

# Overview of the Adult Literacy System<sup>1</sup> in Ireland and Current Issues in its Implementation

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## Introduction

It is only since 2000 that adult literacy has had a place in the education system in Ireland in a meaningful sense. Prior to this Ireland had no national literacy policy and only a very small fund to cover minimal adult literacy services. Today, literacy is the top priority in national policy on further education<sup>2</sup> and is firmly embedded in policy agendas outside of the education sector. This change has been largely the consequence of the Irish results of the first-ever national adult literacy survey, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which was carried out in 1995. It showed that one in four of the Irish adult population scored at the lowest level of literacy on a scale of one to five (Department of Education, 1997). IALS also showed how poor literacy skills among the adult population negatively affected family, community, and work life. This led to government recognition of the importance of improving adult literacy levels for wider social and economic development.

Since the publication of the IALS, the funding has increased 18-fold and participation in literacy services has increased almost 6-fold. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2000–2006 outlines a vision of the future that provides for greater economic and social development. Adult literacy is part of the NDP as a clear contributing factor to upskilling the workforce, and facilitating greater participation of those on the margins of society (Government of Ireland, 1999, pp. 191–192). Also, in 2000, the Department of Education and Science (DES) published the first-ever policy on adult education, containing a national adult literacy strategy as the top priority in the document. This policy document, *Learning for Life*, recognizes that adult education can make a major contribution both in meeting the skill requirements of a rapidly changing workforce, as well as improving social cohesion and equity in the emergence of a broadly inclusive and proactive civil society. The inclusion of a philosophy of literacy as broader than just workforce development distinguishes literacy in Ireland from the market-driven rhetoric that is dominant in U.K. and U.S. policy in this area (Hamilton, Macrae, & Tett, 2001, p. 32). A further distinguishing element of adult literacy in Ireland is that the core national body overseeing the development of the sector is a membership-based nongovernmental organization (NALA, The National Adult Literacy Agency) with relatively good public funding and influence. NALA's mission statement is as follows:

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The term adult literacy is most commonly used in Ireland, particularly in policy. There is concern however that adult literacy is often interpreted too narrowly and excludes numeracy. Some practitioners use the term adult basic education to overcome this difficulty and not to denote something different from adult literacy.

<sup>2</sup> Further education is defined as “systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training” (DES, 2000, p. 12).

NALA is an independent, member-based organisation committed to making sure people with literacy and numeracy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs (2007).

### **Building a Foundation for Adult Literacy**

Although adult educators in Ireland had always subscribed to the idea of lifelong learning as an integral part of the philosophy of adult education, and the EU—through a series of publications and policy documents (European Parliament and Council, 1995; OECD, 1996)—promoted it as necessary for industrialized countries to survive in a global context, the government in Ireland had always viewed education and training as a linear progression from school to college or training center. Adult educators felt that a government policy embracing lifelong learning would bring about the infrastructural change to set up a permanent adult education system that would include adult literacy.

The government was focused on training for workers. In 1993, the Irish government submitted a national development plan to the European Commission, in which one of the two central objectives of the Community Support Framework for Ireland, 1994–1999 was to reintegrate long-term unemployed people (and those at risk of becoming so) into the economic mainstream. The government built their strategy around the priority of developing “the skills and aptitudes of those in work and those seeking employment by both addressing the needs of the productive sectors and by integrating those who are marginalized and disadvantaged” (Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 272). Under its Operational Program, which ran from 1994–1999, the government provided a significant percentage of the population with education and training courses.

Despite the unprecedented boom of the Irish economy experienced in the mid-1990s, with growth rates outstripping most, if not all, of its trading partners the government still had concerns about the number of people at risk in society. The government introduced the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS), a nationally agreed-upon set of policy targets, proposals, and programs to eliminate the main factors contributing to the prevalence of poverty and social exclusion in Irish society. One of the key targets was addressing educational disadvantage by ensuring programs were in place for people wishing to improve their level of literacy.

From 1993 until 1997, provision of adult literacy services grew incrementally each year. However, the rate of annual increase in the Adult Literacy and Community Education budget declined each year, dropping most significantly in 1996. By 1997, although there were approximately 5,000 adults participating in the adult literacy service, the adult literacy service relied on a “totally inadequate” budget, according to the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (First Report of the Joint Committee on Education and Science, 1998, p.43).

