

NALA Student Days Report 2023

A snapshot of views and experiences



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Contents

About this report.....	3
Background and context.....	4
2023 Student Day in Galway	5
Feedback from students	8
Acknowledgements	18
Appendix 1: Five workshops.....	19
Appendix 2: More information about who attended.....	20
Appendix 3: Small survey of students about the Learn with NALA website.....	22

12 May 2023

About this report

This report provides a snapshot of views and experiences of adult literacy students. NALA gathered the information in this report from an annual NALA Student Day held in Galway, on Saturday 22 April 2023, in the Galmont Hotel.¹

The aim of this report is to share up-to-date insights on student issues, so NALA can respond appropriately to the needs of learners and improve the quality of our work. People working in adult literacy, or adult education more generally, whether tutors or managers, will likely be interested in the findings of this report.

NALA is grateful to SOLAS for giving NALA funding for student days.

A-Z Glossary of terms and acronyms used in this report

CEO – Chief Executive Officer

Distance Learning Service – NALA’s Distance Learning Service offers adult literacy supports over the phone and online through the Learn with NALA website.

ESOL - English for Speakers of Other Languages (English language learners)

ETB - Education and Training Board

FET - Further Education and Training

GRETB – Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board

LCETB – Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board

LWETB – Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board

LWN – the Learn with NALA website

MSLETB – Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board

NALA - National Adult Literacy Agency

PCs – Personal computers, like a desktop computer

SOLAS – the state agency that manages Further Education and Training in Ireland

¹ NALA had planned a student day in Dublin for 25 March 2023 but cancelled the day due to the small number of bookings.

Background and context

Since it was set up in 1980 NALA has taken a student-centred approach across its work.² Students are involved directly in the organisation itself and are consulted as members. We talk to students at events we organise and check to ensure anything we develop is informed by students. Each year since 2005 NALA has held student days.³

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. NALA guidelines⁴ emphasise 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. They should take an active part in planning the learning programme. NALA has ensured the views and experiences of adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs guide and inform our work. We do this by:

- Hearing from student members on NALA's Board;
- Having a Student Subcommittee of the Board, with students from around the country, who together can raise issues with the Board;
- Providing NALA's Student Development Fund to local centres. Centres bring students together and gather student views as part of the Fund;
- Organising annual student days; and
- Encouraging student advocacy and including it in our strategic plans.

SOLAS commits to be learner centred and include literacy and numeracy supports across courses under the Further Education and Training Strategy 2020 - 2024.⁵ Solas also highlights the need for capacity building, participation in decision making and research among students, in the Strategy. NALA's student days contribute to this by giving students an opportunity to have their views heard and develop confidence. Students get to hear interesting speakers, go to workshops and meet other students.

² See page 32 of "NALA 1980-2020 – a living history", NALA, 2022 for why this was needed.

³ See NALA's website for [past reports](#) on student days.

⁴ "Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work" National Adult Literacy Agency, Dublin, 2015.

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

Who are the student days for?

For NALA “students” are adults who are improving their literacy, numeracy or digital skills on courses that are pitched at, up to, and including Level 4 (not beyond Level 4). NALA uses the terms student and learner interchangeably. Students can be:

- In one-to-one or group tuition, improving their literacy, numeracy or digital skills in an adult literacy centre. This includes adults improving their English in an adult literacy centre, where English is not your first language
- Doing literacy as part of another programme (for example Youthreach, the National Learning Network or the Community Training Centres).
- Learning over the phone with a NALA tutor, or using the [Learn with NALA](#) website.

2023 Student Day in Galway

Theme: “Building confidence together”⁶

Workshops: See Appendix 1 for information on the five workshops.

Number of students that attended: 180 students. See Appendix 2 for more information on where students were from.

Agenda:

10.00 - 10.30	Registration, tea and coffee, free resource books from NALA
10.30 – 10.45	Welcome and introduction, Catherine Devlin and Colleen Dube
10.45 – 11.15	Short talks from Sinead Morgan, Michael Power and Gerry Daly
11.30 – 1 pm	Morning workshop
1 – 2 pm	Lunch
2.00 – 3.30 pm	Afternoon workshop
3.30 – 4 pm	Questions and answers with NALA
4 pm	End

⁶NALA chose this theme to reflect the workshops picked for the event. We consulted with the Student Subcommittee and reviewed feedback from the Student Development Fund and other events when we decided on workshops.

