

# Submission to Further Education and Training (FET) Expert Panel on Staff Structures

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National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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## Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity and membership-based organisation with just over 1,700 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**.



Our primary activities include:

- **Advocacy, policy and research**
- Services for literacy learners
  - **Events** and development programmes
  - **National Freephone advice, information and referral service**
  - **Learn with NALA distance learning and eLearning platform**
- Services for literacy and related practitioners
  - **Events, Online training** and
  - **Resources**
- Services for organisations
  - Literacy awareness training and outreach
  - **Plain English editing and training**

In the first six months of 2024 we delivered the following professional development activity to practitioners:

- We held **our annual Tutors' Forum, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) conference**, follow-up webinar series and a digital learning and teaching webinar series. There were 492 participants from Education and Training Board (ETB) and other local educational providers. Further information can be found on the **news and events section of our website**.
- We continued our collaboration with **South East Technological University's (SETU) Literacy Development Centre** that provides accredited training to literacy practitioners at Levels 6 and above on the National Framework of Qualifications.
- We delivered training on how to use **our Learn with NALA eLearning website** to 400+ tutors and staff.

- We enrolled 235 professionals and adult literacy practitioners on our **online professional development programmes** on our Learn with NALA eLearning website. This included participants from 15 ETBs. A total of 152 NALA Professional Development Certificates were achieved by participants.
- We collaborated with the **Adult Literacy for Life** National Programme Office (NPO) on a survey to gain an insight into needs and preferences for Learning and Development for Adult Literacy Professionals. The survey followed the first phase of research to inform a Professional Learning and Development (PL&D) framework for adult literacy practitioners that was commissioned by the NPO. The research reports are available on request from the NPO or ourselves. The survey responses are currently being analysed.

NALA welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Independent Expert Panel's Evaluation of Irish Further Education and Training (FET) Practitioner Staffing Structures.

## Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

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 to make informed choices.

Literacy, numeracy and digital 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, numeracy and digital skills:

- are not static and they evolve.
- are not something that you get once in school and you have forever – you must practice these skills or you lose them. This is called “deskillling”.
- can vary depending on the context, for example, dealing with a financial service for a loan involves financial and legal terminology.
- are different for each person – you can be good in one area, for example reading, but weak in another, for example writing.

In this submission, the word “literacy” may refer to all these skills (for ease of reading).

Literacy is not about individual intelligence. Literacy is about social, economic and cultural opportunity – and having equal access to opportunity is key.

## Literacy needs in Ireland

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

The most recent adult literacy survey (Central Statistics Office, 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, working out a bill or calculating percentages.

Another survey on adult skills (Cedefop 2020) showed that in Ireland:

- About 2 in 5 (42%) adults struggle with basic digital tasks. For example, looking up a website or sending an email.

There are also literacy needs among many adults where English is their Second or Other Language (ESOL). As of now there is no data on these needs and the Irish Government has not developed a national ESOL policy.

We understand that the results from the **2<sup>nd</sup> Cycle of the Survey of Adult Skills** Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) that was conducted in 31 countries and economies will be released on 10 December 2024. This data, subsequent analysis and correlation with existing reports and data sets will be essential to inform and respond to future adult literacy needs, definitions, provision and the professional development of its practitioners.

## Literacy and equality

Literacy is a barometer of equality and is a way to create a society that is better for all. Equality is not about treating everyone in the same way - individuals' needs are sometimes best met in different ways. At present, those who need to access education and training the most have the least access. 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” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO 2019, p146).

NALA believes that priority should be given to those experiencing the most educational disadvantage - the **furthest behind first** principle in the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). Within such a framework, the needs of those with less than a QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) Level 4 qualification should be met first. Vulnerable adults who cannot access supports, or are refused help when they need it, may not seek help again. For the furthest behind, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports - particularly in informal, non-accredited settings such as community education and at accredited offerings at levels 1 to 4 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

## Adult literacy policy

In addition to the Further Education and Training Strategy, in 2021, the Irish Government published a 10-year Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy, which aims to: “ensure that everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and realise their potential” (Government of Ireland 2021, p4). NALA advocated for this strategy, collaborated in its development and continues to be

involved in its implementation.

The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy commits to a cross-Government, cross-economy and cross-society approach to support literacy needs, provision and services. The Strategy's themes (Embedding, Understand, Access, Expand, Empower and Measuring) have actions that require a resilient workforce and robust data to inform strategic planning and delivery.

