



Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work



Key reference document for people
working in adult literacy



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work

(Revised edition 2012)

NALA's Vision

We want Ireland to be a place where adult literacy is a valued right and where everyone can both develop their literacy and take part more fully in society.

Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work 2012 is the revised edition of the NALA policy document, first published in 1985 and revised in 1991 and 2005.

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Preface

The *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* is the main document for those working in the adult literacy field and should be used as a key reference for teaching and learning. It provides a clear expression of what adult literacy work is about and where it came from. It also aims to establish the right to develop literacy skills as a fundamental human right for adults who wish to improve their literacy and numeracy.

This fourth edition of the Guidelines will be published at an historic and critical time in the area of adult learning. VECs and FÁS will disappear from the landscape and education and training boards (ETBs) will populate the local landscape instead, with SOLAS providing the first further education and training authority in Ireland. Such immense change brings great opportunity for taking stock and clarifying what is required going forward. There is a unified voice on the importance of the adult learner being at the centre of their learning experience. There are also concerns of how to fully realise this. To that end, the Guidelines provide the rationale as to why we do literacy work the way we do, as well as how we put that philosophy into practice. The Guidelines have been refreshed so as to situate adult literacy work in the new environment of further education and training. This, we believe, provides us with the best method of ensuring a good quality teaching and learning experience and outcome for the student and the practitioner.

In this revised edition, NALA has again drawn on the knowledge and insight of experienced literacy students and practitioners. “At the core of all this wisdom is the understanding that any good educational service must take its inspiration from the world of the learner” (NALA, 1991, p. 5). As adult literacy work continues to develop and evolve, NALA is indebted to all those who are willing to share their experiences, to raise issues and to contribute to ongoing debates on policy and practice in adult basic education and we welcome feedback on this document.

Inez Bailey
Director

Gretta Vaughan
Chairperson

How NALA defines literacy

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communications: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals, families and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.

The definition of literacy is also changing as the concept of 'literacies' becomes more widely understood. This concept recognises that there are different literacies associated with different areas of life. The ways we use literacy, for example, in technology, at home, in a learning environment, as part of a social or sports club, or in our community life, vary enormously.

If a person needs to develop confidence and skills in particular aspects of literacy, it does not mean that they have difficulty with all of the basics. Equally, if a person has a qualification, it does not always mean that they have high levels of literacy. Some will have left school confident about their numeracy and reading skills but find that changes in their workplace and everyday life make their skills inadequate as the literacy demanded by society is in constant flux. Some adults who have not used their literacy for a number of years lose confidence and skills.

Principles for good adult literacy work



Adult literacy work is based on a philosophy of adult education which is concerned with personal development and social action.

Adult literacy learning is an active and expressive process. Students have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how, where and when they wish to learn.



Adult literacy work respects different beliefs, cultures and ways of being. An ethical code of trust and confidentiality underpins all aspects of the work.

Students' knowledge and skills are vital for the effective organisation of adult literacy work. Students should have the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of provision.



Adults learn best when the decision to return to learning is their own and the environment is supportive, relaxed and friendly.

Terms used in this document

Accreditation

In education, this is certifying that someone has a certain standard of knowledge or skills. An example is when someone receives a certificate or other qualification from an awarding body, an educational institution or professional body when they successfully finish a course.

Adult Basic Education (ABE)

Adult basic education includes adult literacy work but also involves a wide range of learning in many different areas which people may be trying out for the first time. ABE helps adults to develop important skills, such as literacy and numeracy, which are important for taking part fully in society. The term ABE is used interchangeably with adult literacy.

Adult literacy

The term adult literacy includes all the elements referred to in the section 'How NALA defines literacy'.

Adult literacy work

Adult literacy work describes services to help adults with their literacy development. These may be specific programmes or literacy tuition integrated with other training or education opportunities.

Adult numeracy

NALA defines numeracy as a lifeskill that involves the competent use of everyday mathematical language, knowledge and skills and the confidence to manage the mathematical demands of real-life situations.

Blended learning

Blended learning is about facilitating learning using a variety of approaches, best determined by the needs of the student and the capability of the provider. It may or may not involve technology. It is simply a way of creatively matching different approaches to students' content and contexts.

Distance learning

Distance learning takes place when students and tutors are separated by either space or time. Distance learning can involve people studying in a range of contexts using a number of learning or communication technologies. Ideally, the student has the option to choose a learning environment that most suits their needs at any given time. This flexibility allows students to learn either independently or in a supported learning environment depending on the level of support needed.

NALA's Distance Learning Service (DLS)

NALA has been running a DLS since 2000. This service supports many hundreds of students each year. The DLS uses experienced home-based tutors to support students over the telephone, through the postal service and online. Tutors phone students at prearranged times to suit the students' needs, typically in the evenings. NALA's DLS also offers accreditation options to interested students.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

ESOL is English for Speakers of Other Languages. It can include language and or literacy tuition for people who live in an English-speaking country and whose first language is not English. Adult literacy provision often includes ESOL services.

Financial literacy

Financial literacy is the ability to make informed judgements and to take effective decisions about using and managing money.

Health literacy

Health literacy refers to the ability of a person who is seeking health information and services to communicate their expectations and preferences to somebody who provides those services. It also refers to the service provider's ability to communicate this information to the individual. Good health literacy involves there being a mutual understanding by both parties.

In December 2011 the Irish results of the first European Health Literacy Survey showed that 39% of Irish adults have inadequate or problematic health literacy.

Integrating literacy

In every vocational, academic or other learning programme, at every level, there will inevitably be differences in literacy strengths and experience. 'Integrating literacy' means using a variety of methods that take account of those differences and are effective for everyone in the group. It also means ensuring students develop the particular kinds of literacy and numeracy involved in the particular subject or skill.

Plain English

Plain English is a style of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. To learn more about it, go to NALA's plain English website: www.simplyput.ie

The Simply Put website has lots of free resources such as plain English guides to legal terms, financial terms, environmental terms and others. It also has the latest news about developments in plain English.

Practitioner

Practitioner refers to anyone involved in management or tuition in adult literacywork.

Providers, services

These terms refer to organisations offering literacy tuition or basic education for adults.

Settings, centres

These terms refer to places where adult learning programmes are provided. Learning can also be non-centre based, for example, distance learning.

Students, learners

In this document, adults who are working on their literacy, numeracy or language are called students.

Although both the terms ‘students’ and ‘learners’ are in use, many adults prefer the term ‘students’. The word ‘learner’ is only referred to in this document when it is used in a quotation. Local groups and projects need to adopt the term most suitable to their own context and ways of working.

Tutors, teachers, facilitators

The terms tutor, teacher and facilitator are used interchangeably to describe the people who assist students in the learning process. Literacy work also results in ongoing learning for tutors.

Vocational Education Committees (VECs) or Education and Training Boards (ETBs)

These are the educational bodies with principal responsibility for adult and further education. Some areas refer to the VEC/ETB adult literacy service as the local adult literacy scheme. At national level, they are represented by the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA).

1 Introduction

This document sets out and explores the philosophy, principles and approaches which underpin good adult literacy work. It also outlines the facilities, tuition options and management styles necessary for effective adult literacy development.

In 1985 NALA's first policy document, *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*, established key principles and good practice for the development of adult literacy work in Ireland. These guidelines were revised in 1991 and 2005.

In this latest update of *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*, it is important to reiterate NALA's view that adult literacy work is about human development; enabling people to live full and meaningful lives and contribute towards the enrichment of the communities in which we all live. While it affects economic development and employment, literacy is primarily concerned with the rights of individuals, families and communities: it is about their right to have a voice in society; to continue and extend their education; **to read and to be read.**

Standing true to the core values is also important at a time when the adult literacy movement in Ireland has increasingly moved into the mainstream of the education system. This has followed the International Adult Literacy Survey in 1997, and the subsequent increase in State funding for adult literacy provision. The shift 'from the margins' to the centre, from adult literacy 'movement' to adult literacy 'service', has brought with it increased opportunities and new challenges for adult literacy providers, practitioners, students and NALA.

"One of the challenges is to maintain and strengthen curriculum development processes that are critically aware, flexible, responsive, learning-centred and learner-directed" (NALA, 2009, p. 3). This document also explores how adult literacy work can meet this challenge.

NALA's mission

NALA's mission is to be the voice of adult literacy in Ireland and, with our partners, influence policy and practice to support people in developing their literacy.

While all NALA's work is now supported by a series of in-depth policy documents (See Appendix 2), *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* offers a concise statement of principles and practice. It is, therefore, a core text for anyone interested in adult basic education in Ireland including:

- volunteer and paid tutors and tutor trainers;
- VEC/ETB Adult Literacy Organisers, senior managers and Community Education Facilitators;
- other adult literacy service providers;
- policy makers;
- adult literacy students;
- students working in committees;
- managers of education and training programmes;
- Adult Educational Guidance Initiative staff; and
- researchers and academics.

Become a NALA member

You can become a member and support our work to influence policy and practice, supporting people in developing their literacy and numeracy. If you join, you can save money; 50% on NALA events, 10% on some Irish publications and 5% on our Plain English editing and training services and literacy awareness training.



You will also get up-to-date information on literacy, available grants and funding sources, news from students, tutor resources, plain English tips and more through our member ezine (web magazine). For more information, contact NALA.

