



UPSKILLING
PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME



INTERNATIONAL
WORKFORCE
LITERACY REVIEW

› IRELAND

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1. Introduction to the reviewer

Inez Bailey has been working in the area of adult literacy since 1993, initially as a group literacy tutor and then as researcher in the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Ireland. She has been director of NALA since 1997 and in that time she has been directly involved in the development of workplace basic education at national and local level.

2. Background information on the context for workforce literacy

2.1 Country workforce demographics and projections

According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the population in Ireland increased by 15.7% to almost 4.24 million between 1997 and 2006. Ireland's fertility rate in 2005 was the second highest in all 27 European Union (EU) countries—1.88 compared to an EU-25 average of 1.52 (CSO 2006). As a result of this, Ireland's population is expected to increase for at least the next decade, and it is forecast to exceed 5.3 million in 2020.

There are currently over two million people in the labour force. This number is expected to grow by 2.2% per annum till 2015, and it will keep growing beyond this, but at a slower rate (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs 2007).

Due to the pressures of outsourcing work to low cost economies, it is expected that there will be a reduction in employment opportunities for those workers with poor levels of education and training. In addition, the increased use of new technologies will also reduce the number of unskilled jobs.

2.2 Relevant immigration patterns and volumes

The biggest contributor to Ireland's population growth is net immigration. The CSO states that in the 12 months to April 2006 there were almost 70,000 immigrants. This rate of inward migration is more than twice the EU and United States averages (National Competitiveness Council 2006). Nearly half of the immigrants were nationals of the 10 new Accession countries to the EU—the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. One of the challenges facing Ireland is to make sure these skilled immigrants are integrated into the workforce and particularly into occupations commensurate with their skill level.

2.3 Employment rates and patterns

The figures from the CSO show the employment rate in Ireland rose from 56.1% in 1997 to 68.1% in 2006. The employment rate for women increased by over 14 percentage points over that period, while the rate for men rose by around 10 percentage points. The unemployment rate in Ireland increased from a low point of 3.6% in 2001 to 4.3% in 2006. Ireland had the third lowest unemployment rate in the EU 27 in 2006 at just over half of the EU 27 average of 7.9%. The long-term unemployment rate in Ireland was 1.4% in 2005, which was lower than the EU 27 average of 4%. The employment rate of people aged 55–64—51.7%—was higher than the EU 27 average of 42.3% in 2005. However only 37.4% of women in Ireland in this age group were in employment compared to 65.7% of men.

Productivity in Ireland, measured as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per person employed, was the second highest in the EU 27 in 2005. Across most sectors, Ireland is above the EU average for the share of employment of those with higher education qualifications. However in agriculture, construction, retail and transport sectors, our share with lower-secondary or less education is significantly above the European average.

Much of our job growth over the last decade has been at the high end of the skills continuum, with growth in high-skilled employment and a decline in low-skilled employment. This pattern is set to continue, according to employment forecasts to 2020 (EGFSN 2007).

2.4 Growth industries and industries in decline

The manufacturing sector has declined in employment terms relative to the service sector, though it is still important to the Irish economy. The strong performing areas include: telecommunications, transport, wholesale and retail trade, and financial services. All are forecast to grow into the future.

Employment in agriculture is predicted to show the greatest fall in employment up to 2020. In terms of job growth, forecasts seem to suggest that the strongest employment sectors in Ireland will be those with professional, high-skilled jobs and that jobs losses are likely to be in low-skilled work associated with specific sectors (EGFSN 2007).

2.5 Lifelong learning statistics

By examining the data available from the Central Statistics Office' publication, *Module on Lifelong Learning* (CSO 2004) it is possible to sketch out the reality of adult participation in formal and informal education. Those with the highest level of educational attainment are more likely to have participated in adult learning, and as a result to have gained further increases in their educational levels. That means that the pattern of participation in lifelong learning in Ireland is causing increased educational inequality.

Another related factor is that workers in lower-level occupations, usually as a result of their educational attainment, have lower rates of participation in lifelong learning than workers in higher-level employment. This is particularly the case in certain sectors of employment. These include agriculture, forestry and fishing, production industries, wholesale and retail and hotels and catering.

2.6 Population literacy statistics

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (Morgan et al 1997), conducted in 1995, provided Ireland with its first, and to date only, profile of the literacy skills of adults aged 16–64. The survey found that about 25% of the population, or at least 500,000 adults, scored at the lowest level (level 1). That meant they performed, at best, tasks that required the reader to locate a simple piece of information in a text, with no distracting information, when the structure of the text assisted the task. A further 30% of the population was at level 2. Ireland thus had a total of 55% of those aged between 16 and 64 scoring at below the minimum desirable threshold for a Western industrialised nation, as defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 1997). Early school leavers, older adults and the unemployed were identified as being most at risk of literacy difficulties, with participation in adult education and training being least likely for those with the lowest level of literacy. One reason why many older Irish people have not participated in second-level

education is because it was fee-paying until 1967 (DETE, 1997). The survey showed that over one sixth of those in employment also scored at the lowest level of literacy.

Like the United Kingdom and the US, Ireland produces 'polarised, high skills labour forces' (Green 2006 p315; EGFSN 2007). This is evident through the results for Ireland from the International Adult Literacy Survey and statistics from the Central Statistics Office. The OECD went on to highlight the strong association between literacy levels and economic productivity (OECD 2000). A more recent study shows a significant correlation between the proactive investment in education in any period and a country's subsequent economic growth and labour productivity. The study is based on the adult literacy skill levels in 14 countries of those who entered the labour force between 1965 and 1995. It found that a rise of 1% in literacy scores (relative to the international average), is connected with a 2.5% rise in productivity and a 1.5% hike in GDP per head (Coulombe et al 2004).

2.7 Drivers for workforce literacy

There is considerable evidence from surveys and the CSO findings that attention needs to be focused on upskilling the adult population with the lowest levels of skills.

There is a rise in the importance of generic skills required across all sectors in the twenty-first century. People, including those with low skills, will be expected to:

- work more autonomously, as well as part of teams
- adapt to change
- be more self managing
- solve complex problems
- think more creatively.

Generic skills are understood to include basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and using technology, as well as people-related skills like interpersonal skills and communication and thinking skills.

Labour productivity will be the main determinant of Irish economic growth in the future and education and training will be central in increasing productivity. In order to compete in the global economy, a flexible, well-educated workforce is a prerequisite, especially for a small, open economy like Ireland.

By focusing on adult literacy and its potential importance to the economy, the OECD managed to give more attention and status to a marginalised subject in just a few years than decades of national and local-level educational equality campaigning in Ireland. This led to an Irish example of what has been described as the new global policymaking processes in education, in which the importance of adult literacy levels are linked to the demands of the global economy rather than the needs of disadvantaged communities and individuals. (Rizvi & Lingard 2000, p419)

3. Overview of key policies related to workplace literacy

3.1 White Paper on Adult Education

The first-ever White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, was launched during the summer of 2000. However, despite the presence of the Minister of State with responsibility for Adult Education, the occasion was marked by a lack of attendance by any senior civil servants from the Department of Education and Science or any other government department. The significance of this was not fully understood for several years, with the realisation that many of the fundamental proposals in the Paper relating to structural change were not being pursued (AONTAS 2006). As a result, there is an overall lack of coordination along the lines feared in the *Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning* (Taskforce on Lifelong Learning 2002). Coordination was cited as essential in achieving the National Skills Strategy (EGFSN 2007).

Learning for Life declares that the State accepts lifelong learning as the governing principle of educational policy to make sure that all learners can achieve their education and training goals within an overarching, coordinated framework. The Paper provides six priority areas as the basis for adult education in society as follows:

- consciousness raising
- citizenship
- cohesion
- competitiveness
- cultural development
- community building.

It then sets out the three core principles needed to underpin adult education:

1. A systematic approach highlighting the need for a holistic approach to the design of education and training policies including the interfaces between education and training providers;
2. Equality of access, participation and outcome for participants in adult education with targeted investment towards those most at risk as a priority;
3. Inter-culturalism, recognising that policy and practice need to serve a diverse population.

The proposals in the White Paper are framed from the perspective of the adult learner in the context of four key learning sites;

- the school
- the community
- the workplace
- higher education.

As the top priority, the increased investment in adult literacy is framed within 'a comprehensive framework for second-chance education for those with less than upper secondary education' (DES 2000 p15).

The White Paper contains the first-ever National Adult Literacy Programme, which sets out to provide increased learning opportunities for the estimated 500,000 adults with literacy difficulties. This is to be achieved through:

- implementing a quality framework to raise standards in the service
- developing new outreach and recruitment strategies, especially for men¹
- ensuring customised provision for the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups
- exploring the potential of Information Communication Technology and broadcasting
- expanding the provision of workplace literacy
- increasing collaboration with the public library service and other relevant organisations.