Currently, there are gaps in data about literacy needs, provision, and the profile and training of practitioners. As mentioned above, the Adult Literacy for Life National Programme Office has conducted initial research on current professional development provision and is currently analysing response from a survey on literacy provision and practitioners' professional development needs. This information and the expert panel's work will help to progress the Strategy's following commitment to "support skilled practitioners":

<b>EXPAND: Support Skilled Practitioners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop and establish an overall continuous development framework for literacy practitioners, embedding a consistent approach to initial and ongoing skills development.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Agree a consistent approach to provision of one-to-one literacy tutoring, that all tutors have common capabilities to assist in delivery of training programmes.</li><li>• Set consistent initial education requirements, a structured portfolio-based approach to initial and ongoing development, a consistent defined future role for literacy tutors and a range of core skills modules to be made available for all involved in literacy support.</li></ul>
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(Reproduced from Government of Ireland 2021, p75)

The expert panel's work is essential to ensure that FET structures are strategically developed and resourced to ensure the successful implementation of the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (ALL) and forthcoming Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy.

## Response to consultation questions

NALA's responses, which are primarily focused on literacy provision and practitioners, have been informed by:

- available data and reports;
- our interactions with the FET and ALL stakeholders and structures since 2020; and
- consultation with our members and the Adult Literacy Organisers Association (ALOA).

### **1. In the context of futureproofing the FET system, what is your overall perception/assessment of the FET system? What works well? What needs to change?**

Feedback has previously been provided to these questions during:

- BH (Boland and Ellen Hazelkorn) Associates' 'High-level Mid-Term Review of Future FET: Transforming Learning, The National Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024' (2023, unpublished). Our submission to the consultation is available on request. We would welcome an update on the status of that review.
- The 22 May 2024 FET Fostering Inclusion Advisory Group meeting.

#### **What works well?**

- The scoping of an ambitious and much needed programme of change. This programme includes a new funding model, planning and performance agreements, workforce development, provision and branding and promotion.
- Response to the significant increase in participation, particularly from ESOL learners in literacy provision.
- Collaborative working arrangements, particularly at a local and regional level
- Opportunities to involve learners in consultation and decision-making such as Student Councils and the Learner Voice initiatives.
- Frontline staff understand learners' needs and are learner-focused in their attitudes.
- An increase in energy, enthusiasm, structures and modest additional funding to raise literacy awareness and activity due to the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy.

#### **What needs to change?**



- Strategic structures, additional supports and resources to manage the extensive programme of change.
- As mentioned above, accurate data on educational needs, programme provision and practitioner profiles are required to inform strategic programme and workforce planning and development that responds to identified needs of FET learners and staff.
- An acceptance, matched by provision, that education is not just about accreditation and labour force development at levels 6 and higher. There needs to be a greater understanding of literacy needs by allowing longer timelines for progression and agreeing definitions of success other than progression and accreditation.
- There are too many inflexible and unconnected systems (Programme Learner Support System - PLSS, Document Centric Solutions - DCS, Quality and Qualifications Ireland Business System - QBS) that reduce staff time with learners. Additional staff are needed along with more transparent, integrated and efficient systems and structures for planning, decision-making, implementation, reporting and monitoring that are qualitative and quantitative and user-centred in their design.
- There is a need for more learner-centred programme delivery (flexible, modular / stackable, online) and relevant supports such as travel and childcare that respond to changed and changing learner profiles and near full employment.
- There is a need to resolve ongoing challenges with accessing information and guidance about educational opportunities.
- Annual planning and funding cycles need to move to multi-annual ones.
- Additional funding is required and the rules and regulations regarding the National Training Fund need to be considered, particularly to fund community education and National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 1 – 4. The €1.5 billion surplus in the National Training Fund should be considered as source of funding for this provision.
- Attractive terms and conditions and career paths for FET staff. This should include literacy tutors/teachers and Adult Educators, who may work under conditions which are less favourable than other teaching staff. A career path with educational requirements and growth opportunities (like the path from teacher to principal in secondary education) would be helpful for recognition and to further professionalise the literacy sector in FET.
- A futures unit in SOLAS to scope the emerging trends and relevant policy and

provision responses. For instance, young people today and future generations have different learning needs and expectations of education. It seems likely that there will be an increasing preference for online and other flexible modes of delivery, especially for people who experienced full-time education during COVID. It is also important to note that the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results for 15-year-olds in reading and maths show no improvement, over recent rounds, in the proportion of students performing poorly. Just over 1 in 10 students demonstrate below functional reading skills (Educational Research Centre - ERC 2023, p78) and almost 1 in 5 students demonstrate below functional maths skills, a significant increase on previous rounds (ERC 2023, p52). This means there is going to be a need for adult literacy and numeracy education for the foreseeable future, in addition to the emerging needs and demands of the green transition, digitalisation and migration to Ireland of those whose first language is not English.