2 Philosophy of adult literacy work

This chapter presents an outline of the basic philosophy and approaches underpinning adult literacy work in Ireland. Adult basic education in Ireland is based on a belief that effective learning builds on the wealth of life experience which adults bring to their work on literacy development.

At the heart of this approach is the understanding, “A beginner reader is not a beginner thinker” (Frost and Hoy, 1985). Students bring to the process of learning a knowledge and understanding of themselves, their community and the wider society. They wish to engage with their teachers as equals and to support each other as peers. This underpins the ethos and development of adult basic education.

The work and writings of a number of key thinkers have informed this approach, in particular Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers, Jack Mezirow and Stephen Brookfield and more recently David Barton and Mary Hamilton, James Paul Gee and Brian Street.

Pedagogy of the oppressed: Paulo Freire

One important focus of adult literacy development in Ireland has been the expression and analysis by students of their own lives, views and experience as an essential part of the process of developing their literacy. This approach to literacy learning is based on the pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire in Brazil in the 1960s. While Freire’s literacy work related to a very different language and a society where only a minority of the population had access to school, the experience of being oppressed and being silenced is one that is shared across many different societies. In our own society, individual rights and access to education, employment and personal development are often seriously restricted by literacy difficulties.



Freire believed that education should give adults the opportunity and resources to reflect on, question and analyse their world. He encouraged students to discuss key words and themes important in their lives and to base their literacy development on these. He described this as ‘problem-posing education’ based on dialogue, as opposed to ‘banking’ education, in which “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider know nothing” (Freire, 1972, p. 46).

Freire’s view is that developing skills of reflection and analysis enables students to take social action to improve conditions for themselves and their communities.

‘Wealth’ model

Connected to Freire’s analysis of these two approaches to education is the concept of ‘wealth’ and ‘deficit’ models. In the deficit model, the tutor or teacher often has an underlying, but usually unacknowledged, assumption that the student is in some way inadequate or unfortunate because they lack knowledge and skills that must be provided by the teacher. The wealth model aims to help students to realise their own strengths and knowledge. They are encouraged to explore opportunities for further learning from an understanding of their own life experience and the questions this raises. Adult literacy work in Ireland aims to build on the wealth model.

Humanistic education: Carl Rogers

The ideas of the humanistic psychologist, Carl Rogers, have also played a central role in the development of approaches to adult basic education. Rogers believes that human beings have a natural need to learn and that the goal of education is, therefore, to help people develop their full potential (Rogers, 1967, p. 313).

His view is that effective learning occurs when students understand how they learn.



“The only [person] who is educated is the [person] who has learned how to learn.” (Rogers, 1967, p. 304) This has been reinforced by studies from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2000).

Rogers makes certain key points about the learning process that are important in adult literacy work. He argues that learning can only be effective if the student’s sense of self is supported. People learn best when the subject matter is relevant and when the learning is based on active participation – learning by doing. When students participate in decisions about the learning process and are encouraged to evaluate their own learning, they are more likely to develop independence, creativity and self-reliance.

Transformative learning: Jack Mezirow

Jack Mezirow believes that education can help adults to realise that the ways they see ‘meaning’ and ‘reality’ are formed during childhood and can be changed by experiences as an adult. Students can begin to challenge their own assumptions and explore alternative ways of seeing the world and themselves.

This ‘transformative’ learning makes it possible for students to develop new perspectives and to take action based on this new view of themselves, their families and wider society. A key element in this process is critical reflection.

Many aspects of this view of adult learning are connected with Freire’s ideas on education and social action.

Adult learning and self-directed learning: Stephen Brookfield

Stephen Brookfield’s work on the nature of adult learning and self-directed learning has influenced how adult education, including adult basic education, is viewed and practised around the world.

His principles for good adult education include: voluntary

participation; mutual respect; collaborative facilitation between the adult educator and the student; facilitation should enable adults to develop their own critical thinking. He sees the aim of adult education as enabling students to become increasingly empowered through self-directed learning.

Literacy as social practice

Brian Street's writings in the 1980s and the New Literacy Studies which emerged challenged a view of literacy as a set of technical skills that are neutral, detached from the social context in which they are used and that are constant over time and place (Maclachen, 2008). This work opened up a different way of thinking about literacy, which focused on the ways we use and experience literacy and numeracy and shows that the context in which we use literacy is central.

By focusing on the ways in which people use written and spoken language in their lives, different literacies are identified, such as workplace literacy, home literacy and school literacy (Street, 1995; Barton and Hamilton, 1998). Seeing literacy as a social practice recognises that the value given to different literacies varies; that some literacies are more dominant, visible and powerful than others. The literacies associated with powerful institutions in society (such as the courtroom, school, banks) are given higher status than the literacies used in everyday life. Individuals and communities who possess or 'take on' these powerful literacies are likely to have an advantage over those who do not (Papen, 2005).

Student-centred or student-directed education

These ideas have contributed to the development of a student-centred concept of adult education. The needs, concerns and experience of the students are the focus of learning, rather than an externally structured and enforced curriculum based on the needs of, for example, the economy. Curriculum for adult basic education is an ongoing process, formed in consultation with students.

A more challenging concept, also at the centre of adult literacy work in Ireland, is the student-directed approach. This means that rather than curriculum and approaches being formed by tutors who take into consideration the needs of students, it is formed by the students in discussion with their tutors. Tutors then facilitate the learning which the students wish to pursue. It does not mean that tutors give up their role as teachers, but it does mean that their role is to facilitate and to develop materials, approaches and structures which encourage the increasing direction by students of their own learning.

3 Definition and principles

Following the outline in Chapter 2 of the basic philosophy and approaches informing NALA's view of adult literacy work, this chapter examines further the ideas that underpin NALA's definition of literacy and the principles for good adult literacy work. These principles express the ethos of adult basic education in Ireland.

The following discussion explores:

- NALA's definition of literacy, and
- principles for good adult literacy work, which build closely on the principles in the 1985, 1991 and 2005 documents (See Appendix 1).

Exploring the definition

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communications: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals, families and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.

Modern society requires an adequate level of literacy among all its adult members. Confidence in literacy opens many doors in adult life related to work and personal development, involvement in children's learning and community and leisure activities. Numeracy and basic technological skills are integral elements of literacy as everyone faces a range of mathematical and technological demands in everyday life. These are some of the reasons why we recommend using plain English in everyday documents and communication.

For some people, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is the core element of literacy learning. 'ESOL literacy' refers to teaching and learning that focuses on both language and literacy development in English for students who have literacy difficulties in their first language. 'ESOL language' focuses on English language development for students who do not have literacy difficulties in their first language.

Literacy and self-esteem

Experiencing difficulties in any of these areas can create considerable barriers for people and may affect their ability to participate fully in family, social and community life. In addition, the experiences which led to literacy difficulties and the expectations of society can seriously undermine people's self-confidence and self-esteem.



The stigma attached to adults and young people who are perceived as having limited literacy skills leads many to hide their difficulties from employers, acquaintances, relatives and even close family and friends. The emotional and social consequences arising from these experiences may cause greater difficulties than their concerns about their literacy.

In some families, economic and social circumstances make it difficult to benefit from education, which still involves considerable expense for books and uniforms, loss of earnings from older teenagers and other hidden costs. If the school experience is unhappy, young people and their parents are less likely to see these expenses as worthwhile.

Literacy work in context

Relationships between students, tutors, organisers and the adult literacy service in general are based on equality and respect for the role each plays in the development of effective learning. In particular, enabling students to take responsibility for their own learning from an early stage, and encouraging involvement in all aspects of the organisation, are important features of adult basic education.



Exploring personal experiences and placing these in a wider social context both support the student and provide material for working on literacy. The opportunity to articulate and assess past experiences in a supportive learning context can make it possible to develop an understanding of current and past difficulties. This process often lays the foundations for improving self-esteem and confidence, leading eventually towards success in developing literacy.

It is also important that links with the wider community are maintained by the adult literacy service. This may include schools, training bodies, local employers, community groups and other adult and further education providers. These links establish adult basic education as part of the wider social context and may provide education, training and employment openings or opportunities for further community involvement. Building these connections makes it possible to broaden literacy provision to include family and workplace literacy.

The contact between literacy work and other educational and community development opportunities needs to be a two-way process. It is not enough to assume that literacy students can move on to other activities once they have achieved certain levels of literacy competence. Students often wish to explore other areas of learning while continuing to work on their literacy. Literacy learning, therefore, needs to include a wide range of activities and topics.

As students develop their confidence and their literacy, they may wish to explore the social context of their educational experience. This may include the causes and the effects of their difficulties with literacy. The social and political context is a topic for study and debate, sometimes leading to action within communities. Literacy learning can be a part of this social and political engagement. This is explored further in the NALA publication *Curriculum development: an evolving model for adult literacy and numeracy education* (NALA, 2009, p. 13-17).

Curriculum development An evolving model for adult literacy and numeracy education (NALA document, 2009)

Who is it for?

The model is relevant to many different contexts and in relation to many different programmes. This includes literacy as part of training courses, workplace literacy, family literacy, education in prisons and distance learning, as well as work in local adult literacy settings.

Participative curriculum

The model describes a process for developing curriculum. This is a participative process carried out by learning partners, such as tutors and students, with support from organisers, managers and others involved. The model does not describe the content of a curriculum. That is created by the learning partners.