3.2 The Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning

The White Paper regards the workplace as a learning organisation and sets out a number of proposals aimed at enhancing workplace learning generally, as well enhancing participation of employees with the lowest skills in particular. In order to progress this area, the Paper points to the work of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning whose report was published two years later.

The Taskforce on Lifelong Learning was set up by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in collaboration with the Department of Education and Science. Its purpose was to build a strategic framework for lifelong learning by mapping existing provision, identifying any gaps and suggesting solutions to fill those gaps. In the final report, this objective was deemed too ambitious to achieve through such a reductionist methodology outlined above. The Taskforce therefore only concentrated on adult learners in the formal and non-formal sectors.

Similar to the White Paper, the *Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning* (2002) adopted a broad approach to lifelong learning which enables 'individual development, active citizenship, social inclusion and the economic well being of society as a whole' (p6). It goes on to identify a number of factors that are required in order to realise this approach, most crucially:

- a significant systemic shift within the education, training and certification systems and in the enterprise sector, along with attitudinal change on the part of individuals and society in general
- a long-term commitment on the part of government and citizens, and additional investment which, if not forthcoming may well have a negative impact on Ireland's long term economic and social well being.

The Taskforce put forward a framework for progress containing the following elements:

- developing and implementing the National Framework of Qualifications
- ensuring basic skills for all
- providing comprehensive and coherent guidance and information
- addressing delivery, access and funding issues
- better learning opportunities in the workplace for workers.

¹ There are fewer men participating in adult and community education programmes.

More specifically it makes a number of recommendations in relation to basic skills and workplace learning involving:

- building on the progress started under the White Paper on Adult Education;
- additional support for workplace literacy initiatives;
- greater levels of job analysis by employers;
- the development of a cross-occupational and cross-sectoral foundation qualification in workplace skills encompassing:
 - information and communication
 - technology
 - social skills
 - workplace and personal safety
 - literacy
 - numeracy
 - communications and business literacy;
- setting up new networks by Skillnets aimed at addressing workplace literacy
- literacy-proofing all workplace education and training initiatives to ensure inclusion of those with low levels of literacy².

The main recommendations which were adopted and implemented from this report related to the National Framework of Qualifications and the development of workplace learning, especially in the expansion of Skillnets and including literacy and numeracy, discussed later in this chapter. There were also incremental funding increases to the Adult Education Guidance Initiative which provides guidance to existing adult learners involved in programmes run through the Vocational Education Committees. No specific workplace basic-skills qualification has been developed, nor is there any literacy-proofing tool for workplace learning which ensures the inclusion of those with low literacy levels.

3.3 Report of the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs

In mid 2005, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) was requested by the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment 'to identify the skills required for Ireland to become a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy by 2020' (EGFSN 2007 p5). The group carried out a programme of research which was published as the basis for the development of a National Skills Strategy. At the launch of the report, the Minister announced the report would in fact be the National Skills Strategy as opposed to just the research base for its development.

Tomorrow's Skills—Towards a National Skills Strategy (2007) starts with a position that human capital development has played a very significant role in Ireland's increased productivity and successful economic and social development, and therefore, in order to continue this association, there is a need for enhanced funding of the education and training infrastructure.

The report contains a detailed description of the changing skills needs of Ireland as a result of the continued growth in the services sector, and the relative decline in 'traditional'

² A literacy-proofing tool is being devised by NALA to help education and training providers make sure their programmes can accommodate people with literacy and numeracy development needs. It is drawn from NALA's work on the integration of literacy and numeracy in education and training and is discussed later under the heading 'WBE the whole organisation approach'.

employment sectors of agriculture and manufacturing. The greatest increases in employment are predicted to be in the 'professional', 'associate professional' and 'personal and service' groupings. These occupations, along with all others, are described as becoming more 'knowledge-intensive' and requiring higher levels of skills and qualifications.

The Expert Group presents a portfolio of generic skills which it believes essential for all workers and this includes literacy, numeracy and IT literacy as well as communication, interpersonal and learning-to-learn skills. It states in the report that it is a 'widely shared assumption' (2007 p48) that the knowledge economy will continue to need low-skilled workers, but mainly those who can demonstrate they possess the generic skills referred to above.

One of the key issues addressed in *Tomorrow's Skills* relates to the debate around investing in education and training in the workforce and in particular the targeting of that investment. First, there is statement based on research that 'participation in education has an unambiguously positive impact on earnings' (2007 p51). However, when you look at the evidence provided to support this claim it all relates to years spent in schooling and participation in higher education. The investment in education and training by individuals and employers is situated within the frame of Human Capital Theory which applies a cost-benefit analysis to the investment. No evidence or argument is put forward to convince adults with low educational attainment that it is worth their while returning to learning. However it is made clear that there is evidence and argument to support the benefits to the state if they do so.

Second, is the case for state intervention in education and training. This is only dealt with from an economic point of view—that of market failure in education. The premise is that individuals and, in the first instance, their parents, will invest in education as the returns from it are positive. However this is based on a set of assumptions that does not apply to all people all of the time. Some people may find it difficult to access the finance to invest, and a delay negates against the returns on the investment. As the report puts it, 'human capital is not particularly suited to deferred consumption' (EGFSN 2007 p54). Nor is there the option of getting a loan on the basis of being able to repay as a result of your increased earning potential as this is not broadly recognised as suitable collateral.

Furthermore it is accepted by the authors of the report that people with low educational attainment are less likely to invest in education because of lack of finance and appropriate role models who are usually associated with wealthier and better-educated cohorts. Once again, there is no research evidence cited for this section of the report. However it is understood by me that this is drawn from the theory of educational markets and the work of Martin West (2000) on state intervention in English education in the nineteenth century. It is from here that the case is made for state investment in education for specific groups of individuals, most notably the low-skilled, as otherwise they are unlikely to make the investment themselves. This will benefit them and the wider society in which they live. In fact the report goes even further, concluding that the state is justified in this investment, as the returns to society 'significantly exceed the private gain to the individual' (EGFSN 2007 p54).

The level of state resources in education and training is next to be scrutinised. Using the OECD's *Education at a Glance* (2006) figures from 2003, it is shown that Ireland spent 4.5% of GDP on educational institutions. That is less than the OECD average of 5.4%. In 2004, Ireland was 21st out of 27 OECD countries in terms of the percentage of the labour force with a lower secondary qualification attainment. The vast majority of expenditure on education and

training in work comes from employers, and around 80% is spent on general education and training. As a result of this, Ireland's participation rate in continuing learning is relatively poor at 14%, especially in comparison with the UK at 34.5% and the EU 25 at 16.5%, all based on non-formal education and training of those aged 25–64 in 2002.

In light of this, the EGFSN suggests that a no policy change will lead to 'surpluses at lower educational levels, with a large number of low-skilled individuals, unemployed or inactive' as well as shortages of people with third level or above standards of education and training. Their alternative vision is to set about ensuring that all workers should have a qualification, with the vast majority with qualifications at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level 4 or above.

A distinctive feature of the EGFSN is that the main recommendations in their report are costed. In broad terms they suggest their proposals to upskill the workforce at all levels will be €457m annually for a 13-year period. From this the low skilled or those with less than upper secondary qualifications 'should be assisted to achieve such an award ... without incurring tuition costs and with a level of subsistence ... provided by the State (EGFNS 2007 p93)'. The targets are to upskill 70,000 people from NFQ levels 1 and 2 to level 3, and 260,000 up to levels 4 and 5, at a cost of €153 million per annum. These figures have been approximated from OECD statistics contained in *Education at a Glance* (2006) based on average expenditure per student at various levels of education. They should be regarded as the basic cost of provision and do not include income support, extra salary compensation or subsidies to employers (EGFSN 2007 p99).

According to the report, 11% of the 2005 labour force aged 25–64 had a primary-level education or less, and 17% had a lower secondary-level education or less according. In total it is estimated that 37% of the labour force has not completed upper-secondary education. These figures show that the number of people holding lower-secondary qualifications or less has fallen by about 5% in five years. However, these figures are described by the report as 'worrying', with a direct relationship to Ireland's poor performance in the International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD 1997). This survey, as noted above, showed that over half of Ireland's adult population had literacy levels below those required for industrialised countries.

Finally, in looking at the education and training trends of the labour force forward to 2020, the EGFSN has estimated there will be no major shift in the education distribution of the working-age population, as most of the current workforce will still be there in 13 years time. As a result, it is imperative for the future of the Irish economy that all those in the labour force improve their educational attainment levels.