### **Adult Literacy in Ireland in 1997**

- No national survey of adult literacy and numeracy
- No national policy on adult literacy and numeracy
- In 1997, less than €1m budget
- 5,000 participants in VEC adult literacy services – majority in 1:1 tuition provided by volunteers

- NALA still campaigning for the 3 ‘Rs’ – recognition, resources and representation

### **The International Adult Literacy Survey**

The International Adult Literacy Survey (DES, 1997), conducted in 1995 and published in 1997, provided Ireland with its first profile of the literacy skills of adults aged 16–64. The survey found that about 25% of the population, or at least 500,000 adults, scored at the lowest level (Level 1), performing at best tasks that required the reader to locate a simple piece of information in a text, with no distracting information, when the structure of the text assisted the task. A further 30% of the population was at Level 2. Ireland thus had a total of 55% of those aged between 16 and 64 scoring at below the minimum desirable threshold for a Western industrialized nation. The survey showed, however, that people in the older age quintiles had poorer performance than those in the younger age groups. The survey concluded that one reason for this was many older Irish people had not participated in second-level education, because it was free until 1967 (DETE, 1997). The findings were met with shock and disbelief (First Report on the Joint Committee on Education and Science, 1998, p. 46).

The publication of IALS, which provided a comparative analysis of the numbers of adults in many Western industrialized populations who have difficulties with everyday reading tasks, greatly affected the adult literacy sector in Ireland. Up to that time there had been no published adult literacy survey and very little attention paid to the area by successive Irish government administrations. NALA prepared a campaign to publicize the IALS results and suggest solutions; the campaign attracted considerable media attention. In addition, NALA set up meetings with, and prepared papers for, identified policy representatives and service providers, who heretofore had little or no involvement in the adult literacy issue, including the Department of An Taoiseach; Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment; and FÁS (the State Employment and Training Agency).

In 1997, as a result of the OECD survey, constant lobbying by NALA, and the initial ranking of Ireland as second-last in the first IALS publication, the government budget for literacy increased by 16%, starting a trend that was to continue for the next five years. Provision for adult literacy increased from a base of €1 million in 1997 to €18 million in 2003. Literacy had become a top priority. At the launch of the NALA International Literacy Day conference in 1999, our government leader, An Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern had the following to say:

“I am convinced that literacy is one of the key ways to build an Ireland where people have the chance to build their own futures and have full access to a full and decent life. The Government I lead is determined to work with you to put in place a forward looking strategy in order to ensure that, as a society, we promote higher standards of literacy for all. I can assure you that the National Development Plan currently being finalized will reflect this priority. ... [A]n underfunded and underresourced service too easily gets the label of being a service about a special problem. A problem that affects one in four of us is not a special problem, but a problem for all of us and we need to start saying so even

more loudly and clearly and unapologetically.” (NALA Newsletter, November 1999)

## **1998 to Present: Adult Literacy Service Expansion and Improvement**

### **First National Adult Literacy Strategy**

Since 1998, numerous policy initiatives and dedicated funding from the government through a variety of schemes has permitted the adult literacy service to expand and improve, reaching a greater number of adults. This has been accomplished through three primary components: national policy on adult education—*Learning for Life*, the first national strategy on adult literacy, and the inclusion of an adult literacy target in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

In 1997, the new government appointed the first ever Minister for State at the Department of Education and Science, with responsibility for Adult Education. After discussions with key stakeholders involved in adult education, the new administration published a Green Paper on Adult Education (DES, 1998), including a broad definition of adult literacy that encapsulated the philosophy of Irish adult literacy practice. It outlined the requirements necessary for the development of the adult literacy service to meet the needs of a greater number of adults wishing to improve their basic education.

### **Learning for Life**

After two years consultation concerning the Green Paper, and advances to the adult literacy budget, the Department of Education and Science published the first ever White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, in 2000, with adult literacy policy as its top priority. The approach to adult literacy developed since the 1970s thus became embedded in national policy, an important victory for adult literacy.

*Learning for Life* sets out a holistic approach to the development of a national program of adult education, recognizing its contribution to the six priority areas of:

1. Consciousness raising
2. Citizenship
3. Cohesion
4. Competitiveness
5. Cultural development
6. Community building

Three core principles underpin this framework for adult education: lifelong learning as a systemic approach, equality, and interculturalism. This broad vision of adult education equally applies to adult literacy and highlights that both areas are not just about the development of skills and the resultant effect on the economy, but the role of adult learning in the development of social, cultural, and civil society as well.

The qualities that characterize good adult literacy practice are outlined in *Learning for Life*:

- A holistic curriculum.
- A view of the student as a self-directed, self-motivated learner.

- A recognition of the learner as the center of the learning process, i.e., learning as construction rather than as instruction.
- A core-learning objective of preparing the learner for a life of learning rather than for a terminal, end-of-learning examination.

