

NALA submission on the National Strategy for Migrant Integration

Submitted to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

November 2023



National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth regarding National Strategy for Migrant Integration



30 November 2023

1. Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with 1,825 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.

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

This can be for **many reasons.**



NALA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on a new national strategy for migrant integration.

2. Literacy skills

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

These 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.



3. 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 (CSO 2013) 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 among many adults where English is a Second or Other Language (ESOL).

The literacy, language, numeracy and digital literacy skills that we use and need:

- are not static and evolve constantly.
- are not something that you get once in school and you have it forever – you must practise these skills or you lose them – deskilling.
- can vary depending on the context, for example, dealing with a lawyer and legal terminology or studying a course and language specific to it.
- Can differ from one skill area to another – for example, a person can be good at reading, but struggle with writing – people have “spiky” profiles.

4. Literacy needs of migrants in Ireland

ESOL learners, who are learning English as a Second or Other Language, do not necessarily have functional literacy in their native language. This can happen for many reasons which are shared with Irish literacy learners, or for reasons relating to their migrant status, such as interruption of their education due to conflict. “ESOL literacy” refers to these learners who face the double challenge of learning English and improving their reading and writing skills at the same time, sometimes in an alphabet they are not familiar with. SOLAS provides a formal definition as follows:

“ESOL literacy is an umbrella term used to describe a migrant learner who is new to literacy (and possibly also new to ESOL) and has little or no reading or writing literacy skills in English and/or their own native language, while their spoken English language competency may range from pre-A1 to C2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).”

(SOLAS 2021a, p. 74)

It is not known how many migrants in Ireland have ESOL literacy needs. There were just over 29,000 registered ESOL learners in Ireland in 2022 and just over 26,000 learners in adult literacy tuition of some kind (SOLAS 2023, p. 9). The extent of overlap between these two groups is not clear. It is clear, however, that the number of ESOL learners overall has grown – almost doubling from around 15,000 in 2015 (SOLAS 2018, p. 13) to 29,000 in 2022. Consultation with Education and Training Boards (ETBs) suggests “a growing number of ESOL literacy learners” in recent years (SOLAS 2021, p. 70).

5. Policy and provision for ESOL literacy in Ireland

ESOL education is currently part of the remit of adult literacy services in ETBs. According to SOLAS (2021a, p. 14) “ETBs are operating on a more localised basis in the absence of national guidance or standards”. SOLAS (2018, p. 32) have recommended the introduction of a national ESOL framework as well as local frameworks for each ETB (for example, LCETB 2023). They note that “[p]ublicly funded ESOL provision in Ireland has developed in the absence of any overall national strategy or policy initiative” (SOLAS 2018, p. 10). In practice, this means that ESOL literacy practice varies across the country.

Through the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy, government departments are committed to a whole-of-government approach to creating “an Ireland where every adult has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully engage in society and realise their potential” (SOLAS 2021b, p. 10). This general commitment includes migrant members of Irish society. Migrants and international protection applicants are also priority groups under the ALL Strategy.

6. Impact of literacy needs on migrant integration in Ireland

Having literacy needs can impact integration in all six areas listed in the consultation survey for this National Strategy on Migrant Integration:

- Social life
- Access to public services
- Political/Public representation
- Employment
- Housing
- Education

The Council of Europe has recently developed a major project on Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Education of Adult Migrants (LASLLIAM, Council of Europe 2022). This recognises the central importance of second-language literacy to migrant integration.

“Language skills foster, among other things, social inclusion, access to education and employment. Within this context, non-literate or low-literate migrants have specific educational needs. [...] When it comes to language or knowledge of a society’s courses, such needs are rarely taken into consideration [...]”

(Council of Europe 2022, p. 11)

ESOL literacy needs must be taken into consideration for any policy affecting migrant integration in Ireland.

7. Barriers to literacy learning for migrants

A recent study in the UK found a number of barriers to ESOL literacy learning, which are worth quoting in full:

- A lack of experience of formal education and literacy, often linked to low levels of confidence to engage in learning
- Physical and mental ill health, particularly for refugees and asylum seekers experiencing trauma, and possible undeclared or undiagnosed learning difficulties, affecting learners’ readiness and ability to learn

- A lack of opportunity to practise English outside the classroom
- Caring responsibilities acting as a barrier to participation in learning and regular attendance, particularly for women who tend to take on childcare responsibilities
- Irregular and insecure employment affecting the ability to participate regularly in learning”

(Learning and Work Institute 2019, p. 1)

In addition to these barriers, SOLAS have highlighted that “the concept of ‘learning to learn’ is of particular relevance in the context of ESOL literacy supports” given some migrants have limited experience of education, as well as cultural differences around education (SOLAS 2021a, p. 73).

8. Recommendations for the next National Strategy for Migrant Integration

Recommendation 1: ESOL tuition should be a distinct service, working in collaboration with adult literacy services

Both literacy and ESOL are areas of high demand in adult education in Ireland. They each require specific attention and specific expertise.