3.4 The National Development Plan

Transforming Ireland—A Better Quality of Life for All: National Development Plan (NDP) 2007–2013 is the largest and most ambitious investment programme ever proposed for Ireland. The NDP, published in 2007, builds on, and consolidates, the achievements of the previous National Development Plan 2000–2006, and provides:

- €54.6 billion for investment in economic infrastructure
- €49.6 billion for social inclusion measures (children, people with disabilities, etc.)
- €33.6 billion for social infrastructure (housing, health, justice, etc.)
- €25.8 billion for human capital (schools, training, higher education, etc.)
- €20 billion for enterprise, science and innovation.

The NDP outlines a series of challenges facing Ireland over the next seven years, one of which is to create and sustain high-value employment opportunities. One of the ways of meeting this challenge is to make sure there is adequate investment in human capital. Of the €184 billion required to achieve this plan, around one seventh of the total investment in the plan is set for this area. The human capital chapter of the NDP makes a clear commitment to the area of lifelong learning, highlighting the need to introduce formalised approaches with priority interventions for low-skilled workers in order to facilitate people to continually acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies required to meet the demands of the global economy. Just over €7.7 billion will be spent on Training and Skills Development over the seven years.

Like *Towards a National Skills Strategy*, the NDP acknowledges the dominant role of the private sector in funding training for those in employment, but it also identifies the need for the state to provide increased resources to support the training of low and unskilled workers where there is clear evidence of market failure. The plan also covers Lifelong Learning under the heading of Social Inclusion, outlining an investment of over €4 billion in Working Age Education Support programmes over the seven years. These programmes will be targeted at those people of working age who are not classified as in the labour force.

The *Ex-Ante Evaluation of the NDP* (Morgenroth & Fitzgerald, 2006), commissioned by the Department of Finance, provides independent 'advice on the priorities for public investment' in the next National Development Plan (NDP) for the period 2007-2013 (p3). It recommends an increase in public spending on education of almost €200m per annum, as well as the need for greater efficiency in the use of resources through increased planning, evaluation and project management. Of its eight key priorities, human resources, and research and development come in at number five and are referred to as a continuing top priority. Among the areas mentioned specifically under this priority is increased expenditure in training and lifelong learning.

The evaluation presents the educational attainment statistics for Ireland and concludes that while the figures are generally comparable to the OECD average, the picture for the adult population is less favourable. In particular, the incidence of those with low-level qualifications in the 25–64 year age group is above the EU average—40% of those in Ireland have second level or less compared to an EU average of 38%. The rates in Germany and Sweden are 17% and 19% respectively.

Furthermore, the level of state investment in education and training is described in the Ex Ante as being significantly below international comparisons. The result is that the participation rate in learning outside of the mainstream education system is low. For example, 17% of the employed in Ireland participated in non-formal learning in 2003 compared with an EU average of 21%, and over 50% in Denmark, Sweden and Finland. The authors also point to prospective decline in new entrants to the labour force, putting greater emphasis on those working now and into the future (Morgenroth & Fitzgerald 2006).

The expansion of the second-level (12–18 years of age) and third-level (university) education sectors, and the resulting increased participation, is credited as being one of key contributors to the success of the Irish economy during the 1990s. In light of this the authors recommend increased public investment in continuing education and training for the lower skilled, as they are less likely to be involved in education and training or to be supported in it by their

employers in comparison to their more qualified colleagues. Similar to other reports examined in this paper, this strategy is put forward in light of the market failure concept, and is seen as a means of building the future skills-needs of the Irish economy. More specifically, it is suggested that the proposed investment would improve the level of GNP by between 2–3% and that the ‘rate of return to the state of such an investment would be quite high, fully justifying the very substantial commitment of resources’ (Morgenroth & FitzGerald 2006 p3).

3.5 National Social Partnership agreements

In 1987, the government initiated a partnership process to stimulate the nation into collective action to address an economic downturn. In the National Social Partnership (NSP) agreements, the Irish government brought together four groups—employers, trade unions, community and voluntary representative bodies and farmers—and got them to agree to a common agenda for employment conditions. These included wage increases and a social inclusion agenda. This partnership approach, and the respective 3-year agreements, are often cited as one of the success factors in taking Ireland out of recession and into an economic boom from the mid 1990s.

The current social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016* (Department of the Taoiseach 2006), is concerned with improving Ireland’s competitiveness in the globalised economy, and sets out a vision by which this will be achieved. It involves ensuring the full participation of all people of working age in economic, civic and social life. This will be facilitated through greater access to lifelong learning and ‘the need to examine in particular the availability of workplace learning (including in relation to basic skills) and upskilling to lower skilled and vulnerable workers, including in manufacturing, as well as to workers from overseas’ (p81). In order to achieve this it recommends that the ‘allocation for the Workplace Basic Education Fund, aimed at increasing numeracy and literacy skills in the workplace, be increased’ (p82).

3.6 A strategy for workplace basic education

In 2001, NALA established a Workplace Literacy Strategy Group³ which agreed on a strategy document which detailed approaches and an implementation plan for developing workplace basic education (WBE) in Ireland. This draws on the learning from a number of pilot projects and a brief overview of international best practice in the area. The benefits to employees and employers were outlined as were the issues to employers embracing WBE, including funding, release of employees and lack of a culture of workplace learning. It was submitted to relevant Government Departments and the Task Force on Lifelong Learning.

The *Report of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning* (2002) recommended ‘additional support should be provided for workplace literacy initiatives, building on the Report from the Workplace Literacy Strategy Group established by NALA’. In 2005 the report of the Forum on the Workplace of the Future, *Working to our Advantage* (A National Workplace Strategy) stated that the key recommendations from the Task Force should be implemented, ‘in particular the recommendation on basic literacy, numeracy and IT must be implemented with renewed urgency by the relevant agencies’.

³ Consisting of representatives from Government Departments (DES, DETE), FÁS, employers (CIF, IBEC, ISME, SFA), trade unions (ITUT, SIPTU, UNISON), literacy practitioners and learners.

3.7 Monitoring and statistics of workforce literacy provision

As WBE in Ireland is still at a relatively early stage of development, there is no data to date to draw upon relating to monitoring and outcomes of activity.

4. Current workplace literacy provision

Two aspects of the adult literacy services that are unique to Ireland are the philosophy underpinning adult literacy and the existence of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). NALA is a non-profit membership organisation concerned with national coordination, policy, and training in the adult literacy sector. The structure of the current system will also be detailed in this section.

4.1 Profile and roles of main stakeholders in workforce literacy

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment works for the government and the people to grow quality employment and national competitiveness. It aims to achieve this by means of action under four pillars. These are:

- Pillar One: Enterprise, innovation, growth
- Pillar Two: Quality work and learning
- Pillar Three: Making markets and regulation work better
- Pillar Four: Business delivery, modernisation and customer focus.

Under Pillar Two, the key purpose of the Employment and Training Strategy Unit's work is to develop, review and oversee the implementation of appropriate policies to upgrade the skills and competencies of the adult population within a framework of lifelong learning, thus contributing to enhanced employment prospects for individuals and improved competitiveness in enterprises. The Unit's activities entail involvement with core issues such as Lifelong Learning, skills demand and supply, vocational and enterprise training, and employment and training for people with disabilities.

FÁS

FÁS is Ireland's national training and employment authority. It works in four areas:

- community services
- employment services
- training
- services to business.

The last area is responsible for training in the workplace and is dominated by apprenticeship training. This division provides training and support to all sectors of industry under the brand *One Step Up. It*. It has several programmes:

- a competency development programme
- a small firms cluster programme
- Excellence Through People
- a disability awareness training programme.

The Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre

The Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre is an affiliate of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and was set up in 1984. Its aims are to work with the unemployed, including providing education and training. It is a recognised training provider within the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, and is a registered United Kingdom Government New Deal training organisation.

The Department of Education and Science

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

Vocational Education Committees

The DES funds the bulk of the further education sector through Vocational Education Committees (VECs), of which there are 33 throughout Ireland. VECs are made up of locally elected councillors, as well as parents and representatives of students and staff. Each VEC is an autonomous and independent body, so there are differences in how each provides service. Further education provision within the VECs includes programmes targeted at early school leavers (those receiving welfare benefits and those not) and people wishing to improve their adult literacy or get a post Leaving Certificate qualification. All VECs, as well as their individual literacy services, are members of NALA.

The Irish Vocational Education Association

The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA), a national representative employer body, formulates policy and advances the cause of the VECs by advocating with the DES. In 2002, the IVEA established a National Literacy Forum, which is comprised of representatives from various groups, within the VEC sector, concerned with provision of education services. This is the first time the core provider body of the VEC adult literacy service in Ireland has come together to address adult literacy issues.

Adult Literacy Organiser

An Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) manages the adult literacy service within the VEC.

