

# **Submission to Statement of Strategy**

**Submitted to the Department of Further and Higher Education,  
Research, Innovation and Science (FHERIS)**

**April 2023**

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## Introduction

Some people have their **literacy needs met**; others do not.

This can be for **many reasons**.



We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with almost 2,000 members. We believe literacy is a human right. We are committed to making sure people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can fully take part in society, and have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs.

NALA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (FHERIS) Statement of Strategy.

## Literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy skills

These skills involve listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology to communicate, to build relationships, to understand information and make informed choices.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills enable people to reach their full potential, be active and critical participants in society and help address poverty and social exclusion. These life skills allow us to participate in, and make sense of, the world.



Literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy skills:

- are not static and they evolve.
- are not something that you get once in school and you have it forever – you must practise these skills or you lose them – this is called ‘deskilling’.
- can vary depending on the context, for example, dealing with a financial service for a loan and understanding financial and legal terminology.
- will be different for each person – you can be good in one area, for example reading, but weak in another, for example writing – people have “spiky” profiles.

## Literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy needs in Ireland

Unmet literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy needs arise because of educational and wider structural inequalities.

The most recent adult literacy survey<sup>1</sup> showed that:

- One in six (18%) adults (aged 16 to 65) struggle with reading and understanding everyday text. For example, reading a bus timetable or understanding medicine instructions.
- One in four adults (25%) has difficulties using maths in everyday life. For example, basic addition, working out a bill or calculating percentages.
- About 2 in 5 (42%) adults struggle with basic digital tasks. For example, they find looking up a website or sending an email difficult. Note that the majority of people who have digital literacy needs have underlying literacy issues.
- There are also language needs amongst many adults where English is a Second or Other Language (ESOL).

Recent data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO)<sup>2</sup> highlights that currently there are 320,050 people (aged 25 to 64 years) who have less than a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 4 qualification (equivalent to a Leaving Certificate). These include:

- 175,640 (55%) employed;
- 7,990 (2.5%) unemployed; and
- 131,460 (41%) not engaged in the labour force.

## Literacy and equality

Literacy is a barometer of equality and is the gateway to creating a society that is better and equal for all. Equality is not about treating everyone in the same way, but it recognises that individuals' needs are sometimes best met in different ways. At present, those who need to access education and training the most, benefit the least. This is the Matthew effect where “without intervention, those who have acquired more education get more and those that have not, get little or nothing.”<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> CSO (2022). [Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2022](#)

<sup>3</sup> Kerckhoff, A. and Glennie, E. (1999). The Matthew Effect in American Education. Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization.

NALA believes that priority should be given to those most in need of experiencing educational disadvantage, the **furthest behind first**. This is a principle in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>4</sup> and in successive national anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies. It means that where funding is limited, State investment should target those most in need. Within such a framework, **the needs of those with less than a QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) Level 4 qualification would be met first**. This would include adults who are most at risk of experiencing unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. For the furthest behind first, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning.

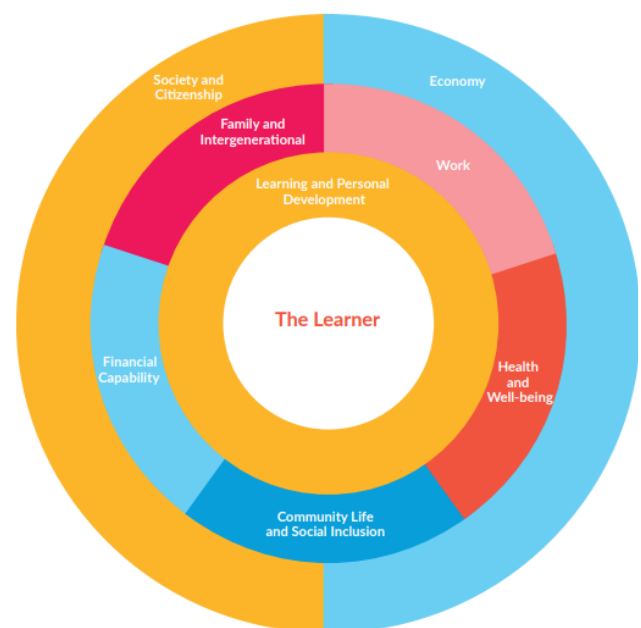
## Supporting unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs

The Government recently published a [10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy](#), which aims to: “ensure that everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and realise their potential”.

The strategy says that:

“Modern understandings of literacy have expanded to include areas such as digital literacy, family literacy, environmental and eco-literacy, financial literacy, health literacy, media literacy and numeric literacy.”