### **The National Adult Literacy Program**

The *Learning for Life* White Paper also established the National Adult Literacy Program, a strategy to improve adult literacy levels amongst the adult population in Ireland. This is the first strategy of this kind in Ireland and represents the blueprint for adult literacy development up to 2006. The goals of this plan over six years were to:

- Increase the number of clients reached so that by the end of 2006, an estimated 113,000 will have benefited from these services.
- Prioritize those with the lowest literacy levels.
- Implement a quality framework to monitor the effectiveness of the service.
- Develop new modes of reaching out and recruiting people.
- Ensure adult literacy education is available for the unemployed.
- Develop new strategies to address the under representation of men in adult literacy classes.
- Explore the potential of Information Communication Technology and broadcasting.
- Continue to develop specific initiatives for disadvantaged groups.
- Expand provision of workplace literacy.
- Increase collaboration with the public library service, as well as other organizations working with relevant sections of the population.

The National Development Plan 2000–2006, with a commitment to provide comprehensive and diverse education and training opportunities, catering to the needs of specific groups from early childhood through adulthood, particularly those experiencing social disadvantage, funded the National Adult Literacy Program at €93.7 million. Since 2000, the program has ensured that:

- The clients catered to annually have increased from 5,000 to 28,000 from 1997–2003, surpassing published targets.
- Provision includes free nighttime and daytime classes, typically of two to four hours duration per week.
- The adult literacy service is developing a continuum from one-to-one voluntary tuition to group work to progression to certified learning options, in recognition of the need to provide a suite of learning options.
- The adult literacy service is expanding and strengthening referral networks and typically includes libraries, farming organizations, community groups, trade unions, social welfare centers, etc.
- Additional practitioner training programs provided by NALA are underway on a modular in-service basis, as part of a higher education accreditation framework for adult literacy practitioners.

- NALA has mainstreamed the Quality Framework, a strategy to guide and monitor quality standards, for the adult literacy service after a three-year development process involving learners, practitioners, and senior management.
- In conjunction with adult literacy practitioners and learners, NALA has developed a national assessment framework, building on the Equipped for the Future program from the United States.
- NALA has successfully piloted and evaluated literacy and dedicated numeracy programs broadcast on radio and television, which are now part of the mainstream provision, most notably the READ WRITE NOW television series.
- Adult literacy services and their local authority are rolling out national workplace basic education programs for local authority workers in the public sector, after pilot programs were 50% oversubscribed.
- The DES has established an Inter-Departmental Group on Literacy for the Unemployed to develop an integrated response to addressing the literacy needs of the unemployed. *Return to Education* programs have been expanded throughout Ireland providing long-term unemployed people with an opportunity to combine supported employment with a nine-hour basic education course.
- The adult literacy service is successfully running a small number of family literacy groups and piloting open learning centers, along with literacy groups for migrant women, the Traveling community, and supported programs for the unemployed.
- The adult literacy service is developing ESOL to meet the needs of an ever-increasing number of asylum seekers and refugees. NALA has published a set of guidelines for ESOL work drawn up by a national working group made up of adult literacy and ESOL practitioners, as well as representatives of agencies supporting the integration of nonnationals.

The national policy context outlined above shows the government of Ireland's commitment to addressing the adult literacy issue in Ireland, and for the first time ever it has security for the future. However, it is not possible to ascertain where Ireland would rate in a future IALS and the Irish government did not sign up to be part of the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS), the successor to the OECD's IALS, which not only covered literacy skills but measured a broader range of skills in the adult population. However, the inclusion of a quality framework devised by adult literacy learners, practitioners, and senior management has given previously unknown legitimacy to the sector and ensured that the ethos of adult literacy work in Ireland will underpin all developments in the area in the future.

### ***Training and Practitioner Supports Teacher and Tutor Preparation and Certification***

*Learning for Life* (DES, 2000) acknowledges the unique and invaluable contribution made by volunteers (over 70% of all tutors) to the development of the adult literacy service and commits to providing opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills and help them gain certification through flexible procedures. With additional funding and staff in the 1990s from the DES, NALA devised a professional development program that enabled local literacy organizers to train their own tutors locally and to then use NALA in-service training to train tutors in additional areas. Training includes non-accredited training & regional and national development forums and themed events (1500 participants pa). The most common of these one-day sessions, delivered by experienced tutors, covered creating materials and group work. NALA/WIT National

Certificate/Diploma in Literacy Development – Single Cert modules are also available. To date 50% of schemes validated initial tutor training courses through the modular accreditation programme.