Free resources for students on the day

NALA distributed over 1,000 books for free, directly to students at this event. Books were very popular, for example “Better Handwriting”, “Digital Matters”, “That’s interesting!” and the “Legends” book. We also distributed 200 leaflets about learning options.

The morning speakers were:

- **Catherine Devlin**, NALA Board member and Student Subcommittee member, chaired the day. She welcomed everyone, let people know the plan and how we would work together on the day.
- **Colleen Dube**, NALA’s CEO gave an overview of NALA’s work. She said how NALA is interested in students getting involved with the Agency and how they can do that. Colleen facilitated the questions and answers session at 3.30 pm.
- **Sinead Morgan**, Further Education and Training Director, GRETB gave a short talk. She welcomed students to Galway and emphasised how good it is to come together and how the ETB wants to hear the learner voice.
- **Michael Power**, literacy ambassador who has done massive work raising awareness about literacy with the public and organisations. He has served on Tipperary ETB as a learner representative on their Board. Michael shared his experience of going back to education to help his child with homework. He said he realised how far he had come when his daughter asked him to help her with algebra homework.
- **Gerry Daly** is a former Ireland soccer player who recently published a collection of poetry called “Childhood Memories”. Gerry had struggled with spelling all his life. He recommended people “Never shy away from asking for help. Silence, where you are locked in your head is the worst.”

Photos of the Student Day in Galway on 22 April 2023



Photo of attendees taken at the start of the day.



From left to right: Facilitators Sadie Hynes and Pascal Lally, Edel Donnellan (tutor, with LCETB and with NALA's Distance Learning Service) and Maggie O'Sullivan Graham facilitator.



Group photo taken at the end of the Student Day showing students from Galway, Castlebar, Dublin, Kerry and Ennis.

Feedback from students

120 of the 180 students present, filled in evaluation forms at the student day in Galway. Facilitators gave out the forms ten minutes before the end of the afternoon workshop. As well as what students said on the forms, the feedback below is from reports from facilitators, NALA Staff and emails sent to NALA by Adult Literacy Organisers involved in the day.

The five main findings of the student day in 2023 are:

1. Workshops were popular. Students would like more of the same for future events.
2. ESOL students want more opportunities to speak English and more classes.
3. We know more about what students want to know about being wise online.
4. This event was valuable to distance learners.
5. NALA needs to advertise its work and learning opportunities more.

1. Workshops were popular. Students requested the same ones for future events

From the evaluation forms, 54% of students said the workshops were the best part of the day. Next most popular (24%) was hearing and meeting other students and third (15%) was hearing the student speakers⁷. Below is how students rated the workshops on a scale of not good, okay, good or excellent:

- Creative Writing – 81% excellent, 17% good.
- Tips for living well – 73% excellent, 25% good.
- Being wise online – 95% excellent, 5% good.
- Two ESOL workshops – 87% excellent, 13% good.

The Creative Writing Workshop was over-subscribed - 47 people gave it as their first choice of workshop, 49 gave it as a second. All the people who attended - 50 of the 180 people at the student day - said they were interested in writing. 17 students said on the evaluation form they would like to see a workshop on this at future events.

⁷ 4% said the best part of the day was being able to tell NALA their student issues.

Students attending the well-being workshop seemed to have got a lot from the session. They said to the facilitator that their self-confidence and their inner critic are big issues for them in their learning and their broader life.

2. ESOL students want more opportunities to speak English and more classes

79% of the total number of students that went to the student day were ESOL learners.⁸

ESOL learners said on the evaluation forms they wanted:

- Workshops to learn spoken English more.⁹
- More English classes and workshops to learn English faster and have fun.¹⁰
- Meetings of ESOL students.¹¹
- More English classes. One student said on the evaluation form “I love the teachers. They are professional and kind.” Another student said in answer to - Is there anything else you want to tell NALA? - “Suggest that centres that teach English have a program where learning is progressive, marked by objectives to be developed. My experience is that there is a lot of improvisation of class content, there is no continuity.”
- More ESOL classes.¹²
- Recognition of qualifications from their native country.¹³
- 33 students said they would like to see a workshop on ESOL at future events.

⁸ This may reflect the high number of ESOL students in adult literacy centres around the country at the moment?

⁹ 21 students said they wanted to improve their spoken English.