The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy proposes a cross-Government, cross-economy and cross-society approach to support literacy needs. It will mean that a whole range of local services will understand literacy barriers and work together to ensure that needs can be identified quickly and that the right learning, support and services are signposted straight away.



Key Adult learner domains

<sup>4</sup> [Transforming our world](#): the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## NALA recommendations for the new Statement of Strategy

NALA recommends that the Department should:

1. Continue to prioritise, actively support and adequately resource the **implementation** of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy.
2. Develop a cross-departmental policy to address **family literacy**.
3. Expand **workplace basic education** programmes and invest in **targeted paid learning leave**.
4. Work in collaboration with the Department of Finance to implement a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral **financial literacy strategy**.
5. Promote and support the continued **integration of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy development** into further and higher education and second level.
6. Work in collaboration with the Department of Education and other government departments, to explore barriers and new and innovative solutions to improve and support **youth literacy**.
7. Work in collaboration with the Department of Education and other government departments, to develop and implement a **Digital Competency Framework** for Ireland.
8. Remove barriers and **offer supports and incentives to participate** in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning.
9. Promote and use a **literacy friendly approach** to communicate effectively, including the use of plain English and universal design principles.
10. Invest in **research and evaluation** on adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs and in particular the role and potential of technology in adult literacy.

## 1. Continue to prioritise, actively support and adequately resource the implementation of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy.

We welcome the Department's role in leading on the cross government, cross society and cross economy approach to addressing adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

Progress on the Strategy which was launched in September 2021 is slower than expected.

The Department should continue to work with relevant government departments on

- aligning policies where relevant, and
- agreeing inter-related policies and action plans to work collaboratively towards the same goals. For example, there needs to be an inter-departmental discussion and agreement between DHERIS and the Department of Social Protection (and other relevant Departments) on supporting the literacy needs of adults experiencing long-term unemployment.

In addition, and as a short-term priority, the Department needs to provide leadership and oversight of the ALL Strategy to ensure that the following essential key actions are implemented in 2023

- Resolution of the historic pay and condition issues of contract staff in Education and Training Boards to provide equitable and attractive employment contracts.
- Strategic workforce planning and resourcing to ensure sufficient staff to provide relevant tuition.
- Establishment of baseline data regarding literacy provision and learners in SOLAS funded agencies and where possible non-SOLAS funded entities such as POBAL / TUSLA funded programmes.
- Agreement of a monitoring and reporting system that aligns with adult and community education perspectives and is GDPR compliant, which is not the case with the current PLSS system.
- Agreed scope and development programme / responsibilities / budget for the proposed One Stop Shop in light of the existing digital information channels funded by SOLAS (NALA, ECollege, FETCH, ETBI Digital Library) and QQI database and the Government's plans to produce a Life Event Portal being proposed in the Digital For Good: Ireland's Digital Inclusion Road map.
- Agreed messaging, scope and responsibilities for an Awareness Campaign.

## 2. **Develop a cross-departmental policy to address family literacy.**

The family is a key site of literacy learning. According to the research, parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on their educational outcomes than any other demographic measure including social class or level of parental income.<sup>5</sup>

NALA would like to see the Department implement all of the recommendations in the [2020 report on Family Literacy Practices in ETBs](#).

We need a **cross-departmental** national policy, working group and action plan on family literacy, which includes an increased commitment and resources to family literacy as a basis for improving chances of educational equality for both children and adults. Such policy should always be grounded in an analysis of the systemic roots of literacy and educational disadvantage as this would give added credibility, motivation and optimism to participants and practitioners. The policy should align across other government strategies, such as the Department of Education's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy for Children and Young People.

## 3. **Expand workplace basic education programmes and invest in targeted paid learning leave.**

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills, as part of lifelong learning, are essential in helping to develop the workplace skills of adults in the labour force. The further education and training sector has a vital role to play in the providing these learning opportunities for both unemployed and employed adults.

We know that people with unmet literacy and numeracy needs are treated less equally in society with less access to services and opportunities. There is often inequality in accessing labour market services. In particular this occurs in labour market activation programmes where for example programmes only catered for higher level qualifications (Level 5 and above).

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<sup>5</sup> Desforges (2003); Feinstein et al. (2004); NESF (2009).



We propose that the Department, in conjunction with other departments, should:

- Develop an **incentivised work experience programme** for adults with less than a QQI Level 4 qualification. This would include access to a relevant literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning supports on and off the job.
- Work with **employers to raise awareness of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills** needs in the workplace and link them into the Skills for Work programme delivered through their local Education and Training Boards (ETBs).
- Introduce a **targeted paid learning leave programme** for employees in work with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital needs and or less than a QQI Level 4 qualification to develop these skills if they wish to do so. This intervention would be for a maximum time period and funded through our social insurance (PRSI) system.