National Adult Literacy Agency

NALA, the umbrella organisation concerned with adult literacy, includes individual learners, tutors, and those involved in adult literacy who work outside the VEC sector. From its membership, individuals are elected to the NALA Executive Committee to guide the policy direction of the agency and monitor the work as outlined in the organisation's strategic plan.

NALA applies annually to the DES for core funding to carry out work, identified through consultation with members, and research into best practices in adult literacy internationally. One of its guiding principles is to ensure the involvement of adult learners in all aspects of planning, organisation, and research in all adult literacy work environments, including NALA. This 'appears to be a distinguishing feature of adult literacy work in Ireland where a student-centred model is promoted which emphasises individual student input and negotiation' (Hamilton et al 2001 p33).

4.2 The philosophy of adult literacy in Ireland

The basic philosophy of adult literacy work in Ireland is drawn from a number of sources and is primarily concerned with being learner centred and the belief that effective adult learning builds on the wealth of their life experiences. The work of Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and Jack Mezirow are among the most influential in the development of adult literacy work in Ireland. The philosophy was developed in conjunction with learners and practitioners. It was first presented in published form in 1985, in *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*. This publication has been updated and revised twice since then, in 1991 and 2005. It is recognised as the core manual for adult literacy work in Ireland and mirrors the wider philosophy of adult education in *Learning for Life* outlined above.

Central to the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* (NALA 2005) is the NALA definition of adult literacy which states:

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change (NALA 2005, p12).

In exploring this definition further the link between literacy and self-esteem is clearly made in the opening line. This is followed by the point that literacy is a social practice and so cannot be understood or addressed as a set of technical skills but must be seen within the social context of individuals. Finally the definition presents the view that good adult literacy practice can lead to social change as well as personal development.

The *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* sets out the principles for good adult literacy work. These are as follows:

- 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. Learners have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how 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.
- Learners' knowledge and skills are vital for the effective organisation of adult literacy work. Learners 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 (NALA 2005, p16-17).

In maintaining the philosophy of adult literacy work in Ireland, NALA has attempted to ensure that it is enshrined in and actively informs all new developments, including those since the publication of the IALS and the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*.

4.3 Adult literacy services in Ireland

The core adult literacy service is provided by the VEC in 135 locations. Although each VEC is unique in its approach to the provision of adult literacy, especially in structural matters, in most cases service is available during the day and in the evening, Monday to Friday. Adult

Literacy Organisers (ALOs) manage the service, working alongside paid group tutors and volunteer one-on-one tutors. Most adult learners are now in tuition groups of around seven people, although some are given the option of starting with a tutor on a one-on-one basis. The timing of tuition is usually customised to the needs of the individual within the resources of the service. Most services offer classes on a two-hour-a-week basis; though some services are able to offer more where requested. However, in a small number of locations, only one-hour sessions can be offered, due to a shortage of facilities.

Some programmes have private rooms for one-to-one tuition. Other programmes, usually in urban areas, offer one-to-one tuition workshops, where several one-to-one pairs work in the same room. This can be a more sociable and less isolating way of offering one-to-one tuition, for both the learner and the tutor. In many cases, a support tutor—an experienced group tutor who provides back-up support to the tutor as required—is also available in the room.

In 2006 there were approximately 35,000 learners participating in the VEC adult literacy service with approximately a third of these pursuing accredited learning programmes leading to a level 3 Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) award in Communications. This is the standard Irish qualification pursued at level 3 by adult literacy learners in the adult literacy service and in the WBE programmes. There is also a qualification in mathematics and new qualifications in literacy and numeracy have also been developed at two new lower levels, 1 and 2. This should greatly increase the number of literacy and numeracy learners pursuing and gaining qualifications. (see www.fetac.ie.) Adult literacy services also have a resource room, of varying quality, which can be used by learners and tutors.

The VEC adult literacy service is the main provider of workplace basic education programmes in Ireland, mainly through the development of pilot projects initiated through NALA, with funding sourced from the state sector primarily through the Department of Education and Science and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. All of these initiatives have been devised using adult literacy practice as detailed above as their basis. The specifics of these workplace basic education projects are detailed next in this paper.

4.4 NALA definition of workplace basic education

Workplace basic education (WBE) is an innovative measure to improve people's literacy skills in their working environment. The course includes literacy and numeracy and can incorporate a variety of subjects including:

- communication skills
- computer skills
- interpersonal skills
- problem solving
- report writing
- workplace themes such as health and safety and customer care.

The programme is offered on company premises where possible, otherwise in a mutually convenient location. The programme length will vary depending on the programme. Taster programmes can start from about 24–30 hours over 10 weeks and be followed on by programmes of between 50, 90 and 120 hours. Ideally employees should attend the course

on paid work time. However the issue of release will depend on each company's situation and may consist of a blend of employer and employee time.

A WBE is designed and delivered in a flexible and adaptable way to meet the needs of the participants and employers. Employees participate on a voluntary basis and total confidentiality applies to all. A high level of cooperation and liaison between the company and the literacy provider is required in the development stages.

The key principles underpinning workplace basic education are as follows:

- a partnership approach involving all stakeholders at all stages
- flexibility and adaptability in terms of design and delivery, taking into account the diversity of needs of the target group and sector involved and in collaboration with a professional service
- addressing identified basic educational need by using appropriate assessment
- voluntary participation in a safe environment, in light of the stigma often associated with low literacy and sensitivity of raising this issue in the workplace
- timed to optimise success, as considerable time is required to go through the stages of development of WBE programmes (Workplace Literacy Strategy Group 2002)

4.5 Models of delivery

In December 2004 the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Michael Martin announced the setting up of a Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF) with a budget of €2m for 2005. The aim of the fund is to develop initiatives to provide opportunities for employees to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, on a grant-aided basis to their employers. A further €2 million was secured for 2006 and €3.048 was announced in the estimates for 2007. The fund is targeted at private sector companies and in particular, small and medium enterprises. This is the first and currently only dedicated fund available to address workplace basic education and came about after lobbying by NALA using the recommendations from the Workplace Literacy Strategy Group.

The fund is managed by FÁS Services to Business and guided by a National Steering Group consisting of representatives from relevant stakeholders including:

- FÁS
- Department of Education and Science/IVEA ⁴
- National Adult Literacy Agency
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Small Firms Association
- Irish Small and Medium Enterprises
- Construction Industry Federation

FÁS gave the title *Skills for Work* to all initiatives generated under the WBEF which may include:

- development and piloting of nationally applicable models and strategies to deliver and integrate workplace basic education programmes

⁴ The Department of Education and Science sat on the Steering Group initially and then gave their seat to an IVEA representative.

- identification of workplace basic education need within a workplace sector
- development of a workplace basic education plan for a particular workplace sector
- training for trainers and other staff in assessing needs, delivering tuition and integrating literacy/numeracy development into other work based training.

FÁS, in rolling out the WBEF, called on the representative bodies outlined above to put forward proposals under the fund. This work has been principally taken forward by NALA and the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre (BURC). They are acting as two coordinating entities each currently employing five Skills for Work Co-ordinators who act as brokers at regional level, encouraging employers and employees to take up free WBE programmes on offer. The coordinator organises all aspects of the programme including locally based and suitably qualified tutors sourced from the VEC adult literacy service.

An independent evaluator, WRC Social and Economic consultants, was awarded the tender to evaluate the initiatives funded through the WBEF in 2005 and 2006. This report is due for publication in 2007 and will be used as a key resource to informing the future development of WBE in Ireland. In lieu of this report being available in a published format I will outline in the next section the NALA model of WBE which was originally designed by NALA with a view to FÁS taking it forward as an integrated part of its work, as FÁS had previously not being involved in the area of WBE.

4.6 A literacy support model for FÁS

NALA is working with the Services to Business section of FÁS to develop and pilot a literacy support model to address basic education needs in the workplace. The aim of the project is to develop a model to identify needs and deliver training to employees with literacy and numeracy difficulties, within the framework of the FÁS Competency Development Programme (CDP) (see www.fas.ie) This pilot project, also called *Skills for Work*, is funded under the WBEF, however it was initiated by FÁS and NALA in advance of this fund being established.

The objectives of the project are to:

- raise awareness of the literacy/numeracy issue
- consult with local relevant organisations (employers organisations, trade unions etc) to develop effective awareness and action strategies
- identify individual literacy/numeracy needs and level of support necessary;
- respond to individual needs where requested and appropriate, through the provision of information, advice and organisation of training intervention
- facilitate, design and organise the training intervention, in line with FÁS training specs
- facilitate access to external literacy/numeracy support services (such as local VEC Adult Literacy Services) as required
- provide information to FÁS Services to Business staff
- develop an effective support model to deal with literacy/numeracy issues in the workplace for FÁS Services to Business Section.