The emphasis is on how the learning partners work together in deciding how and what to learn. This understanding of curriculum is in tune with student-directed approaches, which are core features of adult literacy and numeracy work. It is a learning-centred curriculum, in that, everyone involved learns through taking part in the process of curriculum development.

The model reflects a view of literacy as social practice and is “informed by an emancipatory interest...which expects both to start with and to transform the learner’s experience” (Mace et al, 2006, p. 14).

NALA’s evolving model of curriculum development in adult literacy and numeracy is available on the NALA website.

Principles for good adult literacy work



Adult literacy work is based on a philosophy of adult education which is concerned with personal development and social action.

Because literacy in modern society is a complex issue, adult literacy work must enable students to connect their literacy and numeracy learning with the reality of their daily lives, and with past experience. Therefore, personal development is an integral part of the learning process. In addition, literacy learning may lead individuals and groups to relate their own experiences to wider social issues.



Adult literacy learning is an active and expressive process. Students have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how, where and when they wish to learn.

Adult literacy learning is most successful when the students are actively involved in the process and are encouraged to express their ideas and draw on their experiences. Students should also be enabled to explore the methods and materials which help them to learn most effectively and to take an active part in defining their goals and planning the learning programme. This has implications for training of tutors, teaching and learning approaches, choosing materials, including use of technology, and the assessment of learning. Some students benefit from the range of flexible options that are available such as blended learning, non-centre based learning, additional technological supports and distance learning.



Adult literacy work respects different beliefs, cultures and ways of being. An ethical code of trust and confidentiality underpins all aspects of the work.

This addresses the central issue of respect for difference and diversity. Adults who return to learning come from many different social and cultural backgrounds. Adult literacy tutors and organisations need to operate from a

clear position of respect for different beliefs, languages, cultures and ways of life. This variety should be seen as providing opportunities for learning for all participants in a learning group or programme.

Confidentiality and respect must be established from the outset in order for students to feel safe. They can then begin to develop the trust that is needed if meaningful learning is to take place.



Students' knowledge and skills are vital for the effective organisation of adult literacy work. Students should have the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of provision.

Students have experience and knowledge which are essential for the successful planning, development and evaluation of adult literacy provision. Their views and understanding need to inform the way provision is organised, particularly publicity, course options, student support, resources and social activities. Students should be actively encouraged to become involved in the organisation, for example, to take a seat on the board. However, some students choose to attend only for tuition and this choice should be respected.



Adults learn best when the decision to return to learning is their own and the environment is supportive, relaxed and friendly.

Adults who decide to work on their literacy have taken an important and often difficult step. Students are more likely to attend regularly and stay in tuition when they see that their needs and concerns are at the heart of the organisation, and that good tutoring and resources provide the best possible conditions for learning. Ideally adult literacy learning should not be linked to welfare benefits or employment. Students based in other settings, such as training workshops, the workplace or in prisons, should have the right to decide whether they wish to work on their literacy skills.

Adults learn best when they enjoy the process. Learning provides opportunities for new social relationships. Adults and young people often find that their learning benefits from the chance to relax informally with other students and tutors. In addition, interaction in a learning group contributes to the learning process, and to the development of both the individual students and the organisation.

4 Key stages of development

This chapter looks at key stages of development in adult literacy work and policy responses in Ireland since the 1970s.

Efforts to build an adult literacy service 1970-1990

Adult Education in Ireland (Murphy, 1973) listed a number of actions necessary to develop adult education, including a study of the needs of adults with literacy difficulties. At community level, people were beginning to volunteer as tutors for adults who wanted help with their literacy, working mainly in isolation and in their own homes. Literacy was identified as a priority for the emerging education service in Irish prisons and as an aspect of work training programmes, mainly for young people.

In the late 1970s RTÉ, the national broadcasting service, produced *Helping Adults to Read* which provided guidance and support for volunteer adult literacy tutors. In several areas volunteer tutors were also beginning to act as local organisers. In 1980 NALA was established as a membership organisation to act as a coordinating body for all involved in adult literacy work, to raise awareness and to lobby for funding and recognition of the issue.

In 1985 for the first time, the Government allocated funding for adult literacy work with a grant to NALA and a small adult literacy and community education budget administered by the VECs. Funding continued at a similar level for the next few years. Despite a very low budget, determined and committed individuals, groups and communities, most of whom worked on a voluntary basis, were making progress towards gaining increased recognition and resources for the adult literacy service (Bailey, 2004).



International Literacy Year in 1990 brought more awareness to adult literacy work. The President of Ireland agreed to act as patron of NALA and successive presidents have continued in this role.

Establishing a foundation for adult literacy work 1990 – 1998

Between 1990 and 1997 provision of adult literacy services grew slowly but steadily each year.

In the mid-1990s two reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) gave impetus to the adult literacy movement. *Lifelong Learning for All* (OECD, 1996) highlighted the role of adult literacy in promoting competitiveness and employment, addressing poverty, promoting democracy and social cohesion, building a knowledge society and strengthening individuals, families and communities.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), conducted in 1995 and published in 1997, provided Ireland with its first profile of the literacy skills of adults aged 16 to 64 (OECD, 1997). The survey found that approximately 25% of those surveyed performed the given literacy and numeracy tasks at or below Level 1. Level 1 required participants to locate a simple piece of information in a basic text or chart, including instructions for the correct use of medication. A further 30% of the population was at Level 2. Level 3 is regarded as the level of literacy necessary for the demands of modern society. In Ireland therefore, in terms of the IALS assessment, the literacy skills of 55% of those aged between 16 and 64 were at or below this minimum level.

The publication of the IALS provided a comparative analysis of adult literacy levels in western industrialised countries. Up to that time there had been no comprehensive facts on the scale of adult literacy difficulties and the issue had been neglected by successive Irish governments. In 1998 as a result of the OECD survey and persistent lobbying by NALA, the government budget for adult literacy work increased significantly.

Expansion and improvement since 1998

Since 1998 policy initiatives and dedicated funding from the Government have allowed the adult literacy service to expand and improve.

The White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* (DES, 2000), embedded the adult literacy issue in national policy and established the first government strategy to improve literacy levels amongst the adult population in Ireland.

From 2000 to 2010 the adult literacy service was concerned with consolidation, expansion and quality assurance, whilst safeguarding its distinctive ethos and status within the broader educational context. One example is the development by NALA of self-directed online programmes through www.writeon.ie, with accompanying supports and resources, and the option of certification. These resources are increasingly used by providers in a blended learning approach.

Current policy

Since 2010 national policy has focused on reform of the further education and training sector. FÁS is being disbanded. The 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are replacing the 33 VECs and they will also incorporate FÁS training centres. SOLAS is being established as the further education and training authority. In 2012 Operational Guidelines for VEC staff managing, administering and delivering adult literacy programmes were published. These Guidelines were produced by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). They provide a definition of and a scope for adult literacy provision, as well as information on target groups, assessment, tuition models and types. Operational Guidelines exist for all part-time, further education programmes funded by the DES.

Integrating of literacy and numeracy in all further education and training programmes has emerged as a priority for providers and government.

What we want to see happen

NALA argues that three elements can make a significant difference to achieving better adult literacy and numeracy outcomes. They involve new thinking and require purposeful implementation. These elements are:

- integration of language, literacy and numeracy development into all publicly funded education and training;
- family literacy development, as this offers opportunities to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage; and
- flexible, high quality adult education and training provision. This means providing enhanced adult literacy and numeracy services across a wider range of settings, including the workplace, and by different modes, including distance, blended learning and intensive options.



5 Current context

This chapter looks at the current context in adult basic education by focusing on students, tutors, range of provision and accreditation issues.

Students

The term ‘students’ includes people from many different age groups who are learning in different settings. Adults may decide to look for help with their literacy to help them find a job, to improve their chances of promotion or to move into another job. People often return to learning when they become parents in order to be able to help and support their children’s learning. Others attend tuition after their families have left home and they have more time for their own self-development. Some young people leave school early but choose to work on their literacy as part of a training programme. Students also include adults who work on their literacy through distance learning.

Adults working on their literacy may wish to:

- improve and gain confidence in a particular area such as spelling or basic computer skills;
- help their children’s learning;
- improve or maintain their skills for personal reasons;
- use technology more effectively in their everyday life;
- gain accreditation in order to move on to further training or education;
- work on literacy and numeracy for employment purposes;
- update skills as a result of changes in work practices;
- gain basic English language communication skills (ESOL);
- overcome specific difficulties which may have been undetected at school; or
- enhance their quality of life.

The contribution of students has always been central to the development of adult literacy work at both national and local level.

This has ensured that ongoing work and new developments are informed by the students' perspectives.

Students play an important role in many ways including:

- voicing student views at events;
- participating at management or board level;
- advising on initiatives such as policy development, materials and
- speaking at conferences, public events and to the media;
- serving as members of NALA's National Executive Committee and Student Subcommittee;
- participating in literacy awareness raising programmes;
- recruiting students and tutors;
- selecting and training tutors;
- encouraging and supporting their peers;
- getting involved in administration;
- taking part in evaluation; and
- organising social events.



The more students are involved in these activities, the more vibrant and successful the service is.