#### 4. **Work in collaboration with the Department of Finance to implement a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral financial literacy strategy.**

A recent NALA report on financial literacy<sup>6</sup> recommended that policy makers should:

- Implement a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral financial literacy strategy led by the Department of Finance, with stakeholder engagement, that adopts or adapts the EU/ OECD Financial Competency Framework to the Irish context and consolidates the current financial inclusion and regulatory activity.
- Provide more education and training on financial literacy for adults. This involves the development of literacy, numeracy and basic computer skills, which underpin everyday financial activities.

The Department should progress this in collaboration with the Department of Finance.

A Financial Literacy Strategy for Ireland should include not only **personal financial literacy** skills but also address **organisational financial literacy**. This means the degree to which an organisation implements policies, practices, and systems that make it easier for people to navigate, understand, and use information and services to take care of their finances.

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<sup>6</sup> NALA (2022). [Financial Literacy in Ireland: Challenges and Solutions](#)

## **5. Promote and support the continued integration of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy development into further, higher education and second level.**

Literacy should continue to be integrated into Further Education and Training (and Higher Education where needed) and second level programmes in line with NALA's research and guidelines.<sup>7</sup> This requires ongoing training and development for staff on this area.

The Department should continue to promote and support integration of literacy and numeracy development into all further and higher education curricula (where appropriate). The Department should also collaborate with the Department of Education, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to define and develop life long and life wide competency based literacy, numeracy and digital literacy curricula.

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

## **6. Work in collaboration with the Department of Education and other government departments, to explore barriers and new and innovative solutions to improve and support youth literacy.**

While literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy needs are evident across society, the issue is particularly prevalent among children experiencing educational disadvantage. In the last strategy for literacy and numeracy for children and young people, the particular needs of four groups were highlighted:

- children and young people attending schools that serve communities where there are high concentrations of social and economic disadvantage, including members of the Traveller community
- children of migrants whose first language is neither English or Irish
- children and young people with special educational needs, including children who are exceptionally able
- young people who have dropped out of school early and for whom centres for education, for example, Youthreach and Community Training Centres, provide a second chance to acquire and improve literacy, numeracy and other necessary skills.

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<sup>7</sup> See more on NALA's integrating literacy work here <https://www.nala.ie/integrating-literacy/>.

Children from these communities are more likely to have literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs, and the gap widens as children progress through school. The Department should engage with the Department of Education to consider a more robust and specific focus on how schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged communities and children with diverse learning needs and profiles, can engage with children, parents and communities to redress this imbalance.

While school completion programmes provide excellent support to children who are at risk of leaving school early, some children still leave school before they are 16. Sometimes it is not clear that there are appropriate alternative supports available for these children. For example, the Department of Education funds 120 children a year to work with iScoil to complete QQI level 3 programmes. Children are only eligible to apply if they have been out of school or any educational programme for at least six months and all other options are exhausted. iScoil regularly report that they turn away eligible children due to lack of funding for additional places. In their annual report, iScoil note that despite being the largest provider of alternative education in Ireland, “55 Tusla home-based referrals were turned down, as were partnership requests from youth services, youth diversion projects, and residential care services”.<sup>8</sup> Many of these children and their parents turn to other services, which are not designed for children, such as NALA’s online learning platform, Learn with NALA.

Relevant government departments, including DFHERIS, should work together in identifying literacy and numeracy needs of young people in second level and explore new and innovative way to provide adequate supports.

## **7. Work in collaboration with the Department of Education and other government departments, to develop and implement a Digital Competency Framework for Ireland.**

We need to develop and implement a life-long, life wide Digital Competency Framework for Ireland based on the [European Digital Competence Framework](#). The implementation of a competency based framework across the Irish educational and digital landscape will ensure that Ireland’s basic skills targets as set out in [the Harnessing Digital – The Digital Ireland Framework](#) are objective, measurable and comparable.

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<sup>8</sup> iScoil (2022). [Annual Report and Financial Statements](#).

## 8. Remove barriers and offer supports and incentives to participate in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy learning.

There are many barriers to participation in adult literacy learning, such as lack of childcare, elder care, transport, income supports, technology and broadband. There are no financial supports or incentives available for people attending classes. We would like to see the Department examine the barriers to participation and explore how to motivate and support people – this may be possible in the context of national schemes.

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

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

## 9. Promote and use a literacy friendly approach to communicate effectively, including the use of plain English and universal design principles.

