA's publication "Brushing Up" 1 and 2.

What the evaluation forms showed

Table 3. Location of student day and number of evaluation forms filled in

| Venue of student day | Number of people who filled in an evaluation form |
|----------------------|---|
| Dublin | 18 |
| Cork | 54 |

Table 4. How students found the days overall

| Ratings | Dublin | Cork |
|----------------|--------|------|
| Excellent | 13 | 35 |
| Good | | 14 |
| Okay | | |
| Not good | | |
| Did not answer | 5 | 5 |

The workshops were the best part of the day from the evaluation forms.

Other things students said on the evaluation forms:

- “NALA are already doing so much and doing it so well. Meeting everyone was great, well done.”
- “Both workshops was perfect, also the teachers.”
- “The day was just brilliant. Thank you all so very much.”
- “Very helpful, useful ideas and well worth coming to Dublin with NALA. Great to see you face to face.”
- “The way to find the emotional balance in life is not easy. It would be great if we can get more information.”
- “I think there are many supports and resources already. Perhaps helping to have a better knowledge of them.”
- “I would like to see some supports in place to retrain in a workplace and educating for example, work experience.”
- “More interesting books with exercises and CDs or online link to listen to these books.”

- “Everything I learnt today was important.”
- “It’s great organisations like this exist and you really feel included.”

Other outcomes of the NALA Student Days

- NALA held a separate Creative Writing Workshop due to the enthusiasm from the Dublin Student Day and because we have a history of supporting student writing. NALA previously hosting weekends for students in 2004 and 2005 and published student and previously published student writings. Poet Colm Keegan facilitated and the workshop that took place on Friday 9 September 2022 in the Carmelite Centre, Aungier Street, Dublin 2. 18 adult literacy students took part and the feedback was extremely positive. Students said about the workshop:
“New learning experience” - “A great day fulfilling” - “Lovely and interesting and invigorating” - “Inspiring seeing people give it a go” - “Like magic, like letting go”
“Fountain of knowledge” - “Heartfelt”
- One student saw the advert for the Student Day on the Learn with NALA website. Her tutor did not know about the student day. This student attended the Dublin student day, subsequently joined NALA’s Student Subcommittee and then helped out at the Cork Student Day.
- Students in different ETBs, such as Kerry and Donegal ETB, heard of the success Cork ETB had in bringing in a student card for adult literacy students. NALA knows at least one student has brought that back to their ETB and asked could students get a student card in their ETB.

We are pleased to get feedback from students. Some issues such as trauma from past school experiences, praise for tutors in centres and confusion about what NALA does and what the ETBs do, resonate with issues we heard before. Some issues are now more important. In particular, understanding bills and digital skills gained in importance. NALA will integrate this feedback and respond in its work as best it can and in the context of the ALL Strategy to honour and act on it. We will also share it. We ask you to share it in your local centres, with students who attended and with the wider community and voluntary sector.

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We work to support adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy 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 tutoring services and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

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