The project involves piloting an awareness, identification and solution (AIS) model, which includes:

- raising awareness of the literacy/numeracy issue with employers, employees and FÁS staff among others

- identifying literacy/numeracy needs in the workplace
- customising/brokering training solutions.

The key element of this strategy is the employment of a workplace literacy coordinator, (the only full time person on the project per region) who works specifically with FÁS Services to Business staff. This NALA model is being piloted in four FÁS regions over a 16-month period. The project is promoting awareness of the service through the following:

- promotional material, such as posters, leaflets etc
- direct mail shot to companies and businesses in the area
- holding briefing sessions with employers, human resource managers, training managers, employer representative bodies and others
- including information about the service in relevant FÁS material, employer organisations material and trade union material
- informing the Steering Group, which is made up of local contacts
- information sessions with relevant FÁS Services to Business staff.

The project is broken down into two key stages carried out by the coordinator:

Stage 1: Identifying literacy and numeracy as an issue

After promoting the service, the workplace literacy coordinator contacts employers directly. If employers are interested the worker meets with them to ascertain the extent of the literacy and numeracy needs in their workplace. The coordinator uses a checklist of indicators (these will be written and adapted throughout the project) to ask employers to consider if their business has literacy/numeracy needs.

Stage 2: Identifying specific literacy and numeracy needs

If the employer believes that his/her employees may have some needs in relation to literacy/numeracy and would like to use training course to address this, the employer agrees that the coordinator meets with employees to assess their level of need. These individual needs are identified through an informal person-centred interview process.

All support interventions are governed by the principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation, equality and empowerment. Some people with literacy/numeracy needs may not be ready or in a position to participate in a workplace training intervention at this time. In this case they are given the option of referral to the local VEC adult literacy service or to contact the workplace literacy coordinator at a later stage.

People who do agree to attend a workplace literacy/numeracy training programme participate in developing an individual learning plan. The coordinator completes this with the person. Based on the identified needs, participants are put into a learning group that best suits their level, needs and interests. The plan is communicated to the tutor of the programme, with the knowledge and agreement of the participant. The plan is reviewed and updated at regular intervals.

The workplace literacy co-coordinator works within the FÁS region to:

- raise awareness and develop understanding of the adult literacy/numeracy issue with both key FÁS personnel (FÁS advisors etc) and employers
- liaise with employers to identify and address the issue

- work with local organisations such as Chambers of Commerce, Local Enterprise Boards etc in the development and roll-out of the project
- identify and analyse literacy/numeracy needs in the workplace
- consider current training offered
- devise appropriate solutions and approaches to address the literacy/numeracy needs identified
- negotiate with employer to establish actions, such as agreeing hours of training course, how many can attend and release for employees
- broker a training agreement between employer, training service provider and FÁS Services to Business
- organise and monitor implementation of agreed actions.

NALA's role in this project is to develop and coordinate this pilot model which includes the employment of a local WBE coordinator in four regions. The other four FÁS regions (Dublin, North-West, North-East and West) have a similar coordinator in place and are now rolling out a similar approach to that designed by NALA. These coordinators are employed through the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre (BURC). So for the purpose of the pilot stage, both NALA and BURC had four coordinators each. However in 2007, due to the workload on these coordinators, a further two coordinators were employed, one each for NALA and BURC.

In 2006, from the Workplace Basic Fund almost 1500 participants had enrolled on *Skills for Work* courses. There were 201 programmes and the cost was just under €2.2 million. Almost 800 employers were contacted by a total of eight coordinators employed during this time, nearly a quarter of whom said they had no interest in operating a programme in their workplace at that time. The majority said they were interested either in the specific intervention, now or into the future, hearing more about it or had another training need. Approximately 12% of employers contacted during 2006 put interventions in train during this period of time.

4.7 Other workplace basic education models

The Return to Learning project

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

The Return to Learning (R2L) project is a partnership initiative between the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) and the Department of Education and Science (DES). It was initially designed and supported by NALA and provided by the VEC adult literacy service. The project aims to give local authority employees an opportunity to attend a workplace basic skills course.

In 2000/01 the project was piloted in five locations, with a budget of €133,000, funded half by LANPAG and half by DES. A total of 120 people participated. The programme consisted of four hours per week over a 20-week period, on work time. NALA designed and VEC adult literacy service delivered the programme to meet the needs of the participants. The option of pursuing a literacy qualification was introduced to participants, namely in communications, but it was not expected that any would be gained during the period of the programme due to the

limited time available. The course cost an estimated €8,900 for each group of seven to eight people. This included 80 hours of promotion/awareness and recruitment by the project coordinator.

Feedback from all stakeholders was very positive and was captured in *The Return to Learning Initiative Evaluation Report and Implementation Guidelines* (Conboy 2002). The evaluation shows that employees benefited from the course in the following ways:

- increased self-confidence, as well as improved communication and interaction with others
- literacy skill development (such as filling out forms, writing letters, and reading the newspaper)
- greater familiarity with computers and some development in computer skills
- a positive influence on their home and family lives
- reawakening of interest in learning.

Following on from the successful pilot, the initiative was phased into the remaining local authority areas. The initiative continues to go from strength the strength with the majority of the 34 local authorities and VECs continuing to work together to deliver these programmes.

The Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) organised an evaluation of the project in mid-2004. The key purpose of this evaluation was to prepare a submission for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in Ireland (CIPD) awards. The Return to Learning programme won the category for lifelong learning. The main points from the report are as follows:

- Although there was higher-than-expected participation in the project, with over 1200 people involved since 2000, this only represented 8% of the outdoor workforce targeted by the initiative and so there are more people to be reached.
- The partnership approach between trade unions and management at national and local level greatly enhanced this initiative and resulted in an increase of goodwill between all parties.
- The embedding of this initiative within existing local authority structures is required to ensure the longer term development of employees.

Skills Management and Relevant Training (SMART) project

In 2003, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment funded the NALA Skills, Management and Relevant Training (SMART) project, under the In-Company Training measure through the European Social Fund (ESF). The aim of the project was to devise a WBE model for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Previous WBE initiatives in Ireland at the time related almost exclusively to the public sector and this was an opportunity to document a successful model for the private sector.

The project offered companies 100%-funded basic-skills courses for their employees. The courses consisted of communications, numeracy, basic computing and office communications. Companies contacted had a proven track record of providing training for employees and some had received a FÁS Excellence through People award. It was felt that such companies had already demonstrated a commitment to employees' training and development and might, therefore, be more receptive to the idea of WBE.

By the end of the project in December 2005, 21 groups of employees had taken part in training. This represented 159 employees from 18 companies, mainly in the retail, manufacturing and services industries. Group size ranged from two to eight people; however the two tutors involved in the initiative felt that eight provided the better dynamic for the learning group (Hegarty 2006). The course lengths ranged from 20 hours over 10 weeks to 108 hours over 32 weeks. In this latter course accreditation of learning was offered and all group members achieved a qualification. In total 30 FETAC awards were presented. More than half the courses were English for Speakers of Other Languages.

The success of this project lay in its local coordinator whose business and adult education background made it easier to recruit companies, and in the flexibility of the project to adapt to employers needs. These needs included the curriculum offered, as well as the duration or scheduling of courses. However it is clear from the evaluation report that a lot of work went into involving employers, many of whom did not entertain the offer of free training organised according to their specific needs and with the incentive of wage subsidies. It appeared that the companies prepared to participate in a WBE initiative did so only when they understood the benefit of the intervention to their business and their employees.

The *Employers' Guide to Basic Skills at Work* (2006) was developed as part of the project and provides an implementation model for WBE in small and medium enterprises. The project was also evaluated and made a series of recommendations. In terms of the findings, the evaluation stated that all those involved in the project found it a positive experience. Relationships were developed between the local VEC provider and employers and despite the time limit on the project it was felt that a WBE culture was beginning to take hold. The original target audience was workers wanting to improve their basic education, but demand from employers was highest for ESOL classes.

The evaluation highlighted that, despite a varied and extensive awareness-raising phase, companies were only won over after direct contact was made with them by the local coordinator. The coordinator skillfully sold the programme to employers who had demonstrated an interest in investing in WBE for productivity and well being of employees. Employers, like their employees with literacy difficulties, were keenly aware of the sensitivity of the issue being addressed in the workplace, and the stigma that still exists in society regarding low literacy.

Overall the evaluation concluded that the benefits outweighed the challenges faced by this pilot project. 'Students immediate learning needs were met and this produced efficiency benefits for companies and improved confidence and skills for students' (Hegarty, 2006 p10). It was noted that significant numbers of men were reached through this initiative who are often considered a hard to reach group in terms of adult education.