¹⁰ Six students said they would like to learn faster and have fun.

¹¹ Five students said they would like meetings.

¹² Five students said they would like to have more classes.

¹³ One of the facilitators of the ESOL showed the NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union) website and briefly explained the recognition system.

Facilitators of the ESOL workshop noted:

- Students wanted to progress in their courses and asked about international English exams provision. Are ETBs providing support for the learners to attain these?
- Students found the healthcare system is hard to navigate. They spoke about how supportive the Irish people were. Younger people had higher levels of English.

NALA Staff felt that:

- ESOL students and literacy students mixed in workshops, during lunch and in between workshops. The student day provided an opportunity for intercultural communication and for people of diverse backgrounds to meet.

3. We know more about what students want to know about being wise online.

The facilitator of the “Being Wise Online” said students were interested in the following:

- ✓ E-mail - receiving unsolicited emails, how to get rid of unwanted e-mails.
- ✓ Shopping online - how to recognise legitimate sites, safety using credit or debit cards.
- ✓ Online footprint - what cookies are, location setting, removing browsing history, removing e-mail address from computer in training centres or Internet Cafés.
- ✓ Making time for yourself in the real world - turning off Wi-Fi, notifications, and social media at specific times
- ✓ The advantages and disadvantages of social media apps such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp. What to share, privacy settings, the dangers of challenges for young people, bullying and catfishing.
- ✓ Fact, fiction truth or lies? - how you check if a story is real.
- ✓ The importance and value of settings on devices - how to change your settings and finding demonstration videos on YouTube.

Local adult literacy centres may be doing classes on the above already. If not, the topics raised above could be a good starting point for a local being wise online courses. 12

students said on the evaluation form they would like to see a workshops on this at future events.

4. This event was valuable to distance learners

NALA was delighted that three people doing tuition over the phone with NALA tutors (as part of our Distance Learning Service) attended the day in Galway. Their tutor met them at the hotel. She introduced them to one another as they all work with the tutor on a one-to-one basis.¹⁴ The health and well-being workshop was mentioned by all of them as being particularly interesting. One of the students lived in rural County Clare. They had not been to Galway city before. Their tutor said it was a big step for all three of them to come to the day.

5. NALA needs to advertise its work and learning opportunities more

At least three students said that NALA should increase its promotion. See the two quotes below from the evaluation forms under “Is there anything else you want to tell NALA?”

- “Only I have never heard of them before doing their lesson in my classes. Then again I had not heard of my lesson just went into building and asked.”
- “An excellent day, enjoyed immensely. Workshops both excellent and interactive. Advertise NALA more as some people not aware of its existence.”

During the question and answer session at 3.30 pm:

- “I’d never heard of you”.
- A man suggested NALA should increase promotion and advertising campaigns about literacy supports, NALA’s offering and events.
- A man attending a men’s shed said he’s never heard of NALA or literacy in there.

¹⁴ NALA did have one distance learner come to the NALA Student Day in Cork in 2020. This was the first time that three distance learners came to the student day. It meant they could be introduced to one another.

A NALA Staff member carried out a small survey with 20 students on the Learn with NALA website. The survey results in Appendix 3 show that not everyone is aware they could use the Learn with NALA website over the summer when their centre is closed.

6. Other feedback gathered

Students were delighted with the day

64% of attendees said the day was excellent, 24% said it was good and 14% did not answer this question. Considering the high number of ESOL students present and the potential of lack of understanding of language, NALA is happy with these figures.

NALA is delighted with the very positive response to the day in general. This was one of our biggest student days with 180 students. We received emails from Adult Literacy Organisers after the day saying well done and that students' feedback was very positive. Also, with the high number of ESOL learners with varying levels of English there was potential for a lot of misunderstandings, which does not seem to have happened.

On the evaluation forms, 42 people thanked NALA with comments like:

Quotes from students about enjoying the day:

- "I say only thank all about this day because our day it was beautiful."
- "Thanks for your time, it was very important."
- "I am delighted with very pleasant and useful meeting. Thank you very much!!!"
- "I had a great day at today's student day. Thanks for everything."
- "The workshop on creative writing has been invaluable and tips for living well. For both workshops I and Oliver want to express our deep gratitude for the dedicated work you all do and for all you did for us today, for the kind and thoughtful way you do it. It has helped us so much. Oliver and Bridie McHale, Tuam."