### ***The Quality Framework for Adult Literacy***

NALA, working with learners, practitioners, senior management, and the DES, subsidized by a European fund, Socrates, developed the Quality Framework, a strategy to guide and monitor quality standards in adult literacy.

The Quality Framework has five guiding principles or values, which are:

1. The adult literacy program will support the learner's right to attend on a voluntary basis and to set his/her own goals.
2. The organization will operate under an ethical code of confidentiality, respect, and trust.
3. All levels of the organization will respect cultural differences.
4. The adult literacy program will pay particular attention to creating and maintaining an atmosphere of social interaction, informality, and enjoyment.
5. The organization will enable learners to participate in all aspects of the program, including evaluation.

### **NALA Evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education**



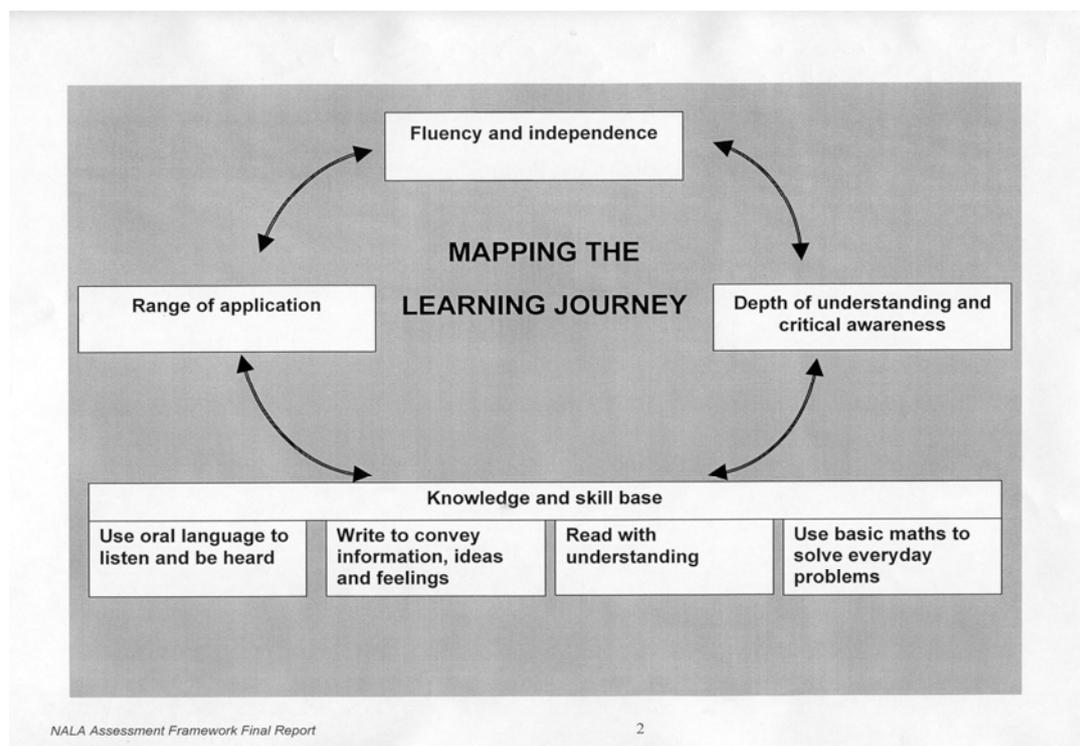
The framework provides a way of looking at five main quality areas involved in running a local adult literacy service. Within each of these five quality areas—Resources, Management, Teaching and Learning, Outreach and Promotion, and Progression—are statements of quality. Combined, these 18 statements of quality are the standards a program should work toward.

The Quality Framework can be used as a tool for self-evaluation of adult literacy sites, promoting planning and continuous improvement, and improving accountability. Over half of programs in Ireland (28 out of 33) are now using the Quality Framework, following an initial piloting of this new system. NALA has developed a mainstreaming plan that gives details of supports it provides to adult literacy services wishing to use

the Quality Framework. These include funding for a team facilitator, an anchorperson to support the process, and the expenses of participating learners and volunteers, as well as advice and guidance.

### Assessment Framework

Following the large scale consultation process to develop the Evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education it became clear that learners, practitioners and managers within the adult literacy service were looking for guidance on how to provide better evidence of learning. To this end NALA developed a national assessment framework for adult literacy built on the practices of adult literacy in Ireland. The framework was called *Mapping the Learning Journey* (NALA, 2004). It was designed and developed from consultation with key stakeholders, best practice in assessment in Irish adult literacy services, and international research, particularly the *Equipped for the Future Assessment Framework* in the United States. *Mapping the Learning Journey* has four main cornerstones that complement the knowledge, skill, and competence structure of the Qualifications Framework.