4.8 WBE: The whole organisation approach

NALA is proposing to further develop WBE in Ireland through the whole-organisation approach, which consists of embedding both the process of project development and the models developed into the organisation. An organisation must embrace a combination of strands to support the development of workplace basic education. These include:

1. direct provision of basic education in the workplace
2. integrating literacy and numeracy into other training programmes
3. literacy awareness training for management and supervisors

4. plain English documentation.

1. Direct provision of basic education in the workplace

WBE programmes focus on boosting literacy and numeracy skills of employees. These programmes can also offer practical skills such as ICT and communications skills. In addition they may also include job orientation and increasing self-esteem and improving self-confidence. WBE programmes present an opportunity to address basic skills needs, in a suitable learning environment in the workplace and at a suitable time for the employer and employee.

2. Integrating literacy and numeracy into specific skills training

Integrating literacy into other training programmes ensures that all workplace education and training takes account of literacy issues in a realistic and effective manner. It involves training the trainers, so that they can build literacy support and development into their programmes. This results in the specific content of training programmes—such as health and safety, or particular work-related skills—becoming more accessible to people with reading and writing difficulties, and indeed to all participants. It also means that these programmes can contribute to raising participants' confidence and skill in literacy.

3. Literacy awareness for management and staff

Literacy awareness is about ensuring that an organisation is aware of the size and range of issues relating to adult literacy. It is about being informed and also being prepared for the challenges which low literacy levels present. In short, it is about equipping management and staff to respond effectively to people who have literacy difficulties. In the course of on-going training employers are discovering that many of their employees have difficulty with basic literacy. Literacy awareness is the first step towards supporting those with literacy difficulties.

4. Plain English documentation

Many adult literacy learners experience difficulties with documentation in the workplace, for example, filling out application forms, reading signs. Plain English is a way of writing and presenting material that makes it attractive to read and easy to understand. Information has never been a more important tool in society, so it is vital that as many people as possible can access and understand it.

Using plain English can achieve this, as it involves:

- considering the needs of your reader;
- writing clearly, concisely and with as little jargon as possible; and
- laying out information clearly to help your reader understand it first time.

4.9 Paid learning leave

A key issue in relation to workplace education and training is paid learning leave for employees. The indirect costs to employers of time off for staff and replacement personnel can often hinder the development of education and training in the workplace. In Ireland paid learning leave is not statutory and therefore at the discretion of employers. In most EU states there is a statutory entitlement for paid education leave⁵, resulting in employees being better able to access training

⁵ Eurydice/CEDEFOP and Directorate General for Education and Culture, European Commission (2001), *National Actions to Implement Lifelong Learning in Europe, Survey 3*, European Commission

and upskill. As adults have continuing demands on their time outside of the workplace, engaging in an education course is often difficult. Paid learning leave would enable employees to attend courses supported by their workplace.

4.10 Skillnets

Skillnets Training Networks Programme, established in 1999 to test the effectiveness of an enterprise-led approach to up-skilling those in employment, is funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Each training network develops and implements training programmes specific to an industry, sector or region. Networks are made up of groups of enterprises that form together to collectively raise the education and training levels within their companies so as to boost their productivity, competitiveness and overall effectiveness. There is strong recognition of the time and human challenges involved in developing education and training in the Small Medium Enterprises and so it maximises involvement through the sharing of knowledge and expertise. Since its establishment it has supported 114 Training Networks involving 6,100 companies and 35,000 employees across 30 industry areas (see www.skillnets.com). Since 2004, Skillnets has allocated dedicated resources to the development of WBE amongst their networks.

NALA worked with Skillnets on their low basic skills initiative. Some of the activities that took place under the initiative included:

- provision of training
- promotion and awareness
- training of trainers (internal and external) and HR staff
- identification and development of case studies in the workplace
- inputting into existing Skillnets (such as surveys and video development).

In particular NALA worked with three Skillnets covering the areas of construction and engineering, to write a handbook for employers, trade unions, employees, and education and training practitioners. The guide was published in September 2005. It was called *Everybody's Business: Literacy, Numeracy and Language in the Workplace* (NALA). It outlines the issues of literacy and numeracy in the workplace and suggests actions.

Under the current social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016* 'the Skillnets programme will be expanded and will provide more flexible means of delivery and will also include pilot initiatives to focus on those with lower skill-sets'. This presents an opportunity for supporting and working in partnership with Skillnets as they develop this further in 2007.

Although the overall programme at national level has not been evaluated, feedback from employers has been positive and hence the programme has been given additional resources to expand. This decision has also taken into account local-level evaluations, as well as research into the return on investment in training in the workplace, but not specifically in the area of basic education. The research documentation relating to this work is available on the Skillnets website referenced above.

4.11 Provider capacity and related issues

Raising capacity is a difficult task facing the adult literacy service. ALOs developed and implemented strategic plans for their programmes that cover (in two phases) the period of funding and targets set out in the National Development Plan 2000–2006. These plans were

incorporated into wider strategic plans for each VEC, which enabled practitioners to ask the burning question in Ireland during this time, 'When is a literacy programme full?' This is one of the implications of an open-access approach designed to cater for low demand from the public. However as demand has increased in the last decade, some services have found it difficult as they did not anticipate increased numbers and the required increased capacity over a 10-year period (participation rates went from 5,000 to over 35,000 in a decade).

In order to attract new learners, practitioners need to provide a wider range of services to adults with literacy difficulties, including more flexible instruction times—not just mid-week during the day and evening. VECs need to provide classes on weekends and during the summer and other holiday periods. (Traditionally, literacy services close completely for three months over the summer.) Different staffing arrangements will be required to facilitate greater access. This will also entail an expansion of family and workplace initiatives, as well as an increased use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and open- and distance-education modes of learning.

Each local VEC needs to develop the local infrastructure. There is a shortage of existing premises for adult learners and the national capital budget made available to the VECs does not cover expenses. VECs are seeking local solutions, with the emphasis on greater utilisation of all local public premises; however, these facilities are often temporary and do not meet ideal standards.

The VEC adult literacy service also needs to review how it provides services. Most VECs provide classes in cities and towns. There has been little exploration of how services could be expanded to provide support to people engaged in self-study, and what would be required to make this happen.

Adult literacy providers have, however, increased their capacity to use ICT. A NALA ICT survey showed that access to ICT equipment has risen by 50% since 2001, and access to the Internet has risen to 80% (NALA 2003). Approximately 51% of tutors integrated ICT into their teaching, primarily by using Microsoft Word and other literacy packages. However, ICT is mainly delivered separately, as an ICT course. Providers will need training, not just in ICT skills, but also in integrating ICT in the learning situation.

4.12 Staffing

Adult Literacy Organisers established their own association, primarily so they could join a trade union to negotiate for better pay and conditions at a time of mass expansion. The Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) represents the ALOs but has recently refused membership to paid, part-time tutors who are in negotiations with another trade union, SIPTU. The TUI negotiates from the position that members with mainstream teaching qualifications are entitled to a permanent job and the appropriate pay scale. However, members who do not hold such qualifications but do have adult education qualifications are not guaranteed permanent jobs because they are not entitled to new jobs if their current jobs cease to exist. In a climate of relatively low unemployment and high inflation, it remains difficult to recruit and retain staff—paid and voluntary—pending the development of attractive career structures and better employment conditions. Joining trade unions has not greatly enhanced the career structure for adult education practitioners.

4.13 ESOL

The number of non-English speaking people coming to live in Ireland has been very small. However, over the last seven years, there has been a significant increase in people whose first language is not English, including refugee and asylum seekers. Asylum seekers do not have the right to work and the state restricts their access to public educational services, except for the VEC adult literacy service, which will provide asylum seekers with 'free access to adult literacy, English language and mother culture supports' (DES 2000 p173). To accomplish this, the VEC adult literacy service has been developing an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision.

Much more research in the area of ESOL is needed, focusing on the effectiveness of provision and ensuring that ESOL tuition is meeting the needs of all potential learners. Anecdotal evidence shows that asylum seekers without the right to work who are taking ESOL classes want more than the two or four hours tuition per week currently offered. There is also an ongoing debate about how best to structure services in this area. It is unclear what the extent of the role, if any, of adult literacy will be in the future, in particular if there is a dedicated ESOL service established. The DES needs to develop an interdepartmental approach to address the needs of asylum seekers, refugees, and non-nationals, as well as develop a national ESOL strategy. A review of ESOL is currently being carried out under the auspices of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the Resettlement and Integration Agency and the Department of Education and Science with a view to informing a national strategy.

4.14 Quality assurance mechanisms

The NALA *Quality Framework* for adult literacy

In the late 1990s, research conducted by Olga McDonagh found that standards of practice were inconsistent across programmes, and that those involved in adult literacy services felt that the development of quality standards would improve their practice (McDonagh 1999). NALA, working with learners, practitioners, senior management, and the DES, subsidised by a European fund, Socrates, developed the *Quality Framework*, a strategy to guide and monitor quality standards in adult literacy.