## **2. To what extent is the current staffing structure, division of roles and responsibilities, appropriate to meet changing educational and workforce needs for learners, communities and employers?**

Without visibility on FET's organisational structures, staffing levels and job descriptions it is difficult to answer this question comprehensively. Clarity and transparency would be welcome and make the structures more understandable.

We understand from our interactions and consultations that there has been significant change to literacy provision and staffing structures in response to the new funding model and performance agreements, but not necessarily in response to needs.

Some of these changes include:

- Reduction and, or cessation of 1:1 literacy provision and volunteer tutors.
- Cessation of standalone Adult Literacy Organiser positions and, or incorporation into other roles.
- Unattractive employment terms and conditions, and career paths.
- Increased administrative responsibilities resulting in decreased outreach and learner contact.
- ESOL tutors being asked to provide basic literacy, numeracy and other adult

education tuition.

There have also been positive changes such as the integration of literacy into other programmes including Apprenticeship.

With strategic direction and oversight from SOLAS and the Adult Literacy for Life National Programme Office, there needs to be agreement of baseline literacy provision, informed by identified need, in ETBs. This needs to be followed up with consistent delivery, resourcing and responsive / relevant professional development.

We note that the FET Strategy 2020-2024 contains a commitment to more flexibility and breaking down barriers in FET staffing:

“It is important to agree an appropriate future staffing framework, which breaks down the barriers between different FET settings and programmes and facilitates more flexible deployment of staff to meet evolving needs” (SOLAS 2020, p56)

This may be a suitable approach for FET, in general, but we would argue that literacy is a specialist area which needs to be protected and developed. Currently, there is a “demographic timebomb” in literacy in Ireland as many teaching staff are approaching retirement. This will need to be addressed by having dedicated, trained literacy staff such as Adult Literacy Organisers and tutors with relevant qualifications (such as from SETU), good working conditions and career prospects.

SOLAS would be well placed to work with the Teaching Council to facilitate teachers trained in other countries to work in the adult education system.

One-to-one, flexible literacy provision also needs to be resourced and retained in staff's working arrangements as it is vital for learners with the greatest need to progress.

Literacy should not be a secondary part of someone's overall role. Currently, “centre managers” or “resource workers” carry out the role in some ETBs. They may not be literacy aware, nor have had literacy training from SETU or similar. This needs to be addressed so as not to dilute the specialty of literacy by having less qualified and, or

experienced staff responsible for it.

Furthermore, we have seen a significant demand for ESOL tuition in recent years. Adult literacy teams have taken responsibility for this in many ETBs. ESOL teachers have been recruited but the long-term arrangements for ESOL provision have not been strategically considered. This is leading to ESOL teachers being asked to provide literacy tuition and the further dilution of resources to engage the “furthest behind” in literacy learning. In addition, ESOL learners, literacy learners, and ESOL literacy learners (those who have literacy needs in their first language and are also learning English) are often being taught in the same programme. Instead, they need to be supported and counted separately to ensure learners are getting appropriate learning and we can see the true extent of literacy need/uptake of literacy services distinct from ESOL.

It can also be useful for ESOL teachers to speak the first language of their students. This supports their language learning at beginner stages, provides general cultural support to people who may be very isolated, and establishes trust and rapport (see Čatibušić, Gallagher and Karazi 2019, pp. 7-8 for a discussion of the latter point). This may be particularly important for people who have had little formal education, or disrupted education, due to conflict or gender inequality. The ability to speak another language should be a desirable criterion in recruitment, and immigrant communities should be targeted for recruitment to these roles.

Overall, it is important to ensure that adult literacy provision continues to be in keeping with Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work (NALA 2012) and the right to education, training and lifelong learning set out in the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and actioned through various EU [adult learning initiatives](#)).

**3. Are current delivery options and approaches appropriate to meet the changing needs of learners and society/economy? Should greater attention be given to flexible delivery modes (for example evening and weekends, summer delivery, online, blended, face-to-face, class ratio)?**

The simple answer to both of these questions is No and Yes due to the following

factors:

- We have near full employment that requires flexible educational offerings. This need for upskilling and lifelong learning was identified in the OECD Skills Strategy Ireland Assessment and Recommendations (OECD 2023).
- Adult learners and adult education have unique profiles and pedagogies. Grummell (2023) refers to “diverse learning rhythms, relationships and temporalities” (p603) and makes the case for maintaining a learner-centred ethos in adult literacy education. Therefore, the FET system must meet learners where they are at. This requires flexible delivery, pedagogy and a range of learning options and delivery approaches at all levels with qualified, adaptable staff and relevant, extensive supports. Literacy tuition is typically already flexible in that tutors work evenings and travel. Flexible provision will need to be retained and enhanced to ensure to attract learners in employment and, or caring responsibilities that cannot attend full-time provision during the day.
- Micro-credentials and individual learning accounts or vouchers can be incentives for adults to access training. They make it easier for people who are in employment to engage with learning. Further development of micro-credentials in adult education would align with the EU’s Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability (Council of Europe 2022).
- The focus on QQI accreditation can make delivery of some courses quite rigid: 3 hours a week for 13 weeks, in-person, won’t suit everyone.
- The current funding model (that is linked to unique learners and outcomes) doesn’t allow for flexible delivery modes.

The demand and potential for flexible delivery is evident in our distance and eLearning services. For instance, since 2020, more than 10,000 learners have registered with our [Learn with NALA](#) distance learning and eLearning courses. Our recent research, [Learning with NALA](#), found that:

- 50% of our online learners surveyed were in employment (NALA 2024, p.95);
- 57% of learners chose Learn with NALA because it is online (p101);
- 58% of learners used it in the evenings and, or at weekends (p102); and
- Learners’ reasons for not doing other education or training included affordability (18% of survey respondents), lack of childcare (18%) and lack of transport (14%) (p98).

These barriers can be addressed by providing flexible learning options and also by providing tangible supports for adult learners, as called for by AONTAS in their ongoing campaign about the [Hidden Costs of Adult Education](#).

#### **4. What changes would support FET being more flexible, agile and adaptable to achieving the ambitions set out in the ‘National Further Education and Training Strategy’?**

There is a unique opportunity for FET to become the go-to provider for lifelong learning opportunities, but this will require:

- Building a collaborative rather than competitive culture.
- Creating clusters of expertise, centres of excellence that can be the go-to places for domain knowledge rather than creating stand-alone units in each FET provider / stakeholder.
- Streamlining online provision rather than having SOLAS and at least 3 of its funded entities providing eLearning solutions.
- Implementing universal design for buildings and learning throughout the FET system
- Integrating informal and formal provision, accredited and unaccredited provision.

This will require:

- clear progression pathways for learners in community education, literacy tuition and informal settings into Levels 1-4 and higher-level courses
- improved validation and assessment processes
- Joining up data systems to strategically identify regional needs, plan for the future and accurately monitor provision and impact
- Conducting longitudinal qualitative and quantitative impact analysis that will:
  - take varying definitions of success into account, including the ETBI’s Wider Benefits of Learning (ETBI 2015)
  - identify and implement alternatives to the current Learner Details Form. The extensive personal data required from learners is a barrier to participation and prioritises learners who progress through the levels over learners who need the most support
- Undertaking skills audits of current staff to identify gaps, needs and development plans

- Providing attractive terms and conditions of employment with training and development opportunities
- Reducing the administrative burden on teaching staff and, or providing more administrative staff to allow more time for teaching staff to work with learners. Putting the furthest behind first means targeted outreach to the most disadvantaged communities, which takes significant time and effort by staff. Adult literacy organisers should be freed to do this essential work
- Implementing multi-annual planning and funding models that are not solely dependent on unique learner outcomes and accreditation achievements
- Ensuring the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy is central to the new FET Strategy and this research and recommended actions. All FET staff, particularly front-line staff, should receive Literacy Awareness and Plain Language training as they may be the first person that someone with literacy needs encounters when they take the courageous step back into education.

## Conclusion

NALA has been supporting and advocating for the strategic development of literacy provision and practice since 1980. We have worked collaboratively with practitioners and policy makers to identify needs, recommend and deliver learning and teaching resources, training programmes and professional development frameworks.

In this submission, we are calling for a learner-centred approach to staffing in which there are sufficient numbers of literacy-qualified and focused staff who are enabled by their organisations to support the “furthest behind”. We argue that literacy services are a specialised area which should be a priority in this research. Any recommendations arising should be aligned with the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy and informed by the results of the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) that will be launched 10 December 2024. We provide evidence of the existing demand for flexible, online learning options in adult literacy and the likely future demand for literacy services. We welcome the ambition of recent FET reforms and make the case for more resourcing to make these ambitions a reality.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our comments and recommendations

further to inform the future development of literacy practice and provision in Ireland.



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## About NALA

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We support adults with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to access learning opportunities that meet their needs and to take part fully in society. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice. We also provide support through our online learning courses, tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

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