### The Present System: Philosophy, the Role of NALA, and Structure of Adult Literacy Services

Two aspects of the adult literacy services that are unique to Ireland are the philosophy underpinning adult literacy and NALA, which is a nonprofit membership organization concerned with national coordination, policy, and training in the adult literacy sector.

## ***Defining Literacy in Ireland***

The NALA definition of literacy states that

- Literacy involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.
- Good practice in adult literacy work starts with the needs and interests of individuals. It is concerned with personal development and building confidence as well as technical skills.

This definition encapsulates the main approaches to adult literacy work in Ireland, namely that it is learner centered and promotes social action. It is the definition used by adult literacy providers.

## ***Structure of Adult Literacy Services***

The education system in Ireland consists of five main components:

- Early childhood (nursery).
- Primary (elementary): starts at the age of 4 or 5 and finishes by the age of 12.
- Secondary (high): five or six years of education; requires two state examinations.
- Higher (college).
- Further (adult), which includes adult literacy services.

The Department of Education and Science (DES) is responsible for all of these areas and funds most primary and secondary schools directly. Early childhood and further education are the newest additions to the education family. Further education is administered through the following infrastructure:

- The DES funds the bulk of the further education sector through Vocational Education Committees (VECs), of which there are 33 throughout Ireland. VECs are made up of locally elected councilors, as well as parents and representatives of students and staff. Each VEC is an autonomous and independent body, so there are differences in how each provides service. Further education provision within the VECs includes programs targeted at early school leavers (those receiving welfare benefits and those not) and people wishing to improve their adult literacy or get a post Leaving Certificate qualification. All VECs, as well as their individual literacy services, are members of NALA.
- The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA), a national representative employer body, formulates policy and advances the cause of the VECs by advocating with the DES. In 2002, the IVEA established a National Literacy Forum, which is comprised of representatives from various groups, within the VEC sector, concerned with provision of education services. This is the first time the core provider body of the VEC

adult literacy service in Ireland has come together to address adult literacy issues.

- An Adult Literacy Organizer (ALO) manages the adult literacy service within the VEC.
- NALA, the umbrella organization concerned with adult literacy, includes individual learners, tutors, and those involved in adult literacy that work outside the VEC sector. From its membership, individuals are elected for a two-year term to the NALA Executive Committee to guide the policy direction of the Agency and monitor the work as outlined in the organization's strategic plan. On an annual basis, NALA applies to the DES for core funding to carry out work, identified through consultation with members, and research into best practices in adult literacy internationally.

### **Adult Literacy Services in Ireland**

- The core adult literacy service is provided by the VEC in 135 locations managed by the Adult Literacy Organisers in 33 VECs
- There are currently 5,500 literacy tutors - over 4,000 volunteers
- Tuition Options in VECs include - 1:1, Groups, Unemployed, Workplace (public and private), Family, ESOL,
- Other settings currently integrating literacy – VEC Adult Education, Prisons, Senior Traveller Training Centres, Community groups
- Distance education opportunities are also available

### **Non VEC Adult Literacy Programs**

In addition to the traditional method of provision of adult literacy services—through the VECs—there are a number of other literacy programs in Ireland.

### **Distance Education Learning**

Since 1997, the number of adults participating in local VEC literacy centers has increased from 5,000 to almost 30,000. However, with a potential target population of 500,000 adults with literacy difficulties, there was a need to look at providing alternative options for adults wishing to improve their skills. To meet this need NALA developed a number of distance learning opportunities for adults.

- READ WRITE NOW (2000–2005) 5 TV literacy series, broadcast nationally and supported by learning pack and tutor operated free phone line. Repeated & available on video/DVD
- Using community radio to broadcast the *Read Write Now* literacy radio series & *Time for Learning* radio numeracy series.
- RUG (2006-2007) 24 TV programmes, workbook, tutor helpline, website – 10% of viewing public
- *Written Off?* (2008)TV / CDROM / DVD / Website/Mobile Phone?
- NALA have also developed and manage an interactive literacy website [www.literacytools.ie](http://www.literacytools.ie) designed for independent literacy learners.

## ***Workplace Basic Education (WBE): Return to Learning Workplace Project in the Local Authorities***

Ireland is divided into 34 local government administrations (called Local Authorities) that have responsibility for housing provision, sanitation, planning, roads, and amenities in their area. The Local Authority sector employs approximately 30,000 people across a range of disciplines, and provides education and training opportunities to their workforce.

