

Submission to consultation about 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy (ALND) Strategy for Ireland

**From
The Department of Adult and Community Education,
Maynooth University**

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The Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University, warmly welcome the development of the 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy (ALND) Strategy for Ireland to support the development of a sustained, long-term vision to enhance literacy, numeracy and digital literacy capabilities.

As the only university academic Dept. of Adult and Community Education in Ireland, our work is informed by the insights and pedagogical practices of the adult and further educators with whom we work to enhance their professional development. We are also guided by our learning from the extensive research on adult education we have conducted over the decades with a range of community, national and international partners.

In this submission we draw on this learning to highlight elements which we feel will create a learning environment where all adults in Ireland will have the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy capabilities to fully participate in society. We welcome the inclusive nature of this strategy in enhancing social, economic, political and cultural equality for all peoples as well as critically reflecting on the opportunities and challenges inherent in it.

Theme 1: Different meanings of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for adults.

In defining literacy, numeracy and digital literacy, we contend that learners' experience and knowledge are at the heart of the literacy learning process. We need to support learners' rights to explore their needs and interests, set their learning goals and decide the processes by which they learn (NALA, 2012). A participative approach democratises the learning process and broadens our understanding of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy beyond a focus on functions or competencies. The Dept. notes that literacy as socially situated in people's daily lives is an ongoing lifelong learning process (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Street, 2001). A socially situated approach to literacy(s) is evident in the good practice evident across the adult literacy services in Ireland as shown in research conducted by the Dept. on behalf of SOLAS, NALA, ETBs, and others.

In this 10-year plan, the Dept. supports the development of an Inclusive 'Adult Learning Strategy' that incorporates literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in a lifelong and life-wide

process that is learner-centred and enables adults to develop their learning in terms of their own lifeworld and life conditions as defined by Freire (1972).

According to Tett *et al.*, (2012), literacy and numeracy are capabilities that are integral to our everyday activities. By acknowledging the socially situated context of these skills we recognise and value more elusive personal qualities such as confidence and self-esteem that accompany the acquisition of the mere mechanistic skills in themselves. Our research in national literacy projects on the inclusion of learners with intellectual disabilities in the Adult Literacy Services (SOLAS-NALA-ETBI 2020) and Erasmus project such as [Unlocking Freedom through Adult Education](#) and the [DELSA \(Digital Education to Upskill Adults\)](#) projects demonstrate the embedded and motivated nature of learning in adult's life experiences as farmers, hairdressers, taxi drivers, parents etc. Hence, the capacity of the adult literacy services to create context-responsive, curricula and assessment pedagogies are key to enabling literacy(s).

Literacy learning underpins learning key transversal skills such as communications skills, study skills, time management, project planning, interpersonal skills and group collaboration. These are examples of qualitative learning indicators which can and should be mapped as part of the literacy learning journey. The integration of literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy learning in the context of key transversal skills is a core part of adult literacy pedagogies.

Theme 2: Improving awareness of and access to literacy, numeracy and digital literacy support for adults.

The consultation paper recognises the 'functional' context of literacy where needs are to be located. Functional need gives rise to an urgency as the individual has a necessity to access and understand relevant information to enable them to meet their minimum standards or capabilities for self-fulfilment. The Capabilities approach can be understood as:

... a theoretical framework that entails two core normative claims: first, the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance, and second, that freedom to achieve well-being is to be understood in terms of people's capabilities, that is, their real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value. (Robeyns, 2015).

For many adults, previous negative experiences of schooling have led to low self-esteem and confidence about their capacity to learn. This is heightened by cultural assumptions and negative stereotyping about literacy as the failure of the individual to learn rather than a failure on the part of the educator to create the conditions for learning. A socially situated approach to literacy emphasises its social nature and the collective responsibility to act (Tett *et al.* 2012).

There is a continual need to examine awareness and access processes for adult literacy to ensure that it is responsive to dynamic needs of learners. In doing this, we need to engage with adults in participative and learner-centred modes, using peer research methods, to

explore how to address their unmet literacy and numeracy needs from their context. In some instances, this may require specific funding to be made available for reasonable accommodations (including physical alterations to the built environment, access to assistive technology or personal assistants, childcare provision, transport to centres for example) to ensure the learning environment and opportunities are fully accessible and inclusive.