It is essential to count ESOL language learners, ESOL literacy learners and English-speaking literacy learners separately in statistical reporting so that policymakers and practitioners can understand the level of need in each of these distinct areas.

ESOL and adult literacy services must continue to work together, particularly to support ESOL literacy learners. ESOL (literacy) learners should be encouraged to take other classes when they are ready, as adult education provides a valuable opportunity for community integration.

Recommendation 2: Provide training in ESOL literacy, intercultural awareness and anti-racism

Given that ESOL literacy is a specific area of expertise, high quality professional development and contract security must be available for educators in this area. SOLAS has concluded that “[...] teacher expertise is the most important resource for effective ESOL practice” (SOLAS 2018, p. 43) so this cannot be neglected for ESOL literacy practice. NALA provides assistance such as webinars and teaching resources, but is not resourced to provide long-term or certified courses for ESOL literacy practitioners. A dedicated and defined framework for ESOL provision and professional development needs to be developed and implemented by relevant educational providers in Ireland.

We also recommend a literacy integration approach through which literacy is integrated into all adult education courses, including ESOL. Similarly, intercultural awareness and anti-racism should be integrated into adult education, for all learners and teachers.

Recommendation 3: Resource adult education services sufficiently to meet the needs of ESOL literacy learners

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some ESOL classes in Ireland are over-subscribed and have waiting lists. It is imperative that enough places are available for every migrant who wants to improve their language and/or literacy skills. In addition, assessment and provision must take into account the varying levels of education, literacy and language proficiency of migrants, their psycho-social health along with their immigration status and personal and professional ambitions.

Some ESOL learners, particularly ESOL literacy learners, may require more teaching hours than they currently receive – the Council of Europe has highlighted that ESOL literacy learners are “rarely provided with a sufficient number of hours of instruction” (2022, p. 11). Intensive courses should be available as an option in every ETB.

Ideally, dedicated ESOL literacy classes would be held, separate from ESOL classes. Čatibušić, Gallagher and Karazi (2019, p. 10) found that “having both groups in the same class posed particular problems for the teachers” due to their very different needs. Separate classes for women may also be appropriate in cases where migrant women are not culturally comfortable sharing a classroom with men – particularly as these women may be at risk of social isolation at home.

Recommendation 4: Produce teaching materials which are tailored for ESOL (literacy) learners in Ireland

The materials used in language and literacy classes provide important context for learners who are new to Irish society. Learners can be empowered to further integrate into social, community and public life by encountering relevant scenarios and information in their learning materials. Unfortunately, tutors in Ireland often have to rely on UK or US materials.

Recommendation 5: Target potential ESOL literacy learners in tailored promotional campaigns and community outreach

A creative approach must be taken to recruiting learners who have both language and literacy needs – traditional marketing campaigns may not be effective, and migrants may not hear about adult education services by “word of mouth” as they may not have social contacts who themselves are aware of adult education services. Community outreach by ETB staff and others may be the most effective way of reaching this cohort. This is resource-intensive work, but it is appropriate to resource it, so that those migrants who are most likely to experience significant difficulties with integration are reached.

Recommendation 6: Commit to the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy

As noted above, the ALL Strategy applies to all government departments and it targets migrants and international protection applicants as priority groups. DCEDIY must continue to work with the ALL National Programme Office on implementation of this ten-year strategy. The ALL Strategy, and its relationship to migrant integration, should be explicitly referenced in the new National Strategy for Migrant Integration.

Recommendation 7: Consider literacy needs in systems used by migrants

The international protection application process in Ireland has been digitalised. People can now track their application online. Many ESOL literacy and language students may need support with their digital and general literacy skills to do this.

This is just one example of systems which need to be literacy-proofed. Literacy awareness training across government departments interacting with migrants would be invaluable.

Recommendation 8: Support a range of ESOL learning and qualification options

Increasingly, funding of adult education services is based on numbers of learners who gain certification. Certification might not be a priority for some ESOL literacy learners, yet they will have benefitted from their learning nonetheless.

For those who want certification, their lack of literacy in English and in their native tongue often make this unattainable. There needs to be ESOL Level 1 and 2 QQI awards to bridge the gap. As mentioned above there are varying language proficiency among migrants that need to be addressed. Some ESOL learners who are using our [LearnwithNALA elearning platform](#) have requested online provision beyond QQI Level 3.

Recommendation 9: Address critical media literacy needs to tackle anti-migrant disinformation and misinformation

The integration of migrants in Irish society is not just the responsibility of migrants themselves. Recent events in Dublin have made it imperative that we must all be on guard against disinformation and misinformation. Critical media literacy is an essential skill which must be supported through the ALL Strategy and the new National Strategy for Migrant Integration.

9. Follow on and contact information

NALA is happy to talk further about these recommendations.

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10. References

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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, 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 online learning courses, providing a tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

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