The *Return to Learning Project*, supported by NALA (through the provision of a template for the program, as well as training and contact with a national coordinator), is a partnership initiative between the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) and the DES. The focus of the *Return to Learning* program is on ensuring that employees have an opportunity to access training in literacy, communications, computers, numeracy, personal development, and job skills. The objective of the workplace literacy program is to create a “safe” and supportive learning environment for staff.

In 2000–2001, the project was piloted in five counties, with a budget of €133,000, funded 50% by LANPAG and 50% by DES. The local VEC literacy service provided the program in each of these areas, and the VEC appointed Project Coordinators who ran the program in conjunction with the VEC ALOs.

The program consisted of four hours per week over a 20-week period, on work time. NALA designed and VEC adult literacy service delivered the program in a flexible and adaptable way to meet the needs of the participants. The course cost an estimated €8,900 for each group of seven to eight people. This included 80 hours of promotion/awareness and recruitment by the Project Coordinator.

In the pilot project, a total of 120 people (twice the anticipated number), mainly men, completed the course in the five pilot areas. The evaluation (Conboy, 2002) shows that employees benefited from the course in the following ways:

- Increased self-confidence, as well as improved communication and interaction with others.
- Literacy skill development (e.g., filling out forms, writing letters, and reading the newspaper).
- Greater familiarity with computers and some development in computer skills.
- A positive influence on their home and family lives.
- Reawakening of interest in learning.
- There are currently workplace projects ongoing in all 34 local authorities – over 50 groups of 7-8 people.

## **Unemployment: Return to Education—An Intensive Basic Education Model for Unemployed People with Adult Literacy Needs**

The 1997 OECD survey concluded that an Irish person at Level 1 would experience a higher incidence of unemployment than people who scored at Level 1 in any other

country surveyed (OECD, 1997). The ratio of unemployed to employed people scoring at the lowest literacy level in the Irish survey was 2:1.

Research done in Belgium by Catherine Sterq highlighted the fact that many social-inclusion measures targeted at the long-term unemployed actually excluded the participation of those with insufficient basic skills (Sterq, 1993). Irish initiatives targeted at such a group also appear to mirror this experience. It is clear that the integration of basic skills development within existing training programs targeted at disadvantaged groups is both highly beneficial to the participant, as it ensures a planned approach to the development of literacy in the context of the overall program, as well as wider access to such programs for people with literacy needs.

The *Return to Education* program was initiated by NALA to provide for the needs of unemployed adults with literacy difficulties. NALA brought together FÁS, the national employment and training authority, and the VECs, to see how mixing their expertise and resources could result in better provision for this client group. Community Employment (CE), funded and administered by FÁS, is the main state-funded work-experience program for unemployed people. People unemployed for more than six months are eligible to apply for supported work in their local area and are paid a salary for 19.5 hours of work. In addition, participants are given a small budget to pay for limited specific training they might require. For participants with literacy difficulties, the training available was insufficient to meet their needs and a barrier to their progress into mainstream employment resulted.

*Return to Education* aims to give participants in CE programs an opportunity to attend a basic reading and writing skills course as part of their CE work-experience program. Participants are released from their CE work for nine hours per week to attend this course. CE participants receive the same entitlements as if they were working for the full 19.5 hours.

The course was designed to ease participants, no matter what education level, back into education. Participants receive accreditation in some cases, depending on level achieved. Due to the nature of the course, a flexible approach is adapted to suit the requirements of each student. One-on-one or small-group instruction is available to suit the needs of the students. The program concentrates on English, communication skills, computers, and numeracy. It also teaches personal-development and job skills.

## **Integration of Adult Literacy into Vocational Education and Training Targeted at the Socially Excluded**

In addition to the local VEC adult literacy programs, adult literacy tuition takes place in a number of other settings, including the Prison Education Service, Centers for the Unemployed, Youthreach (early school leavers), SIPTU (trade union), Community Training Centers, Travelers' Workshops, and centers providing services for people with disabilities. In most cases tuition is an "add on" to the main vocational-training program and is therefore not fully integrated.

An integrated approach to the teaching of adult literacy within vocational education and training programs is an effective way of providing more intensive basic education to a

greater number of people. Vocational education and training programs aim to help participants acquire specific work-related skills and were designed for people with a minimum of upper-second-level education (Sterq, 1993). However, some individuals may not possess the level of adult literacy required to successfully complete the training program. Many training programs have sought to address this by providing separate literacy instruction. The isolation of literacy skills in this manner “is in conflict with current thinking regarding good practice” (City of Limerick VEC, 1998, p. 19).