Adults who have endured social disadvantage are risk-averse to accessing education as adults according to the research from the Higher Education Authority and the Economic and Social Research Institute ([McCoy et al., 2010](#)). Hence, community-based local provision of learning is crucial, as our experiences with the [Communiversities](#) reveals. This programme offers a low threshold entry route with minimum risk to the participants through local libraries. It uses the Capabilities approach for early engagement with learners, often those who are commonly understood to be ‘hard to reach’ target groups.

The role of key personnel such as Adult Education Officers and Adult Literacy Organisers in ETBs (and their equivalence in other services) in linking across and within the services needs to be acknowledged. Consideration needs to be given to a specific ‘inclusion development worker’ role to work across literacy and FET to support inclusive services, as recommended in the NALA Guidelines (2012).

Awareness and access to literacy services benefit from recognising real world problems that are of concern, to not only the target groups the strategy has identified, but also the wider general public. Our contention is that future literacy will not be confined to the page or device but will demand a deeper reading of our planet and our relationships to each other and the environment. To understand the connections between our everyday actions and energy use, carbon footprint, food waste, overconsumption of the world’s natural resources, environmental literacy will be crucial.

Family and community-based approach to literacy are also key, as the desire for many parents and carers to have positive outcomes for their children results in an opportunity for adults to engage in learning not for their own sake but altruistically, for others. Encouraging family literacy and community-based homework clubs for parents and grandparents to help their own children and grandchildren is an important way of engaging adults in literacy services (Hegarty & Feeley 2019). Besides basic reading, writing and maths, digital safety classes designed for the family means that participating in such a programme can be the platform to introduce these adult carers/learners/tutors to refine their own literacy skills. To develop this would rely on a Lifelong Learning strategy that ensures a collaborative approach from all sectors in the education system and develop relationships with the community and voluntary sectors. This approach to engagement that is of longer duration and aims at transformation through reflection on the individual’s life world and life conditions is appropriate and timely.

Psychological motivation to interact with wider literacy services should be acknowledged and understood in designing curriculum and methodology. The Dept proposes that the Lifelong Learning element of literacy should be foregrounded and encompass an integrated approach.

Emphasis should be placed on engagement in meaningful, relevant and interesting content and formats attracting a wide cohort of learners. This can best be achieved by engaging the learner in a process of critical reflection and conscientisation as Freire (1972) describes.

Theme 3 Bridging the digital divide.

Digital literacy is a core element of literacy capabilities which has become even more important in the context of the current global pandemic. The pandemic has heightened existing disparities and inequalities across our society in terms of access to and capabilities using digital technology in a productive and safe manner. Information literacy and media literacy are key elements within digital literacies needing specific critical literacy awareness and training attention.

The Dept. supports the development of inclusive and critical digital literacy so that everyone has an opportunity to fully participate in society. Countries such as Estonia offer examples of integrated systems of digital literacy by providing access to digital literacy hardware and software while enhancing literacy capabilities in an inclusive manner. Examples from countries such as Estonia, [e-estonia](#) (Lurginson and Rillo, 2017), offer frameworks for Ireland to consider.

[Affordability](#) of digital access (Conmy, 2020) needs to be addressed under this theme. Cost of digital connectivity may not have been considered as part of educational budgets previously. Those most in need of digital literacy access are often those most excluded due to the financial burden of paying for broadband utility or network credit.

Theme 4 Priorities and actions.

The Dept. supports the continued development of innovative and creative ways to reach and support adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in a learner-centred and inclusive manner. The Dept. highlights the need to critically engage with ongoing inequalities of education, social contexts, and employment conditions for many learners as documented in national and international research including the [EMPLOY](#) and [PATH](#) research projects. While the policy prioritization of key target groups draws attention to these underlying inequalities and responds to some of the learning and other needs. However, policy priorities generally do not address systemic failure and structural inequalities underpinning these learning divides in the first instance. Collective responsibility and critical awareness is needed of the systemic inequalities occurring, but also the systemic privileging that occurs where the social backgrounds, cultural values and economic position of some adults render them unaware of their own position, privilege and resources.

The Dept. proposes that it is vital to develop responsive and dynamic literacy systems which are learner-centred and inclusive. Such systems need to be cognisant with different priorities across lifelong and life-wide learning pathways. This can be achieved through the provision of flexible literacy provision using different pedagogies, and accredited and unaccredited programmes (including options for individual group tuition, mixed group tuition and 1:1 tuition) as required by learners.