- “This day will be engraved forever in my mind as you lit my dream and now it will never fade. I love all the workshops listed and hopefully there’ll be more. Maths I’d like as it was my weakest subject due to my master in primary school.”
- “It was an excellent day. Everything was so carefully planned down to the last detail.”
- “Thanks for the activity and your kindness! I hope to come to the next event!”
- “An excellent day, enjoyed immensely. Workshops both excellent and interactive.”

Ideas for future events

Students let us know what future events they’d like to see. 88 of 120 students answered this question. Of the 88, in order of popularity for future events, students would like:

- ESOL (33 students) - for speaking, to meet people and to learn about Ireland.
- Creative writing (17 students)
- Being wise and safe online (12 students)
- Energy in the home (10 students)¹⁵
- Tips for well-being (10 students)
- Socialising and interacting (8 students) – meeting other students, psychology, practicing communication and role-play. This is a new topic for NALA but is perhaps related to the Tips for Living Well-being workshop.

Interest in getting involved to help NALA’s work

Five students left their contact details with NALA’s Literacy Student and Development Officer for information on getting involved. A sixth student (who had attended a NALA organised Creative Writing workshop in September 2022) let NALA Staff know at the Student Day in Galway, she’d like to join the Student Subcommittee.

¹⁵ Still great interest in this workshop despite it being cancelled for the 2023 student day. The facilitator was unavailable at the last minute.

Room to make the day more accessible for people with different language levels

NALA considered having a translator on the day. We had 250 students booked with 19 different nationalities which would have made it very difficult to organise. Below are four ideas from Staff in NALA and a facilitator:

1. Filter learners with different levels of English into different groups.
2. Provide the agenda and other short explanation of the event in languages where there are more than 20 attendees of that first language.
3. Facilitators could print slides with notes and distribute these at the start of the workshop. Participants can use Google Translate to prepare for new vocabulary.¹⁶
4. Consider having separate Student Days for ESOL learners. With content like Irish culture, Irish history, and geography and perhaps sessions on how to learn more quickly where we could raise awareness of success strategies.

Next steps – proposed actions arising from feedback

Feedback	NALA action	Stakeholder action
1. Ensuring people have opportunities to learn that meet their needs		
Workshops were very popular and students requested the same ones for future events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to support creative writing events, funding permitting. • Continue to include well-being workshops in future events. It contributes to student development. 	If you know of a creative writing group for students let NALA know. ¹⁷

¹⁶ At the well-being workshop a lot of people pointed their phones at the slides on the screen.

¹⁷ Email NALA's Literacy Student and Development Officer, Margaret Murray, mmurray@nala.ie so NALA can promote any events we are organising with your group.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with partners on a student event on “Energy in the home” and form filling. • Let tutors know that students were interested in the workshops we had in 2022, for future events. • Highlight what came out of this in any digital literacy online workshops we do with tutors. 	
<p>ESOL students are looking for more opportunities to speak and more classes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relay this to NALA’s Literacies Development Officer who is organising an ESOL conference on 18 May 2023. • Is the Learn with NALA website ESOL friendly? Also, could we do something to promote it or tailor it? 	

<p>The value of the student day to distance learners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask a distance learners who attended to share their experience in NALA's "That's interesting!" worksheet or in the e-zine - raise the profile of student days for distance learners. 	
<p>NALA needs to advertise its work and learning opportunities more.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep working on focused campaigns to reach potential learners. • Let students know that Learn with NALA can be useful to students when their centre is closed during the summer. 	
<p>2. Helping organisations and society to become more literacy friendly</p>		
<p>Some students want to get involved in raising awareness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NALA will continue to provide opportunities for students to share their experience. Students are the best at talking about unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs. 	
<p>3. Promoting research and sharing good practice</p>		

<p>Continue to involve more students in the running of NALA in other opportunities as outlined in recent email to NALA members.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NALA’s Literacy Student and Development Officer will make contact with students who said they are interested in getting involved with NALA. 	
<p>4. Supporting national strategies</p>		
<p>79% of attendees in Galway were ESOL learners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For our next strategic plan NALA will consider its role in providing events for general ESOL learners versus ESOL learners who have unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs in their native language. 	