Tutors

Adult literacy tuition is carried out in small groups or on a one-to-one basis by tutors trained specially for the work (See Staff training and development, Chapter 6). Many services offer one or two hours of tuition per week, though an increasing number of programmes are able to offer more intensive provision. Over the years, as funding has increased so too has the number of paid tutors who work with small groups.

One- to-one tutors

One-to-one tutors are voluntary and they have made a major contribution to the development of adult literacy services in Ireland. Involving volunteers enriches the type of service provided and

maintains its roots in the community. Individual tutorial support is still a core element of adult literacy work and, despite increased funding, the use of volunteer tutors is often the only feasible way to provide one-to-one tuition. Increasingly, adult literacy services are adopting a volunteer protocol (See Appendix 4).

This sets out the rights and responsibilities of one-to-one tutors so that they are clear about their own commitment and the support they can expect from the organisation.

Group tutors

Where literacy tuition is organised in groups or if students are working towards accreditation in a group setting, it is important to have trained and paid group tutors. They need to be skilled at creating a co-operative and supportive learning atmosphere, to be able to prepare materials for different levels and interests and to respond to the changing goals and aspirations of the members of the group.

Range of provision

Overall responsibility for adult basic education provision lies with the Government, in particular the Department of Education and Skills. Adult literacy work takes place in a range of different settings and contexts.

VEC/ETB Adult Literacy Service

Local VEC/ETB Adult Literacy Services are headed by the Chief Executive Officer of the individual VEC/ETB and supported by the Adult Education Organiser. The local service is managed by an Adult Literacy Organiser, sometimes working with resource and outreach workers, and usually includes:

- one-to-one tuition, mainly provided by volunteer tutors who are trained locally to an agreed national standard; and
- group tuition, typically involving no more than six to eight students working together or individually in a group setting.

The local service is known as the Adult Literacy Service.

SOLAS

SOLAS is the new further education and training authority being established in 2013 to provide strategic direction and funding to the adult learning, further education and training sector. The name SOLAS is from the Irish title Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanunaigh agus Scileanna, which means Continuing Education and Skills Services.

Training and work experience programmes

Literacy tuition is provided as part of several training and work experience programmes. Many of these provide dedicated literacy and numeracy tuition alongside integrated provision, where vocational trainers build literacy and numeracy development into their subject areas (See Appendix 5).

Organisations that work with people with disabilities

Many organisations working with people with a range of disabilities include literacy and numeracy as a key element of their programmes in local and national centres (See Appendix 5).

Workplace Basic Education (WBE)

Some employers offer literacy tuition in the workplace (See Appendix 5). Literacy and numeracy development is also integrated into many workplace training programmes.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

A wide range of organisations play a significant role in developing ESOL policy and practice. ESOL is a significant part of adult basic education.

Family learning

Family learning programmes help to develop literacy and numeracy learning in a family context and encourage adults to learn for their own personal development and for the benefit of their children. Family learning involves partnership between the Adult Literacy Service, schools and local communities and services.

Prisons and post-release projects

Education is available in all Irish prisons under the Irish Prison Education Service and is provided in partnership with a range

of educational agencies including the VECs/ETBs. Literacy and numeracy tuition is given high priority in prisons and post-release centres.

Community Development Projects

Local development companies, including community development projects are also involved in adult literacy work.

Distance Learning Service (DLS)

There are an increasing number of distance education initiatives for independent literacy learning using resources such as TV, DVDs, CDs, videos, radio and websites.

NALA has been running a DLS since 2000. This service supports many hundreds of students each year. The DLS uses experienced home-based tutors to support students over the telephone, through the postal service and online. Tutors phone students at prearranged times to suit the students' needs, typically in the evenings. NALA's DLS also offers accreditation options to interested students.

The NALA Write On website www.writeon.ie is a free online e-learning site that offers learning and accreditation options in reading, writing, numeracy, communications, computers, digital media and personal development. The website offers certification at Levels 2 and 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland. Students can study in their own time and at their own pace. The website offers students personalised learning plans so that they only study what they need to.

There are hundreds of free resources in the form of videos and downloadable worksheets at www.resources.writeon.ie to complement the interactive content.

The website can be used in blended learning contexts to support centre based study with a tutor. It is designed for people who want to improve their basic literacy skills and for ESOL students who want to work on their own. It can also be used by students who want to combine using Write On with other learning activities or situations such as working with a tutor.

The website covers many levels, from beginner (Level 2) up to intermediate and advanced readers and writers (Levels 3 and 4).

Libraries

Libraries have an important role in literacy development at local level, particularly in relation to materials and access to technology.

Accreditation

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a 10 level framework of standards for accreditation purposes, established in October 2003. There were no previous awards at Levels 1 and 2. Levels 1 to 4 are of most relevance to adult literacy students, but progression to higher levels is also important. However, accreditation is not a requirement of participation in adult literacy, and it is vital that participants continue to take part in adult literacy learning activities with an option of accreditation.

The introduction of NFQ Levels 1 and 2 brought the accreditation options into everyone's reach. For many, including the 500,000 Irish adults with literacy difficulties identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (1997), it provided a more appropriate or realistic opportunity for certification, often for the first time. This was a significant innovation in an Irish context and relatively new in international terms.

Providers are required to formally agree quality assurance arrangements and to validate programmes with awarding bodies before they can offer programmes to students that lead to certification. Both the quality assurance agreement and programme validation cover assessment policies and processes.

For students

The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) is being subsumed into The Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority of Ireland (QQAI). Assessment for accreditation, especially at Levels 1 to 3, is largely based on portfolios of work which the students put together. This makes it possible to build on the

approaches to study that suit their own pace and style of learning. NALA's Distance Learning Service (DLS) offers accreditation options to students on their website: www.writeon.ie
The NALA DLS also has learning resources at Level 4.

Some students are not interested in gaining certificates, especially at the early stages of their return to learning. Others are keen to gain recognition for their achievements from the start, especially as accreditation may help them gain access to employment, training or further learning opportunities. In addition, many students become interested in accreditation as they progress in their learning.

For tutors

In order to provide tutors with opportunities for professional development, formal qualifications at Higher Certificate to honours degree level have been developed by NALA and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). The NALA / WIT accreditation project offers a flexible, modular approach to study and increasingly adult literacy work is becoming a career option for people interested in education (See Appendix 3).



There are also several other adult education degree courses and postgraduate level adult education programmes in Irish universities, for example, in National University of Ireland (NUI), Maynooth.

For providers

Accreditation is not a requirement of participation in adult literacy programmes. However, adult literacy services should provide the option of appropriate accreditation for all students. While most services provide this option, there is work in progress to provide all adult students with access to certification choices.

6 Ensuring quality

One of NALA's central concerns is to ensure that adult literacy students have access to high quality tuition and facilities. It is also important that programmes and organisations reflect the core philosophy and principles of adult literacy work. In this context, NALA developed a quality framework as a means by which providers of literacy and adult basic education can review and assess their service and plan development.

The Revised Evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education (ABE) User Guide (NALA, 2006) is a manual that gives step-by-step instructions on how the Evolving Quality Framework (EQF) works. It also provides general tools, including worksheets and information sheets, that are useful for carrying out quality assurance wherever adult basic education is taking place.

To see the full manual, go to: www.nala.ie/publications/evolving-quality-framework

The framework enables managers, tutors or students in the adult basic education service to reflect on the quality of the service by identifying what is working well and what needs to be changed. The *User Guide* is designed to be used with the help of a trained EQF facilitator. It is aimed at teams using the EQF, especially students, centre managers, facilitators and any other person who has responsibility for quality assurance.

For centres that offer accreditation under the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), using the framework will also generate evidence that they can use to support the quality assurance requirements for national awards.

What is the Evolving Quality Framework?

The Evolving Quality Framework is a system for improving and monitoring the quality of adult basic education in Ireland. It is a

method of self-evaluation because the people using it are the managers, staff and students who work and learn in the ABE centres. It is 'evolving' because it adapts to new situations and needs as circumstances in ABE change.

What is quality?

A quality service is one that responds to the needs, concerns and interests of the people who use it. Everyone in the organisation knows what their role is and how they can play their part in making sure that the organisation achieves its aims. Each person is committed to reflecting on their own work and on the organisation generally, to see how it can be improved. Everyone knows what methods and standards are expected and, where possible, contributes to deciding what these are. To do all this, people in the organisation need clear working methods and enough resources to carry out their tasks.

Quality is an essential part of how an organisation operates and how the people in it work together.

Why evaluate quality?

The Evolving Quality Framework was designed to support people when evaluating quality in adult basic education. Everyone involved in the ABE service, whether a student, a tutor or a manager, is entitled to have the best possible service and the highest quality environment in which to learn and to work. To make sure that this happens, it is important to have a clear idea of what quality in ABE actually means. Then, we need a method that helps us to reflect on this so that we can identify gaps, plan for the future and keep track of any changes recommended.

When the people who work and learn in the adult literacy service carry out this evaluation for themselves, the process is self-evaluation. This self-evaluation has many benefits. If it becomes a regular part of the work of the service, it is a way of reaching a high standard of quality in all of the important areas, and of maintaining or improving on this. It also allows the people most affected by decisions about the service to have a say in those decisions.

Quality areas

Because the EQF system was specially designed for adult basic education, it identifies five general areas of activity that are essential in any good ABE service. These areas of activity are called **Quality Areas**. Each **Quality Area** is described in more detail by Statements of Quality. The EQF has nineteen Statements of Quality altogether. The **Quality Areas** and **Statements of Quality** together allow staff, managers and students, working as a team, to examine each aspect of the service in their centre.