However, NALA has been promoting the integration of adult literacy within the core-training framework. The integration of adult literacy into training programs combats social exclusion by ensuring that no person is, or feels, excluded from these programs because of a literacy difficulty. Integration also ensures that programs help every participant to develop the literacy skills necessary for successful completion of the course and for progression in further education, training, or employment. In order for this to be effective, NALA identified that trainers needed to make these skills an explicit part of their program, which requires a planned and purposeful approach.

NALA, in conjunction with the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), has developed a training program for vocational skills educators and trainers, to enable them to integrate adult literacy into their programs. NALA also published *Guidelines on Integrating Literacy* (NALA, 2002b), which outlined the key features of an integrated, whole-center approach to literacy within vocational education and training programs. The document presents ten guidelines, indicating (a) the systems and procedures needed to ensure that adult literacy development is built into every phase of an education and training program, from induction through to progression, and (b) methods individual trainers and teachers can use to build adult literacy into their program delivery. Education and training centers are using the *Guidelines*, particularly in vocational training programs for young people, as an aid to developing integrated, whole-center policy and practice on literacy.

To complement the *Guidelines*, NALA recently published *Skillwords* (NALA, 2003), a resource pack of literacy materials related to vocational training areas. These are edited versions of materials developed by vocational trainers from FÁS Community Training Centers, VEC Youthreach Centers, and Senior Travelers’ Training Centers, in cooperation with their learners. They are offered as resources that can be photocopied, but can also be used as models and examples of integrated adult literacy materials. The pack also provides further guidelines for vocational trainers on how to design and use vocationally relevant adult literacy materials.

### **Meeting the Numeracy Challenge**

The NALA mission statement is to ensure all adults with literacy difficulties have access to high quality learning opportunities. In working towards this mission, one of the objectives identified by NALA members and included in NALA’s Strategic Plan 2002–2006 was to develop and promote a dedicated numeracy strategy for Ireland. The numeracy strategy provided a roadmap for numeracy development in Ireland. Numeracy was clearly defined as:

*Numeracy is a lifeskill that involves the competent use of mathematical language, knowledge and skills.*

*Numerate adults have the confidence to manage the mathematical demands of real-life situations such as everyday living, work related settings and in further education, so that effective choices are made in our evolving technological and knowledge*

The aim of the numeracy strategy was to:

- Raise awareness and profile of adult numeracy issues.
- Promote adult numeracy to both learners and tutors.
- Further develop a nationally recognised, accessible training programme for tutors of adult numeracy in Ireland.
- Develop a wider range of Irish produced adult numeracy materials.
- Inform the development of appropriate assessment and progression routes for adult numeracy.
- Carry out research on adult numeracy issues, including the types of resources required by adult numeracy tutors and adult learners.
- Support the development of new approaches to adult numeracy.
- Produce a system for monitoring and evaluating developments in adult numeracy.
- Aid the formulation and implementation of central Government policy on adult numeracy

### **Current Issues and Challenges**

One could say that the adult literacy movement in Ireland has come out of obscurity and into an intense spotlight in the past 35 years. Under such scrutiny, practitioners and providers, despite getting a lot of what they have lobbied for, may feel somewhat overwhelmed by current challenges, as well as those that lie ahead. Fundamental to ensuring that their fears are heard and addressed is the availability of a range of forums for debate and support, as well as a means by which they can feed into the policy realm. Following are some key areas of debate.

### **Adult Literacy Policy in the European Union**

Individual members states of the EU have responsibility for their own education and training systems; however, the EU has taken a strong role in the promotion of lifelong learning for many years. Lifelong learning is now seen as an “overarching strategy of European co-operation in education and training policies and for the individual” (Commission of the European Communities, 2002, p. 4).

The EU’s focus on adult literacy is of great benefit to an area that has traditionally had a low profile. The EU has prioritized adult literacy in the context of their work in stimulating and supporting the implementation of lifelong learning across the European area and this has raised several issues, both positive and negative:

- Developing basic skills and upgrading existing skills are eligible for support under the European Social Fund (ESF) and this is currently providing the bulk of resources for adult literacy work in Ireland (although these funds come with some restrictions).