Acknowledgements

NALA wishes to thank:

- All the students who attended the student days in 2023.
- The Adult Literacy Organisers and tutors who encouraged students to attend in such high numbers at the event in Galway. NALA really appreciates your work.
- The three Student Subcommittee members of NALA – Catherine Devlin who did an excellent job chairing the day, Margaret Hanrahan who welcomed people at the door and Thomas Campbell who distributed a massive amount of NALA books for free on the day.
- NALA wants to thank the guest speakers and workshop facilitators.
- Our funders SOLAS who enable NALA to bring adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs together.

Appendix 1: Five workshops

Table 3. Workshops at the Student Day in Galway in 2023

<p>Creative writing – Bern Butler, creative writing facilitator</p> <p>Bern focused on poetry for beginners. She shared how to get started, keep going and develop a practice of writing. Also how to send out pieces of work for publication. Some students had written before and were more inclined to contribute to the discussion, or read their work. Students did a writing exercise as part of the workshop.</p>
<p>Tips for living well - Maggie O’Sullivan Graham, life coach</p> <p>Maggie explored how to look after your mind and become more aware of your inner critic. She looked at strategies for changing habits such as thinking of when you succeeded in the past and when you felt happy and energetic. She covered what humans know that helps us to look after ourselves.</p>
<p>Being wise online – Sadie Hynes, digital literacy tutor</p> <p>Sadie gave tips to help with thinking wisely when you are online or on your phone. She looked at how to check if information you see online is true and what to share. She covered a few topics and then asked students what they needed to know.</p>
<p>Meeting for ESOL students – Pascal Lally, ESOL tutor</p> <p>Pascal shared common Irish phrases that might be confusing and some interesting facts about Ireland. This workshop gave students from different countries a chance to meet.</p>
<p>Second meeting for ESOL students – Sean Driver, NALA</p> <p>Sean who works on plain English in NALA ran a second workshop similar to the one above.</p>

Appendix 2: More information about who attended

NALA was delighted with the strong support for a student day in Galway particularly from the Tuam and Galway city centre services.¹⁸ They recommended tutors for workshops and got behind the day. See Table 1 below for where the 180 students were from.

Table 1. ETBs, centres, number of students and number of ESOL students attending the NALA Student Day in Galway in 2023

ETB, and others	Where students attending were from	Number of students	ESOL learners
Longford and Westmeath - 73 students	Athlone[1]	56	55
	Moate	12	12
	Horseleap Temple accomm. centre	4	4
	LWETB (not stated where)	1	1
Galway and Roscommon - 53 students	Galway city (incl. student speaker)	30	27
	Headford	12	0
	Tuam	5	1
	Gort	2	0
	Loughrea	1	1
	Moycullen	1	0
	GRETB (not stated where)	2	2
Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim - 25 students	Castlebar	18	16
	Castlebar Breaffy Hotel	7	7
Limerick and Clare	Ennis	2	0
Kerry	Tralee	1	0
Others	Galway Cultural Institute	2	2
	NALA's Distance Learning Service	3	0
	Crumlin, Dublin	1	0
	Student Subcommittee & one former	4	0
	Second student speaker	1	0
	Unsure where from	15	14
Total number of students		180	142 (79%)

¹⁸We were delighted, as we had cancelled the Dublin student day because of the low number of students booked in.

On the booking form for the day, we asked ESOL students what their nationality was. Table 2 below shows of the 142 ESOL students that attended, what they told us their nationality was.