At the heart of the Evolving Quality Framework is a set of values that describe the ethos of adult basic education. These are the **Guiding Principles**. If there is any doubt about the best way to carry out an action, for what purpose or in whose interests, the Guiding Principles give direction.

The Guiding Principles of the EQF

Often there are different ways of reaching the same goal. When this happens, people's beliefs or values can influence decisions about how to move forward. Sometimes, these values are not clearly stated. In fact, it is easy to take them for granted and imagine that everyone is working from the same set of ideas about what education should be and what purpose it should serve. This can cause problems when beliefs clash. To prevent this from happening, the EQF system is based on a number of Guiding Principles. These are perhaps the most important part of the EQF, as they state the values and beliefs that underpin adult basic education in Ireland. Taken together, these are sometimes called the ethos of ABE. In the EQF system, the following five principles express this ethos.

■ **Voluntarism**

The student has the right to attend on a voluntary basis and to set their own learning goals in an atmosphere of trust and respect. It is the student's own decision to take part in ABE and the knowledge and skills they work on address their own interests and priorities.

■ **Confidentiality**

The student has the right to privacy and confidentiality. Their participation in ABE is kept private, unless they agree otherwise,

and any information they supply is also kept private.

■ **Respect for cultural difference**

Cultural and social differences are respected at all levels in the organisation. Staff, students and managers in the service welcome people from many different social and cultural backgrounds and take active steps to make sure that everyone who wants to be fully included in the life of the centre has that opportunity.

■ **Social interaction and informality**

The service creates an atmosphere that encourages social interaction, informality and enjoyment. This recognises the social aspects of learning and motivation and the importance of an adult-friendly learning environment and approach to management.

■ **Inclusiveness**

Students can take part in all aspects of the organisation, including evaluation and participation at board or committee level.

The framework describes standards of good practice for adult basic education, under the following headings:

- resources;
- management;
- teaching and learning;
- progression; and
- outreach and promotion.

Resources

This area refers to funding, premises, resources for teaching and learning, and support for students and tutors.

Access to high quality resources sends a clear message to students that they are entitled to high quality provision. The key point is that every aspect of the service is informed by an adult student-centred philosophy.



Funding

A good adult basic education service requires reliable and consistent funding. It is vital to have clear communication between the funding bodies and the management of the service in order to allow for planning and monitoring expenditure. In particular, managers need to have accurate information about the budget allocation at the start of the financial year.

Premises

Appropriate premises are an essential feature of good adult literacy provision. They need to reflect an attitude which respects the status and dignity of the students. Ideally they should be for the sole use of the service and have security of tenure.

The building itself can convey a welcoming and positive environment or can create a barrier to access and learning. A good adult basic education service should provide safe, comfortable and convenient premises where there is adequate and appropriate space for a range of users and activities, both educational and social. The premises should be equipped with adult furniture and facilities as well as access for people with disabilities. The buildings must meet health and safety standards.

Resources for teaching and learning

A wide variety of teaching and learning materials and aids is essential.

Key teaching and learning resources include:

- books and authentic learning materials designed for working with adults;
- appropriate materials, including specific areas such as ESOL and numeracy;
- information and communications technology (ICT) equipment;
- online information and learning resources;
- tutor-support material;
- blended learning opportunities;
- access to validated programmes and certification;
- audio and visual materials; and
- photocopying facilities.

Student support

A good adult literacy service accommodates students with a wide range of needs and concerns and pays special attention to supporting students who experience particular barriers relating to language, poverty, childcare needs or disability.

Student support includes:

- access to educational guidance;
- childcare support;
- outreach centres;
- support for new students;
- student committees;
- funds and structures for financial assistance if necessary;
- other general or specific supports as appropriate; and
- information about local, regional and national events for students.

Tutor support

Tutors need training and support in all aspects of their work. A good adult basic education service will provide initial and in-service tutor training and a support structure for tutors.

Tutor support also includes:

- a mentoring system for new tutors;
- regular contact between tutors and the organiser or resource workers;
- a well-stocked resource room;
- easy access to computers, photocopier, audio and video equipment, with training as required;
- close links to NALA;
- information and training in relation to specific needs (culture, language, disability);
- support for certification;
- regular tutor meetings; and
- information and communications technology (ICT) and online resources and support.

Structures for tutors and students

There should be structures for tutor and student representation

and feedback in relation to decision-making and management processes.

Management

Management in the context of adult basic education has a number of dimensions. Managers are responsible for planning, managing people, administration and accountability in line with the values and ethos of adult basic education. It is important that the management style should reflect the guiding principles, and management committees should include the manager or organiser, students, tutors and other involved groups or individuals.



The management structure will vary according to the context in which the adult literacy work takes place.

VEC/ETB Adult Literacy Service

In a local VEC/ETB Adult Literacy Service, the manager is usually the Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) working in conjunction with a management committee and reporting to senior VEC/ETB management. The ALO must be aware of the strengths and needs of the local community. The role requires vision and skills in working and planning with others to meet these needs effectively.

Other education and training settings

In other settings the manager may be responsible for running a training centre, further education college, community development or local education project that provides a wide range of courses and activities. There is also the Distance Learning Service which is run by NALA.

Key points in relation to management are:

- planning and administration;
- recruitment (See Outreach and promotion later in this chapter);
- initial contact with students;

- internal communication;
- programme evaluation; and
- staffing issues, including training and development.

Planning and administration

Management issues such as budgeting, programme planning, administration, implementation and review processes should involve tutors, students and other relevant people.

Initial contact with students

Initial contact with students is a key element in a good adult basic education service. First impressions are very important as new students need to feel that they will be supported and receive good tuition.

The initial meeting should be held in a place where the student can speak openly and confidentially and find out how literacy work is carried out in the centre. It is especially helpful to involve current students in the process of welcome and induction for new participants. An existing student could act as a 'peer' welcome person. At the initial stages, it is also useful to tell students about the existence of the adult education guidance service should they wish to avail of it.

Internal communication

Good communication structures are vital. Internal communication structures must ensure that the way information is communicated respects the individuals and groups within a particular organisation or service. Information needs to flow in several directions, and structures should encourage feedback and discussion.

Different forms of communication are needed, depending on the people concerned. These may include one-to-one and group meetings or informal conversations, telephone and Skype calls, emails, texts, letters, newsletters and online forums. Many students use social media as a means of communication. The use of plain English is important in all communications.

Programme evaluation

All aspects of the service should be evaluated on a regular basis and there should be agreed procedures for recording, reviewing and communicating and for building on the results of the evaluation.

Programme evaluation includes a review of:

- principles and policies;
- organisation and resources; and
- the effectiveness of teaching, learning and development activities.

Evaluation should involve students, tutors, resource workers, organisers, management committees and all other relevant people.

Staff training and development

There should be a distinct policy and a specific budget for training and development for all staff: tutors, organisers, managers, administration and other staff, both voluntary and paid. This should include initial training in the principles and practice of adult basic education, regular meetings, in-service training and access to accredited courses.

Tutor training courses are concerned not just with the techniques involved in teaching literacy to adults but also with the skills required to promote active learning. For example, such skills would be involving students in directing their own learning, finding ways of building confidence in a supportive atmosphere and thinking out effective group activities.

The initial tutor training course should be sufficiently comprehensive to allow potential tutors to understand fully what is involved in helping adults who wish to improve their literacy skills, and to give them the opportunity to judge whether they have the commitment to undertake tuition. The initial course also helps to determine if participants will be suitable tutors. New tutors need to be aware that they will be expected to give time to in-service training courses at regular intervals.

Both students and tutors should be involved in development of courses to share their experiences and develop ideas. Training

courses should involve students in a positive way to fully communicate the effects of literacy difficulties. The only people who can speak about this with an authentic voice are students.

It is important that tutor training courses reflect the philosophy of adult education. The methods used should be those that encourage active learning and participation, such as role-play, small group discussion and workshops.

Regular in-service training is important. Tutors need to develop their skills in different areas such as learning styles, teaching reading, spelling, numeracy, ESOL, blended learning and the integration of technology. Tutors may also need to attend in-service training for updates on accreditation and certification for students.

The NALA / WIT accreditation project is particularly useful for staff members who need to gain relevant formal qualifications (See Appendix 3).

There should be a member of staff with responsibility for planning, organising and monitoring the effective implementation of the staff training and development policy.

Professional development events for adult literacy practitioners

NALA offers training events and conferences to Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs), tutors and resource workers. Our aim is to run innovative and exciting forums and conferences. These events are aimed at adult literacy practitioners to highlight new initiatives and ideas in adult literacy practice and to demonstrate best practice and initiatives which have worked. NALA has been doing this for 30 years. The main professional development events include an Adult Literacy Organisers' Forum, a National Forum for Adult Literacy Tutors, an ESOL conference, a Family Learning conference and a Numeracy conference.

Teaching and learning

The provision of high quality learning opportunities for all adults who wish to improve their literacy or numeracy skills is the primary purpose of the literacy service. A successful outcome, which may involve certification for students, depends on the quality of the teaching and learning process that students experience when they return to learning, particularly if they have negative memories of education in the past.