The importance of relationships and trust-building in literacy learning places particular demands on literacy tutors to apply a deeply interpersonal and affective manner in their pedagogy. The relational and care aspect of literacy provision is often an invisible and unrecognised part of the literacy process which takes extensive skills, time and capacities in building positive relationships with learners and colleagues according to Hegarty & Feeley (2019). Much of this relational work is conducted by women who constitute the majority of those working as literacy tutors, reflecting the wider concern about the gendered cost of this type of relational and care work in education (Lynch et al., 2007) as well as the gendered and part-time nature of the work.

Literacy tutors need support with dedicated time and professional development in inclusive pedagogical and assessment strategies and in specific areas such as digital literacy and assistive technologies. Existing professional development opportunities in digital literacy need to be promoted more widely, and a community of practice fostered where tutors can share resources, materials, ideas and innovative approaches. The need for awareness raising about literacy based on the Capabilities approach for all learners and educators is key as the Adult Literacy Services become more inclusive.

The provision of literacy and numeracy services needs an integrated approach that is cross-sectoral, inter-departmental, and interagency. It is already evident in collaborative partnerships which exist in community education, family literacy, disability support services, Travellers and Roma support networks, migrants' rights networks, and prisoner support groups. These collaborative partnerships are often developed and managed on a local basis which is vital. However, they also need to be recognised and facilitated in an integrated institution-wide and whole of service approach to eliminate current difficulties and challenges of overlapping or duplicated responsibilities, gaps in supports and funding, communication processes between interagency services, and lack of clarity about roles. A more fluid system is needed where funding and supports can follow the learner's needs as and when it is needed.

Theme 5 Measuring success.

For some time, the dominant narratives suggest that educational institutions measure success in quantitative measures by the numbers of “bums on seats” and aspects of learning amenable to statistical scrutiny (Thomas, 2000; Hamilton, 2012). Data measurement should capture the responsiveness and qualitative capacities of learners and of services to respond to the diverse needs of learners. This is particularly so for adult literacy. Adult literacy needs to be cognisant of the needs of learners, especially in the initial phase of engagement where learners often feel vulnerable, fearful or suspicious of form-filling.

The Dept. proposes a review of current data collection and data management methods within the adult literacy services with particular attention to the issue of how best to gather and manage data which requires disclosure from literacy learners in a supportive and learner-

centered way. A system of responsive and timely qualitative indicators needs to be further developed to capture and record a broad range of inclusive learning outcomes, including the diverse learning pathways and varied progression paths of learners, and the range of transversal skills that have significant life value for learners such as time management, decision making.

Accreditation is important in recognising learner achievement and as a positive outcome for many literacy learners as it is often a first recognition of their learning capacities after previous negative learning experiences. The impact of the increased targets for accreditation, set by SOLAS through the annual performance service agreements, are of key concern to this university department, as they do not fit the varied, uneven and often lengthy learning journey of literacy learners. These accreditation targets need to be reviewed to respect the wide range of individuals' literacy development needs and goals, and the unique role of the adult literacy service in responding to those. Targets should be responsive to the unique profile of literacy learners and their often-atypical progression through standardised timeframes and QQI progression levels. Adopting an integrated capabilities approach would allow for accreditation wherein reward is located in the learning act itself, i.e., in the need met for the individual and certification as a by-product of the learning process.

The literacy sector needs to be highly responsive to its learners' needs, interests and life context. This may mean lower than expected engagement or progression levels, the need to step away from or divert into other areas of learning as life circumstances change, and a diversity across literacy, numeracy and digital literacy capabilities. Opportunities for lateral progression should be facilitated to cater for learners who may not progress 'upwards' but would benefit from 'sideways' progression (at QQI level) to support consolidation, retention and application of learning.

More widely, international data collection about literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to be critically examined. Large data gathering is often based on a functional or technological discourse about literacy dominated by measurable technological skills being compared across and within countries. While large data gathering by PIAAC and others provide valuable insights about learners' profiles and literacy skills, they can neglect and render invisible many other aspects of literacy and learning. Research by Hamilton and others (2012, 2014) highlight that the use of quantification to measure literacy focuses attention on measurable outcomes of technical skills by individuals or across groups and societies rather than broader learning processes and impacts for adult's lives.

Conclusion:

The Dept have welcomed the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and we hope this submission will serve SOLAS in the development of a 10-year plan for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. As noted, above we feel that adopting a learner-centred inclusive strategy that incorporates literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in a lifelong and life-wide process of learning is crucial. We welcome this opportunity to continue to support the capacity of the

adult literacy services to create context-responsive curricula and assessment pedagogies as critical to enabling literacies.

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