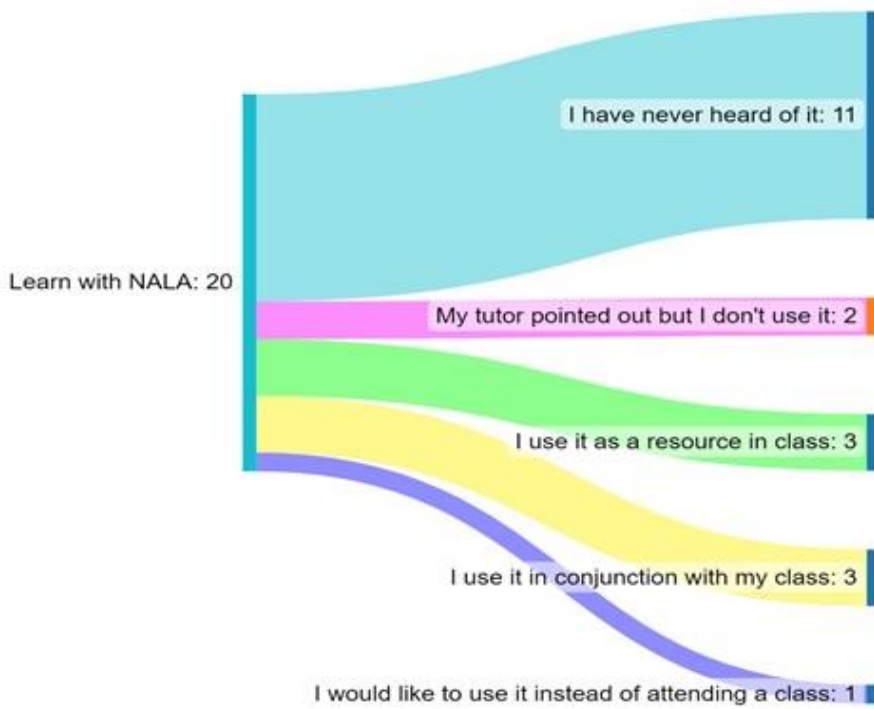
Table 2. The nationality of ESOL students that attended

Nationality	Number of students that attended
Ukrainian	89
Somalian	6
Chilean	4
Russian	2
Spanish	2
Nigerian	1
Iranian	1
Croatian	1
Brazilian	1
Armenian	1
Algerian	1
Nationality unknown to NALA	33
Total ESOL students	142

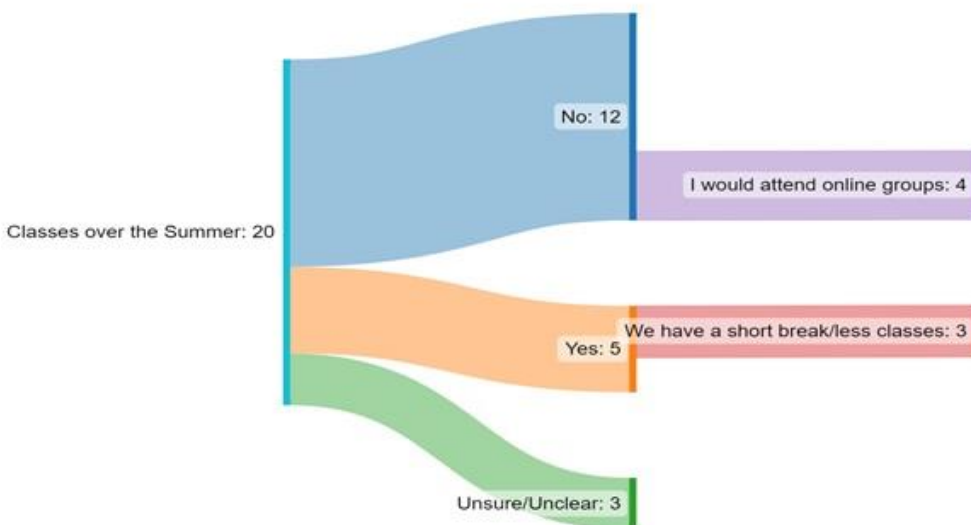
Appendix 3: Small survey of students about the Learn with NALA website

NALA's Project Support Officer, Bróna Conroy, for Learn with NALA asked twenty people questions about the Learn with NALA website. The figures might be slightly skewed as Bróna attended the workshop on Being Wise Online. See below the questions and responses from twenty students.

Do you use Learn with NALA?



Will you have classes over the summer in your centre?



Access to devices

- Of the 3 learners who are using LWN for blended learning, all were accessing on a mobile device.
- One showed me that he uses the automated email he receives from LWN to navigate into the website.
- The others use it on PCs/Tablets in their ETB – one of the tutors raised the importance of teaching learners to sign out of LWN when they are finished their session.

QQI level 1 certification

- I've just signed up for Level 1 General Learning: "If you could make a level 0 I would do it"
- My ETB signs us all up for Level 1 courses. GRETB have a policy of signing all ESOL learners learning English for the first time up to level 1 General Learning.

Additional comments or points raised:

- I would like to have the option. I find it hard to travel to classes. They are on a Tuesday morning and that's my only day off. I would like if my tutor in Tralee ETB had told us about this.
- The courses are too easy for me now. Can you do a Level 4?

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and members-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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