Key points in relation to teaching and learning are:

- the student-tutor relationship;
- the process of curriculum development;
- access to a range of tuition options, including accreditation;
- learning and development; and
- assessment, review and evaluation.

The student - tutor relationship

The nature and quality of the student-tutor relationship is critical in determining the success and enjoyment of the learning experience for both parties in adult literacy work.

The matching of students and tutors, particularly in one-to-one tuition, needs to be handled with sensitivity and imagination in order to maximise the development of a good relationship. There also needs to be a clear process for addressing any difficulties which may arise, whether personal or in connection with tuition, and all service users need to know who to approach in such a situation.

The relationship between tutors and students should be participative and democratic. This requires openness, equality, trust and flexibility. Issues of confidentiality also need to be considered. A successful learning partnership involves each person respecting the other's life experiences and skills and will thrive in an accepting, friendly, supportive and non-threatening environment.

Initial training emphasises the student-tutor relationship and

encourages participants to explore their own attitudes and how these can affect the successful facilitation of learning. This involves a flexible approach and an ability to adapt to the needs of the individual or group. It also includes training in those counselling skills (for example, active listening) which help people relate to one another in an open and accepting way. However, tutors are not counsellors; students with deep-rooted personal problems should be referred to professional counsellors or specialist agencies in the community.

In keeping with the student-centred approach, tutors need to remember that literacy work is concerned with building confidence, self-esteem and independence.

Access to a range of tuition options

Students need to be able to identify their own goals, choose from a broad range of tuition options and participate fully in planning their learning programmes and progression.

The range of provision offered has to be developed in response to the range of goals and interests presented by students. Priority should be given to providing options to those with the greatest literacy needs.

Flexibility is required to accommodate such a wide range of needs: for individual attention or shared learning in a group setting; for day, evening or weekend contact times to fit in with family or work commitments; for short intensive courses or courses of longer duration and by distance, online.

A good service will provide maximum choice for students in terms of the nature, location and timetabling of learning options, including the opportunity to enter tuition throughout the year. Students should be able to choose and move between different forms of tuition according to their needs.

Tuition options should include:

- one-to-one tuition;
- group tuition;

- blended learning;
- distance learning;
- non-accredited and accredited programmes;
- part-time and full-time courses;
- courses based in the workplace; and
- online learning.

In addition to general literacy programmes, students may wish to work on specific areas, such as:

- spelling;
- numeracy;
- technology;
- ESOL; and
- family, financial or health literacy.

Learning and development

Learning and development go together. Effective learning requires active participation by the student and confidence in the ability to learn. It also involves change: as a result of learning, people may change in their attitudes and beliefs as well as in terms of what they know and are able to do.

In literacy tuition, students are encouraged to voice their opinions and experiences in a safe environment. As well as documenting success in meeting goals concerned with technical skills, less obvious but equally important learning outcomes need to be valued and recorded, such as increase in confidence, self-directed learning and networking.

Opportunities for students to express their views and share their skills can be provided through informal interaction between tutors and students, development of students' committees, training events, readings, publication of writings by students and other activities. Students can also contribute valuable insights to tutors through participating in the initial tutor training courses and on committees.

Hearing the voice of literacy students

NALA, through its student members, aims to hear the views and opinions of literacy students across Ireland and to reflect what we

learn from them throughout our work with educators, policy makers and government. Our student work is one of our core values. Each year the NALA Student Committee hosts two student days. The topics covered at the days are chosen by the students. The student days are free, fun and informative events. All literacy students are welcome to attend.

Selecting materials and approaches

Methodologies selected and developed for working with adult students should be designed to address the many dimensions of literacy, both technical and non-technical. Selecting materials and approaches is a joint venture between tutors and students. Initially, students may rely on tutors to suggest methods and content but as relationships based on equality and respect develop, students usually become increasingly involved in directing the learning process.

Successful learning is much more likely to take place when students play an active part in the learning process. Adult literacy students come from a wide range of backgrounds and have differing needs and aspirations. There can be no set syllabus if each individual is to be adequately supported in their own learning.

Adults of all ages learn best when they are given the opportunity to:

- discuss the teaching methods and approaches that help them to learn most effectively;
- take an active part in defining their learning needs, directing the content of study, and selecting materials that suit them best;
- work co-operatively to find ways of helping each other to learn effectively; and
- have an active role in their learning group such as taking part in an icebreaker to co-facilitate welcoming a new student.

Students should also have the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills. The Submission from the *National Adult Literacy Agency, Ireland to the EU Commission High Level Expert Group on Literacy* says: “Critical thinking skills are essential in today’s world. Not only do we have easier access to information these days, particularly through the internet, but you often have to assess if the

information in front of you is correct or not. These skills must be taught as part of all learning programmes.” (NALA, 2011, p. 13)

Teaching critical thinking skills involves exploring the relationship between the people who write articles and texts and those who use them. It encourages students to explore questions such as: What is the purpose of the text? Who benefits from the text? Whose voice and views are included? Whose voice and views are excluded? Why? (NALA, 2009, p. 26)

Students sometimes need help to understand and develop their preferred learning styles. Some people can confidently rely on their visual memory, while others are more skilled in distinguishing and remembering sounds; others learn most effectively by actually carrying out tasks or activities. These are known as visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles. People also vary in the extent to which they require practice and repetition to absorb new learning. Teaching methods, therefore, need to be flexible enough to accommodate different learning styles and approaches. The use of technology in tuition can play an important part in the learning process here too.

Assessment as a support for learning

Assessment gives an idea of how well someone can do something at a given time. It attempts to identify, demonstrate and affirm evidence of learning and development. Assessment also looks for positive change and how that change can be demonstrated.

In adult basic education, it is necessary to establish appropriate methods for finding a starting point for tuition, for devising learning programmes, for identifying and analysing barriers when students encounter difficulties and for the regular review of progress. Tutors also need feedback on whether they are doing a good job and on how they can improve their practice. Service providers need to know whether they are meeting students' goals, to be able to identify training needs and to support funding requests. Where certification is a learning goal, awarding bodies need evidence that standards are being reached and demonstrated. Finally, funding bodies need evidence that the service is working effectively.

Initial assessment

While there is no formal national procedure for initial assessment currently in use in Irish adult literacy services, there is a common approach in terms of the aims, ethos and the principles underlying initial assessment. Initial assessment is characterised as a process which is informal, adult-friendly, and carried out by initial interview with the Adult Literacy Organiser.

Initial assessment is usually carried out with students during an informal interview and in the first literacy sessions. Formal testing is not carried out as part of adult literacy work. However, it could be explained to students that formal testing is available for people who may have dyslexia. The majority of students know what they can or cannot do and are able to express their needs and goals once they feel listened to. From the first few literacy classes, a learning plan is developed based on the goals, objectives and preferred learning styles and teaching methodologies that emerge.

The NALA Distance Learning Service (DLS) has an initial assessment process built into the website www.writeon.ie

Formative assessment

As tuition continues, students need to know how they are progressing, whether they are still in the most appropriate tuition, and whether a change of tutor or group is required.

Students should be enabled to recognise their strengths and what they would like to improve, as well as to explore their own ideas of what counts as progress and success. Assessment which encourages students to plan and monitor their own learning is integral to a student-directed approach. All aspects of literacy should be reviewed. In particular less obvious learning outcomes, such as confidence, self-esteem, social participation and personal and interpersonal skills, need to be documented and valued.

Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ)

Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ) was introduced by NALA in 2005 as a framework to capture and support formative assessment

for teaching and learning purposes, based on practice in the field and international research. MLJ can help identify, record and summarise progress that students make in literacy work. It covers the areas of reading, writing, numeracy, oral and aural skills and personal development. MLJ informed the development of Levels 1 and 2. FETAC Level 1 and 2 awards in Reading, Writing and Listening and Speaking closely match the standards and range of the MLJ Beginning and Mid-level levels respectively.

To find out more information about MLJ, go to:
www.nala.ie/publications/mapping-learning-journey

Summative assessment

Summative assessment is done at the end of a particular period of teaching and learning. It looks at whether learning objectives have been achieved. But it is also important for students and practitioners in deciding what areas, if any, may be the focus for 'assessment of learning', which involves making judgements about learning achieved, often including certification.

Each certificate or award has a specific set of standards that a student must demonstrate to achieve it. The standards apply across all courses and methodologies. The requirement is simply that a person must demonstrate the standards, and do so to the satisfaction of the quality assurance process of the provider. This presents what Jay Derrick (in Campbell, 2007) refers to as "local freedom" in the assessment of standards, while maintaining the integrity of the standards themselves. This local freedom is at the discretion of the provider but can only happen within the assessment processes that are approved by an awarding body, for example, FETAC or the QQAI. Providing flexibility is important for a student to demonstrate achievement, without undermining the rigour of summative assessment processes. This is key to evidencing standards in a way that will allow for different learning journeys to the same destination.

Progression

Progression in the context of adult basic education is concerned with reaching personal goals and relates to all members of the service. It can be a motivating factor and provide a challenge or a definite aim. However, there are some difficulties associated with progression, particularly in a literacy setting. Students and staff may feel under stress or threatened, especially by courses which involve examinations or tests.



For many students, even a relatively small change such as moving from one tutor to another or from one-to-one tuition into small group tuition may constitute a significant step in terms of progression and needs to be recognised as such. Confidence and positive feelings about one's ability to learn independently or with others are important factors when planning progression, both within and beyond the literacy service.