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

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

The framework provides a way of looking at five main quality areas involved in running a local adult literacy service. The five quality areas are:

- resources
- management
- teaching and learning

- outreach
- promotion and progression.

Within each of these areas are statements of quality. Combined, these 18 statements of quality are the standards a programme should work toward. Each statement describes a key element of a quality adult literacy programme. For example, in relation to the quality statement on assessment, a quality local service will:

- assess the learner's needs and level of literacy during an initial interview and/or in the course of the first few tuition sessions, as appropriate
- ensure that tutors engage in ongoing assessment with learners
- refer learners with specific needs for an appropriate professional assessment.

The NALA *Quality Framework* can be used as a tool for self-evaluation of adult literacy sites, promoting planning and continuous improvement, and improving accountability. Over half of the programmes in Ireland (28 out of 33) are now using the *Quality Framework*, following an initial piloting of this new system. NALA has developed a mainstreaming plan that gives details of the support it provides to adult literacy services wishing to use the *Quality Framework*. These include funding for a team facilitator, an anchorperson to support the process, and the expenses of participating learners and volunteers, as well as advice and guidance.

The main reason given by programmes which do not use the framework for not doing so is the burden of other work commitments. Therefore, the adult literacy service is promoting its use and detailing the benefits reported by VECs who are using the framework. The current national reporting requirements for local literacy services are quantitative biannual reports to the DES, which fails to capture true indicators of quality at the local level that translate to the national level. The DES's endorsement of the process-oriented *Quality Framework* in *Learning for Life*, and the adoption of the *Quality Framework* by programmes highlight this point. The challenge ahead, therefore, is how to develop a link between the *Quality Framework* and the national reporting system in order to strengthen the connection between quality and accountability.

As part of an evaluation of the *Quality Framework* (McSkeane 2005), amendments were made to show how the system worked to meet the quality-assurance requirements recently put in place for all providers by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). FETAC is the national awarding body for further education and training in Ireland and aims to give people the opportunity to gain recognition for learning in education or training centres, in the work place and in the community. Its mission is to make quality-assured awards in accordance with national standards within the national framework. This will help create opportunities for all learners in further education and training to have their achievements recognised and provide access to systematic progression pathways.

FETAC's functions include:

- making and promoting awards
- validating programmes
- monitoring and ensuring the quality of programmes
- determining standards.

FETAC has responsibility to ensure that learners receive quality awards reflecting the functions assigned to it by the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. As part of this overall approach, providers are required to develop and implement quality assurance systems to maintain and improve the quality of their education and training programme(s). Quality assurance in the sector should reflect an ethos of improvement, resulting in improved services for learners at the point of delivery.

5. Outcomes of literacy provision

As WBE has largely operated within an experimental arena, and only a few pilot programmes have been evaluated (all of which have been referred to), little is known about what works. There is no national data on literacy outcomes in WBE or in the wider VEC adult literacy service, apart from participation rates and profiles.

6. Literacy capacity building

6.1 Tutor profile

The NALA survey of adult literacy provision published in 1987 showed that of the 1,255 tutors in the service at the time, the vast majority were volunteers and 82% were female. Today there are just over 4,000 volunteer tutors and 1,500 paid tutors. A recent NALA-commissioned survey undertaken in order to inform a training-needs analysis found that the majority of paid tutors work part-time, averaging between five and ten hours per week (CHL Consulting 2002). Most tutors are women, making up 95% of all paid tutors. Two-fifths of tutors are between the ages of 45 and 60, with another third between 31 and 45 years of age. Almost three-quarters of tutors have been working for fewer than 5 years.

The educational background of tutors is generally of a high standard. Over three-quarters of tutors, paid and voluntary, have a higher education qualification and another 13% have postgraduate certification. In addition to existing qualifications, 31% of tutors are currently studying for some type of additional qualification. As might be expected, this group is made up of a greater number of paid tutors.

Although the adult literacy service has gained funding through VECs, the service has retained volunteer tutors as the only feasible means by which to provide one-to-one tuition. In addition, there is a strong feeling within the NALA membership that volunteer involvement in the adult literacy service adds value, enriches the type of service provided, and maintains its deep roots in civil society. As funding for adult literacy has increased over the last six years, the role of the volunteer tutor has not been eroded, as was feared by some practitioners.

6.2 Adult Literacy Organiser profile

When CHL Consulting conducted the NALA-commissioned training-needs analysis survey, they also surveyed Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs). The role of the ALO has changed as a result of the rapid growth and development of the adult literacy service. Originally, the ALO worked on a part-time basis recruiting and teaching learners, as well as training volunteer tutors to work on a one-to-one basis with learners. Over the years, the role has evolved to include the management of a larger number of paid tutors, as well as volunteers.

This has brought up a range of management issues, including managing staff and reporting to line managers, integrating the adult literacy service into the wider further education service

provided by the VEC, as well as other provisions beyond the VEC. The number of learners entering the service has also increased, requiring ALOs to secure additional facilities and provide more diverse programmes. With heightened public awareness of the adult literacy issue, ALOs are also directly involved in local development groups representing their service. These groups include local area development committees, drugs task forces, as well as education networks.

As a result of these changes, ALOs, through their professional association (the Adult Literacy Organisers Association—ALOA), devised a new role outline, which was presented and accepted by their employer's representative body, the IVEA, and the DES. ALOA's aims are to:

- enhance the status of adult literacy provision within the adult education system
- promote a high quality adult literacy service
- secure recognition of the social, cultural, and economic context of adult literacy (ALOA 2001).

The average number of tutors per ALO is just over 36, with the number of literacy clients per ALO averaging 129. Over half of the ALOs are between the ages of 45 and 60, with another third between 31 and 45 years of age. The overwhelming majority of ALOs are female. Two-thirds of ALOs have been working for up to 5 years, with another fifth working for 6 to 10 years. Most ALOs have been recruited from the ranks of tutors.

The majority of ALOs hold a third-level qualification, with almost half holding postgraduate degrees. A relatively small number of ALOs stated they had qualifications specific to literacy and adult basic education. However, almost half of ALOs surveyed are currently studying for some type of qualification, the majority through the NALA/WIT project, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

6.3 Career structure

For the most part, there are no full-time permanent tutors or resource workers assisting ALOs employed within the VEC adult literacy service. This is a major gap in the infrastructure of the service. Many tutors working part-time eventually find more secure employment in other parts of the education-and-training sector. Losing its most experienced and competent practitioners is not a new phenomenon, but it is less acceptable at a time when the service has ample financing.

The adult literacy sector does not appear to be attracting people to work in the area due to the lack of career structure. Although this was the case when most of the present incumbents became involved, the Irish economy and society were also very different at the time. When the current generation of practitioners retires, it will be interesting to see who is there to take their place.

Recently, paid professional tutors organised an association, the Basic Education Tutors Association (BETA), which is principally concerned with advancing tutors' terms and conditions of employment within the VEC sector.

6.4 Funding

The slowdown in Ireland's growth over the last few years has seen a relative decrease in public spending across all government departments. As a result, the DES adult literacy

budget since 2004 has fallen short of projected requirements, representing only a 3% increase in that year, in comparison with the 12% increase to the overall education budget. In real terms, for every €1,000 spent on education, only €3 goes to adult literacy. Already VEC adult literacy services are cutting back provision, as the 3% budget increase goes towards covering wage increases. This creates challenges to the VEC adult literacy service to meet the demands, not just from learners seeking to join programmes but also from employers and other vocational training providers.

The vast majority of the current funding for the VEC adult literacy service in Ireland has come from the European Social Fund. However, with more countries having joined the EU on May 1, 2004, there will inevitably be less aid available to older EU countries. The Department of Education and Science will need to ensure that current levels of expenditure on adult literacy will be at least maintained, through state expenditure, in the future.

In contrast, WBE has been attracting increasing resources, not just in terms of a dedicated budget but also from within other funding covering workplace learning. As this funding is channelled through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and bodies under its aegis (FÁS in particular), it appears WBE will be better resourced into the future than the local VEC adult literacy service. This service is primarily geared to the needs of local communities and receives its funding from the Department of Education and Science.

6.5 Research and evaluation

As a result of the poor funding of adult literacy work in Ireland in the past, there is a dearth of research and evaluation publications in the area. Most of the published material has come through the DES and NALA, with a small but increasing contribution from some VECs. There has been no national evaluation of the VEC adult literacy service, primarily due to the size and nature of the service, although an expenditure review is to be undertaken by the Department of Education and Science in 2007. However, with increased expenditure in the area, and the need for greater accountability that comes with it, the DES, and increasingly DETE and FÁS, will need to place a greater emphasis on research and evaluation in the future.