- Adult literacy is now firmly embedded in the EU agenda for lifelong learning and is fully supported by Ireland, which provides additional security to adult literacy development in to the future.
- The EU focus on new basic skills (such as foreign languages and computer skills) may overshadow the traditional areas of literacy and numeracy, as well as lose sight of the needs of adult learners. In the wider context of what the EU wants to achieve, there needs to be a focus on both the traditional and new basic skills as the foundations for EU citizens in the knowledge society.
- The approach to adult literacy work in Ireland, which is beyond a skills approach, may be threatened by an overriding narrower focus on upskilling the labor force. A critical factor in achieving common goals within the EU is that all involved can agree on priorities for future action.

### **NALA Key Objectives to 2010**

- Secure the support of policy makers and politicians for providing increased resources to adult literacy and numeracy services.
- Make it easier for more adults to develop their literacy and numeracy through education and training programmes.
- Make approaches to teaching and learning more effective.
- Persuade organisations to be fully accessible to people with literacy and numeracy difficulties.
- Strengthen NALA's effectiveness as an organisation

These objectives are set in the context of Government policy targets:

- To reduce the numbers of people in the workforce with a level 3 qualification or less to 7% by 2020 (NDP p. 192).
- Numbers with Level 4 and 5 qualifications are to be increased to 45% of the workforce

## **Conclusion**

Major developments have occurred in literacy in Ireland since the publication of the IALS. In the current economy in Ireland, the future is more uncertain and funding for education is under threat, as it is in all other public services. Although the adult literacy services have not yet felt the adverse affects, many adult literacy practitioners fear that after only a recent spell in the political limelight, the position of adult literacy is set for the same fate as the economic boom and the bubble may be about to burst. In looking at the future of the adult literacy sector, there will need to be greater collaboration between stakeholders. The ongoing government support of the adult literacy sector, particularly the DES, is critical to the future of adult literacy.

Accountability is an increasingly important part of funding debates. Literacy providers are faced with the inevitability of a transparent system that provides taxpayers with evidence of success and value for money. How to achieve this while ensuring that the quality of the service is not undermined is a growing concern among many involved in adult literacy work. To these people, the learner-centered ethos of adult literacy work in Ireland is its most vital characteristic and indeed the key to its success to date. It must

be retained as the adult literacy sector embraces the changes being brought about by the knowledge society.

We can no longer assist people with literacy difficulties with just one core service, nor can we look at this issue in a narrow and linear fashion, as this does not reflect the diversity of people in today's society. People with adult literacy needs often may have other, more important concerns, and therefore adult literacy will most successfully be addressed within those contexts, not by a referral to a dedicated adult literacy service. This, in short, is the theory behind an integrated approach. Any strategy for raising adult literacy levels will need to provide a range of options and opportunities. This will require research and innovation, both of which have been chronically underfunded. It will also require greater levels of partnership across the public, private, and voluntary sector. It is hard to find an organization that would not be able to assist in this area; however, no single organization or sector has the definitive answer. The social partnership process in Ireland continues to be instrumental in continuing this kind of work. Working together may be the greatest challenge for us all, but the most effective in terms of individuals with literacy needs.

### Useful Contacts

Adult Education Organisers Association	<a href="http://www.adulteducationorganisers.org">http://www.adulteducationorganisers.org</a>
Adult Literacy Organisers Association	<a href="http://www.literacyireland.org">http://www.literacyireland.org</a>
AONTAS (national association of adult education)	<a href="http://www.aontas.com">http://www.aontas.com</a>
Department of Education and Science	<a href="http://www.education.ie">http://www.education.ie</a>
FÁS (state training and employment authority)	<a href="http://www.fas.ie">http://www.fas.ie</a>
Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)	<a href="http://www.fetac.ie">http://www.fetac.ie</a>
Irish Vocational Education Association	<a href="http://www.ivea.ie">http://www.ivea.ie</a>
National Adult Literacy Agency	<a href="http://www.nala.ie">http://www.nala.ie</a>
National Qualifications Authority of Ireland	<a href="http://www.nqai.ie">http://www.nqai.ie</a>
NALA/WIT project	<a href="http://www.wit.ie/literacyproject">http://www.wit.ie/literacyproject</a>

### Journals

*The Adult Learner*. Published by AONTAS. Available from AONTAS, 2nd Floor, 83-87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6, Ireland.

*NALA Newsletter and Journal*. Published by NALA. Available free from NALA, 76 Lower Gardiner Street, Dublin 1, Ireland.

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***A more detailed history of Adult Learning Development in Ireland is available in the following publication:***

- Bailey, I (2006). *Review of adult learning and literacy: Volume 6: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice*. edited by Comings, J., B. Garner, C. Smith. National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (U.S.) (NCSALL). pp.197-240