It is difficult to say how long a student's programme of literacy tuition should last. The student is usually the best judge of that. In order to make this decision, students need information about the variety of learning and progression routes available. The students' right to determine in what ways they wish to progress should always be respected and thus it is important that students are not pressurised into accredited courses and are aware of all non-accredited and accredited opportunities open to them.

Current progression routes for students include accredited courses, further education and training opportunities, employment and community or voluntary activities. It is important to note, progression can also be increased confidence and better networking skills.

Tutors need to be able to negotiate students' goals with them and to explain honestly the difficulties and challenges that may arise if they embark on an accredited course. In addition, all literacy centres should have access to an adult guidance and counselling service where students can gain more detailed information and advice.

Such guidance needs to be part of regular review procedures and should include access to clear up-to-date information, realistic goal setting advice and counselling.

Progression for volunteer and paid staff relates to personal and career development and should be supported by management (See Staff training and development above).

Outreach and promotion

A wide range of publicity, awareness-raising and promotion work is needed at both national and local levels. Outreach and promotion include:

- informing the public about the adult literacy issue and the service available;
- recruiting new participants to adult literacy programmes;
- identifying and overcoming the barriers to participation; and
- building partnerships at national and local level.



Plain English can play a vital role in helping outreach and promotion initiatives more effectively target their work and materials.

Promotional strategies need to be creative and sensitive to students' needs and perceptions. They should be evaluated for their effectiveness and should evolve with changing student and tutor profiles.

Informing the public

Publicity can be directed at developing an understanding of adult literacy issues. Careful management of publicity is very important to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. Awareness of the adult literacy issue needs to be brought frequently into the public consciousness. NALA's Literacy Awareness Training develops understanding in the general public and helps organisations review their policies and practices so that they are inclusive of and sensitive to the needs of adults with literacy difficulties.

Involving students greatly enhances the effectiveness of the publicity. However, students do need to be aware of the possible outcomes of exposure to publicity and to consider carefully whether they wish to take part. They also need specific training for this role.

Recruiting new participants and overcoming barriers to participation

A range of recruitment methods is needed to attract people with the greatest literacy needs as well as new tutors who are most suited to providing adult literacy tuition. Given the changed economic climate, innovative ways should be used to recruit harder-to-reach students.

Local adult basic education services use local media and information leaflets, together with direct contact through community organisations, churches and support groups. Creative approaches build on knowledge of the community and an understanding of the need to be sensitive to students and encouraging to potential tutors. National publicity and outreach can also help the work at local level.

Breaking down barriers to becoming involved in tuition requires approaches that build trust and encourage people to feel they have the ability to learn. Word-of-mouth is often the best way of breaking down barriers among individuals and communities, and it is important to involve students in talking to friends, relatives and neighbours, addressing meetings and speaking to the media. Partnership work with other organisations and services is especially useful in addressing barriers to learning where people are particularly isolated and marginalised.

Building partnerships

Effective outreach and promotion depends on developing partnerships and sharing responsibilities between the adult basic education service and other organisations.

Partnership can result in the pooling of valuable ideas, methods and resources. In many areas, adult basic education services are part of local networks which bring together community groups, local education providers and public service agencies. These include:

Area Based Partnerships; community groups; county and city councils; youth projects; employers; organisations involved in work training; family centres; community development projects; schools; public libraries.



7 Research

Introduction

High quality research is vital in clarifying issues relating to adult basic education. A particularly effective piece of research in this field was the International Adult Literacy Survey carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1995. This was instrumental in making legislators in many countries respond to the adult literacy issue. In Ireland, it helped to make adult literacy the highest priority in the White Paper on Adult Education in Ireland, *Learning for Life* (DES, 2000).

The OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) carried out a survey between 2011 and 2012 to assess and compare the basic skills of adults across OECD and partner countries. The results are due to be published in 2013. For information from the Central Statistics Office about the PIAAC literacy survey, go to: <http://www.cso.ie/en/surveysandmethodology/education/piaac/>

NALA's research focus is primarily on ways to ensure highest quality teaching and learning and to increase awareness of adult literacy issues and difficulties. Our research work is centred around the use of new and existing theories and research to inform policy and practice in the adult literacy sector in Ireland. The majority of research within NALA is done as a means of improving practice, producing guidelines and developing policies around key delivery issues such as family literacy, distance and blended learning, numeracy and integrating literacy.

Our research assists the development of new approaches to enable adult literacy students to overcome barriers to access and participation and to ensure success in adult education and training. We also share research findings, promote effective practice and policy and provide information and support to people carrying out research on topics relating to adult literacy, training and further education.

NALA's research approach

NALA's research approach is participatory and collaborative and consultation with our partners will be an integral part of our research strategy. NALA's research and work continue to be informed and guided by the following statement from the first *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*:

Literacy students are not to be passive subjects of study but rather should work with the researchers in defining the questions to be asked, in analysing the problem (including its historical and social context) and in planning the action to be taken...Adult literacy students are often people who, all through their lives, have been reported on but who seldom, if ever, have been given the chance to report themselves...Any investigation that ignores this participatory principle...is likely to produce misleading information (NALA, 1985, p. 41).

NALA recommends the active involvement of students, tutors and our other partners and stakeholders in the design, implementation and dissemination of our research. This collaborative process ensures that their views are central to our research approach. It further ensures that literacy students are actively involved in defining their own experience and in planning the action to be taken to address literacy difficulties in society. We will continue to be influenced by these principles and we will use all data and research findings to advocate for appropriate responses to the needs and rights of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties and to improve our services and work.

NALA's research work is guided by its ethical guidelines which include the principles of:

- securing the informed consent of the participants;
- respecting the rights of the research participants; and
- ensuring and safeguarding the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Research strategy

NALA understands that we need comprehensive and up-to-date research on adult literacy and other related areas to increase our knowledge and improve the range and quality of our work. We will continue to:

- commission and carry out relevant research;
- share our findings with our stakeholders;
- use our research findings to provide evidence-based solutions to adult literacy issues; and
- inform our policy proposals and advice to organisations.

NALA is committed to tackling the adult literacy issue in Ireland. We believe that research will play a key role in helping us achieve this objective.



8 Issues for the future

This section identifies some key issues which need to be addressed.

Current economic and employment situation

We know that people with literacy and numeracy difficulties are less likely to participate in education and training. This exemplifies the Matthew effect, where those who have benefited least from investment in education and training are the least likely to be assisted in further and higher education. Pressure from the current economic and unemployment situation is likely to result in the increased vulnerability of those with literacy and numeracy needs or low qualifications in the coming decade and could compound inequalities further.

Focus on students

In order to retain the student-centred and student-directed focus of adult literacy work, further attention should be given to involving students in all aspects of literacy work at local, regional and national levels.

NALA wants Ireland to be a place where adult literacy is a valued right and where everyone can both develop their literacy and take part more fully in society. The right of access to learning opportunities should be included in equality legislation.

Integrating literacy and numeracy

In every vocational, academic or other learning programme, at every level, there will inevitably be differences in literacy and numeracy strengths and experience. 'Integrating literacy and numeracy' means using a variety of methods that take account of those differences and are effective for everyone in the group. It also means ensuring students develop the particular kinds of literacy and numeracy involved in the particular subject or skill.

Wider access

Adequate funding and access continue to be major issues. While

there are now some full-time and part-time basic education courses, most literacy students still only have two hours of tuition per week. For some students, this service is minimal and needs to be further developed.

Distance learning and blended learning are two ways in which students can avail of tuition, at times to suit them and their circumstances.

Joint responsibility

Any strategy to increase access to a range of learning opportunities will require partnerships across the statutory, public, private and voluntary sectors. In particular, it is important that government and employers ensure that workers with basic education needs are allowed paid educational leave for more intensive tuition. Also the use of plain English in documents and information literature can play an important part in increasing access opportunities for students.

Strengthening structures

To ensure students receive high quality learning opportunities, it is vital to create clear and coherent staffing and career structures for adult literacy tutors and managers, based on appropriate adult education qualifications. Such structures are needed in order to build a professional service in which tutors can develop a range of effective teaching skills and strategies and be supported by well-resourced management.

All these issues require creative initiatives and responses in order to develop the quality and range of adult literacy work.



9 Conclusion

This document has outlined the essential features of good adult literacy work and has discussed the core values underpinning adult basic education in Ireland. As in the previous guidelines, it has attempted to draw together the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of all those involved in adult literacy work including students, tutors, managers, researchers and other interested people.

The philosophy and principles which reinforce student-centred and student-directed adult literacy work remain a central focus for NALA and continue to form the core of its research and development activities.

NALA also continues to assert its freedom to develop creative and new approaches to adult basic education; to involve students in all aspects of its work; to emphasise that literacy provision responds to individual students, their families and communities and to highlight the link between literacy development and social action.