We would like to see this Department, along with all of government, deliver services and communicate using an **accessible and literacy friendly approach**. This means:

- being aware of the unmet literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy needs among adults and taking account of these needs,
- removing literacy related barriers, and
- promoting literacy friendly approaches and learning supports where appropriate.

Using a **literacy friendly approach** means taking account of and supporting adults with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to access your services. For example, the PLSS form is not accessible or easy to read and understand. It is in fact a barrier to many adults returning to education.

There is a need for a centrally-led programme of education and training on literacy awareness and plain language in all government Departments and wider public sector.

The Department of FHERIS could lead out on this by:

- Having designated **staff attend** literacy awareness and plain language training.
- Developing a **communications approach** that is clear and accessible to those with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs. This applies not only to the use of plain language, but also to the mode of communication. Podcasts, video, recordings and material in other languages may be needed. In spite of the move to online services, there are many in the population who are not in a position to avail of these, or who continue to experience connectivity problems. It is a huge barrier to people with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs that there has been an increase in the number of organisations who provide website and email contacts, but no phone numbers. An inclusive approach providing a range of options is needed.
- Working to ensure “All public service communication should be in plain language” in line with current Programme for Government commitment, June 2020.
- Monitoring the commitment in the [10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy](#): “The Cross-Government Implementation Group should ensure that each of its constituent members has a clear plan in place to ensure communication in plain language, with a nominated person responsible for coordinating action to deliver on this.”

## 10. Invest in research and evaluation on adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs and in particular the role and potential of technology in adult literacy.

There is a need for **ongoing research and evaluation** in the area of adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy, funded by the Department. Some areas include:

- **Benefits and costs:** The last Cost Benefit Analysis<sup>9</sup> in 2009 showed that expenditure on literacy training generates high economic returns. It also found that improved literacy was associated with a wide range of non-economic or social gains such as intergenerational effects, civic and cultural engagement and better health.
- **Longitudinal study:** we need a longitudinal study of students who return to literacy learning and track the impact on the individual, family, community and society. This could be based on a model such as The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA).

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<sup>9</sup> NALA (2009). A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training: [Research report](#)

- Identify the **extent of adult literacy awareness among primary and secondary school teachers** and name **current good practice** and **suggestions** for new ways to support the literacy needs of families.
- Research on **maths anxiety** amongst adults with unmet numeracy needs. This could look at what the pinch points were when the child/young person began to struggle with maths, how it was taught and supported when the need was identified, how the family supported them and suggestions for new ways to support the numeracy needs of child/young person and families.

Following on from the recent announcement of the [General Scheme of Research and Innovation Bill, 2023](#), consideration should be given to developing a funded programme to explore the possibilities and potential of new technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI) to support individuals with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs. To date, existing research has focussed on how technology can support literacy development in primary and secondary school learning and for individuals with disabilities. We do not have any research on how adults are using or could be supported to use technology in everyday tasks and, or to develop skills and competences.

## Conclusion

Literacy changes lives and benefits individuals, society and the economy. Research has shown that the positive impact of further education carries beyond individuals, families and into communities – a ripple effect that produces broader social benefits.<sup>10</sup> Investing in adult literacy and lifelong learning is investing in people and communities and will help build a more equal, more resilient and happier society.

The Department of FHERIS new Statement of Strategy 2023 – 2026 should specifically identify and prioritise adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs.

We welcome the Department's commitment to the 10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy and look forward to our continued working on achieving its aims. We suggest some further actions in this submission and are happy to discuss these further.

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<sup>10</sup> Duckworth V. and Smith R. (2019), Transformative Teaching and Learning in Further Education

## Further reading and references

CSO (2022). [Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2022](#)

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

Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the National Disability Authority (NDA) [Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service – A Universal Design Approach](#)

Duckworth V. and Smith R. (2019), Transformative Teaching and Learning in Further Education

Government of Ireland (2021). [Adult Literacy For Life: A 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy](#)

iScoil (2022). [Annual Report and Financial Statements](#).

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NALA (2009). A cost benefit analysis of adult literacy training: [Research report](#)

OECD (2022). [G20/OECD High-Level Principles on Financial Consumer Protection](#)

[Transforming our world](#): the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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

### **National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)**

Sandford Lodge, Sandford Close  
Ranelagh, Dublin 6  
D06 YF65

**Phone:** 01 412 7900

**Freephone:** 1 800 20 20 65


### **Websites**

nala.ie

learnwithnala.ie

**Email:** [info@nala.ie](mailto:info@nala.ie)

 nalaireland

 @nalaireland

**Registered Charity Number:** 20020965

**Charity Number:** 8506

**Company Number:** 342807



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