The NALA/WIT project (explained in Section 6.7) is generating research through coursework and assignments at both certificate and diploma level. This will be added to as the programme extends to develop postgraduate qualifications. Furthermore, the project aims to engage in more research and build up an adult literacy academic discipline, separate and distinct from adult or community education.

6.6 Partnership and integration

Increased funding for adult literacy has attracted new players who are keen to be involved in this growth area. Adult literacy practitioners are experiencing competition in terms of their services and clients, and are grappling with ownership issues. The prioritisation of adult literacy, and increasingly WBE, has also meant that it is no longer the preserve of only those who work in literacy, but now also involves the full range of statutory- and voluntary-sector staff that also deal with 'our clients.'

On the positive side, this has led to a greater emphasis on working in partnership at the local level, whereas previously, practitioners often worked in isolation. More people have become involved in and joined the VEC adult literacy service through a greater emphasis on

networking by ALOs with groups such as local social welfare and health authorities. However, it has also led to a rapidly increasing workload for ALOs beyond their original role, which now needs to be reviewed and amended as appropriate. It has also led to an increased workload for NALA, particularly in supporting the new people and organisations getting involved in this area.

NALA convened a working group representing relevant stakeholders from the VEC adult literacy service and government departments to develop an implementation plan for the VEC adult literacy service. The focus was on the development of a more structured and permanent service (National Adult Literacy Advisory Group 2004). The group has drawn up a model for the adult literacy service, including a variety of other service providers within the VEC and outside, detailing how the adult literacy service should be integrated into the wider VEC and beyond. In addition, the group has developed staffing norms for adult literacy service, and although the VEC adult literacy service is a long way from putting these staffing structures in place (due to lack of resources), having a blueprint available to those responsible for managing and funding the service should improve this situation and may be critical for future development.

6.7 Tutor professional development

Learning for Life (DES 2000) acknowledges the unique and invaluable contribution made by volunteers (over 70% of all tutors) to the development of the adult literacy service. It also commits to providing opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills and help them gain certification through flexible procedures. With additional funding and staff in the 1990s from the DES, NALA devised a professional development programme that enabled local literacy organisers to train their own tutors locally and to then use NALA in-service training to train tutors in additional areas. The most common of these one-day sessions, delivered by experienced tutors, covered creating materials and group work.

Adult literacy tutors need a thorough understanding of the basic principles that underlie the philosophy and methods of adult education, as set out in the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* (NALA 2005). Therefore, the initial tutor training course includes three types of learning—attitude, skills, and knowledge—and allows sufficient time to explore the development of these areas in adult literacy work. During the training course, tutors also examine what it means to be an active learner, exploring the process by which learners can identify what they want to learn, how they as learners can best learn, and how to assess the learning that has taken place.

The tutor training employs methods the tutors themselves will use in their teaching such as role-play, practical work, and group discussion. During the training, the trainers evaluate the course through participant feedback during and immediately after the session. Trainers are encouraged to conduct a follow-up meeting with tutors after they have had time to implement what they have learned. The materials used for tutor training include:

- getting started with reading and writing using the language-experience approach
- using cloze passages
- the Look/Say/Cover/Write/Check method of developing spelling skills (NALA 1995).

Initial tutor training is generally delivered over 20 hours, by experienced tutors or ALOs once or twice a year. Adult literacy learners are often involved in the design and delivery of initial tutor training.

During the 1990s, practitioners realised that if the service was to become more professional they would need recognised qualifications in order to secure permanent, better-paid jobs. With this in mind, practitioners mandated NALA, through a resolution at the NALA Annual General Meeting in 1992, to develop such qualifications with the relevant authorities, ensuring that there would be recognition of prior experiential learning. Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) agreed to work in partnership with NALA to provide accreditation for adult literacy workers. NALA and WIT spent considerable time working through—with practitioners and academics—the content of this university-level programme, ensuring that it built on and was respectful of, the previous training developed over the years through NALA (McSkeane 1998 piii). NALA and WIT developed a number of certificate and diploma programmes, in response to an identified need for university-level training courses that would assist literacy organisers and tutors in upgrading their skills and also in gaining accreditation for the knowledge and skills they had accumulated during their years of work in the field of adult literacy.

The NALA/WIT project was established initially on a pilot basis in 1997, with funding from the DES. NALA/WIT now provides full-certificate, diploma and degree programmes, as well as single-certificate modules, and is developing postgraduate qualifications. The full-certificate programme requires students to complete 12 modules (out of a possible 20 and including Workplace Literacy). At a higher level, the diploma programme requires completion of six out of eight modules. Each module contains 50 contact hours, 35 with a tutor and the remaining 15 made up by group work, peer learning, and support. Three modules of the full certificate level programme are required to register with FÁS trainers' panel in order to deliver tuition under the *Skills for Work* initiative. The programme is offered to VEC-based practitioners who are usually released by their employer to attend. There is no nationally agreed-upon VEC protocol that supports practitioners to attend training, so some do pay their own registration fee and attend in their own time; however, they must have approval from their manager to take the course.

The NALA/WIT programme qualifications are designed for practitioners currently serving as tutors, but NALA and WIT are considering making them entry qualifications. NALA/WIT is also considering how to include field practice in the programme, as they designed the existing body of qualifications for people with a minimum period of job experience. Also, the DES would likely require that trainees agree to serve a designated time with the adult literacy service in exchange for participation in the programme. The current career structure does not extend to tutors, who at best find themselves on part-time contracts that run according to the academic year.

The recognition of the NALA/WIT qualifications by the IVEA is a key objective. Although the DES funds the project, it is the VECs who are the main employer for adult literacy workers and therefore it is important that they recognise and value these specific qualifications. To date the IVEA has mandated that ALOs possess the relevant NALA/WIT qualification, or an unspecified adult education equivalent, within five years of taking a full-time position.

6.8 Certification and assessment

Certification systems used for adult learners in the 1990s set the bar too high, and many adult learners were not able to achieve them through their coursework. This meant they could not get on the qualifications ladder. In 2003, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland launched the National Qualifications Framework, which has brought about significant changes

in the systems and structures of education and training. It is the single entity through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a logical way (NQAI 2003).

The framework defines the relationship between all education and training awards. The result is a clearer and more understandable qualifications system, enabling and encouraging learners to achieve awards for learning on a lifelong basis. The framework contains a grid of level indicators, which cover knowledge (breadth and kind), skill (range and selectivity), and competence (context, role, learning to learn, and insight) and denote learning outcomes within these areas. The framework has ten levels covering a very low level of learning (level 1) up to a PhD (level 10). This has created an opportunity for people to get recognition for smaller learning achievements and is particularly useful for adult literacy learners (see www.nqai.ie).

NALA developed an assessment framework for adult literacy called *Mapping the Learning Journey* (NALA 2004). It was designed and developed from consultation with key stakeholders, best practice in assessment in Irish adult literacy services, and international research, particularly the *Equipped for the Future Assessment Framework* in the United States. *Mapping the Learning Journey* has four main cornerstones that complement the knowledge, skill, and competence structure of the Qualifications Framework. It was used to inform the development of new level 1 and 2 qualifications in this area by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

6.9 Resource development

NALA and FÁS have jointly produced a series of new learning resources for participants on *Skills for Work* courses under the Workplace Basic Education Fund. The resources improve literacy using a health and safety terminology. *Steps to Safety* (NALA 2006) caters for participants with language needs and those with very low literacy. It is aimed at level 1 FETAC and it may be used as a pre-intervention resource for the main workbook *Safe and Well* (NALA 2006). *Safe and Well* is aimed at level 2 FETAC and for consistency both workbooks take a similar form and cover the following areas:

- safety signs and symbols
- managing information at work
- health and hygiene
- working safely
- filling in an accident report form

Safe and Well also contains a CD-ROM where information is delivered through text and video with interactive exercises that students can try out. The workbook supports the learning in the CD-ROM through reinforcing the learning and gives lots of opportunities for participants to practice their reading and writing. They can progress from this resource onto the *Ensuring You're Safe*, noted below.

In 2005 NALA developed *Technology@Work*, an interactive CD on technology in the workplace which focuses on using:

- a fax machine
- a photocopier
- a mobile phone

- a computer
- an automatic cash machine.

Clocking In to Clocking Out (NALA 2007) is a further resource aimed at level 3 FETAC and allows participants to develop their communications, analytical and problem solving skills. This resource is presented in a folder containing five mini workbooks. The first mini workbook continues the health and safety theme, called *Ensuring You're Safe*, and the others look at:

- technology in your workplace
- calculations in your workplace
- managing your time at work
- diversity in your workplace.

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