NALA itself is evolving as an organisation. Throughout recent developments, the agency has maintained its independence in order to act as an advocate for all basic education students, tutors and managers. This independent position remains a key issue for the members, the Executive Committee and the staff.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Guiding principles for good adult literacy work: 1985, 1991 and 2005

1985

1. The adult students are active participants in adult literacy work, that is, they are involved in all levels of organisation and provision.
2. Adult students are always seen as contributors as well as beneficiaries who have skills, knowledge and services to offer in the work of adult literacy generally and in other areas.
3. Adult literacy learning is an active and not a passive experience, expressive as well as receptive from the beginning.
4. Adult literacy relates to the development of the whole person and is not restricted solely to the improving of reading and writing skills. Thus adult literacy work should be perceived particularly in the context of adult basic education and also in the wider context of adult education.
5. Adult literacy provision is based on an adult philosophy of education, which has fundamental implications for the modes of organisation developed, the range of services offered, the qualities demanded of tutors, the materials and facilities used, and the nature of the learning practices employed.

1991

1. Adult literacy work encompasses aspects of personal development – social, economic and emotional. It covers much more than reading and writing skills.

2. Adult literacy workers must always recognise and respect the adult status of the students. All of their work must be developed with this in mind and should never rely on procedures and materials developed for children.
3. Adult literacy students need to become active not passive students. They should always be enabled to contribute their skills, knowledge and experience, both to the learning process and to the organisation of provision at all levels. Students not only have the right to learn but also the right to choose how to learn.
4. Learning is a lifelong process. Adult literacy provision needs to establish links with other existing educational activities and to initiate new developments in continuing education.

2005

1. Adult literacy work is based on a philosophy of adult education which is concerned with personal development and social action.
2. Adult literacy learning is an active and expressive process. Students have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how they wish to learn.
3. Adult literacy work respects different beliefs, cultures and ways of being. An ethical code of trust and confidentiality underpins all aspects of the work.
4. Students' knowledge and skills are vital for the effective organisation of adult literacy work. Students should have the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of provision.
5. Adults learn best when the decision to return to learning is their own and the environment is supportive, relaxed and friendly.

Appendix 2: List of NALA and national policy documents

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Appendix 3: NALA / WIT accreditation project

Contact details:

NALA / WIT Accreditation Project
Literacy Development Centre
School of Education and Professional Development
Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)
College Street Campus
Waterford
Co Waterford

Tel: 051 302 689

Email: literacy@wit.ie

Website: www.wit.ie/lcd

Appendix 4: Volunteer Protocol (included in the *National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Plan 2004*)

Volunteer tutors' rights:

- to know if, and how, they are being selected;
- to be given meaningful work to do;
- to know what is expected from them;
- to be offered appropriate training;
- to be thanked and have their voluntary contribution recognised;
- to receive supervision and support;
- to get something out of the work for themselves;
- to know who to go to if there is a problem;
- to have access to appropriate teaching materials;
- to make mistakes and learn from them;
- to be made aware of any disciplinary and grievance procedures;
- to be treated fairly and not to experience discrimination;
- to have safe working conditions, including insurance cover;
- to be informed about, and given the opportunity to play an active part in, the organisation as a whole; and
- to be able to say 'no' and to leave without being made to feel guilty.

Volunteer tutors' responsibilities:

- to respect the values and aims of the organisation;
- to commit appropriate time and effort to the work;
- to be reliable and give the organisation sufficient warning if unable to turn up;
- to be punctual;
- to attend essential training and support sessions;
- to undertake the work to a high standard;
- to be honest if there are problems;

- to respect confidentiality; and
- to leave when asked and/or when no longer enjoying the volunteering experience.

Organisations' rights:

- to look for certain qualities and skills in volunteer tutors;
- to select only volunteer tutors who are suitable for the work;
- to draw up a volunteer tutor agreement or 'contract'. This agreement should be between the individual and the service, and not the referral organisation, if any;
- to ask for tasks to be done in a particular way;
- to ask for commitment;
- to ask for reliability;
- to ask for punctuality;
- to deal with disciplinary and grievance matters; and
- to ask volunteer tutors to leave if their involvement hinders the organisation achieving its goals.

Organisations' responsibilities:

- to ensure the volunteer tutoring experience is a rewarding one;
- to ensure equal access and not to discriminate;
- to define clear, meaningful roles for volunteer tutors;
- to have policies and procedures for volunteer tutors;
- to provide all necessary information for volunteer tutors;
- to provide training where necessary;
- to thank and value volunteer tutors;
- to provide insurance cover;
- to inform volunteer tutors of any legal liabilities;
- to supervise and to provide support;
- to make available suitable teaching materials; and
- to provide a safe, working environment.

Further information on volunteers is available from Volunteering Ireland: www.volunteeringireland.ie

Appendix 5: Training and work experience programmes providing literacy and numeracy

Literacy and numeracy support and development is provided in a range of education, training and employment settings. These include:

Education Training Boards/Vocational Education Committees

- Youthreach Centres
- Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)
- Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)
- Community Education
- Community Training Centres
- Local training initiatives

Workplace Basic Education

- The Return to Learning Initiative (local authorities and VECs/ETBs)
- Skills for Work project (employers, employees and VECs/ETBs)

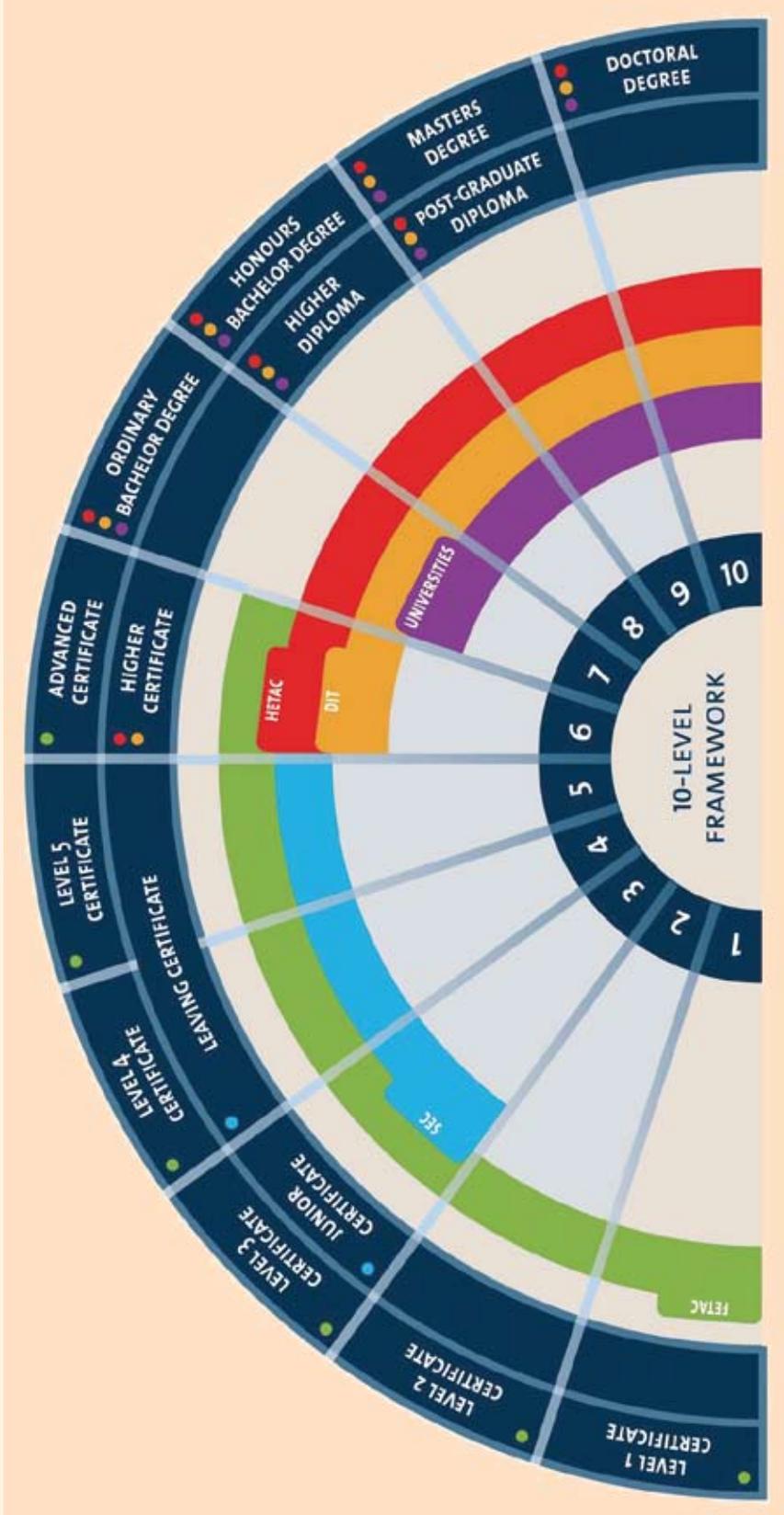
Organisations providing for special needs

- National Learning Network
- Enable Ireland
- Central Remedial Clinic
- Rehab Group
- St. Michael's House

Other providers

- Family Resource Centres
- Congress Centres Network
- Pobal funded local partnerships and community groups
- Community projects

Appendix 6: The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)



The National Adult Literacy Agency

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent member-based organisation, working on improving adult literacy in Ireland since 1980. We are:

- the voice of adults wishing to improve their literacy skills, and
- committed to raising adult literacy levels.



National Adult Literacy Agency
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www.writeon.ie (Distance learning website)

www.simplyput.ie (Plain English website)

www.makingcents.ie (Financial literacy website)

www.healthliteracy.ie (Health literacy website)

www.helpmykidlearn.ie (Family learning website)

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