

National Learning Network

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives



Submission on the
Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy

December 2020

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Overview

National Learning Network (NLN) welcome the opportunity to contribute to the SOLAS 10-Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy. NLN has more than 25 years' experience integrating literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills into education and training programmes and through our student support and advocacy services.

This submission seeks to:

- Detail the challenges and opportunities for Ireland in relation to adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy with reference to people with disabilities and people who are excluded from society predominantly in the area of education, training and employment opportunities.
- Make suggestions as to how to work towards a society with services are universally designed and (where necessary) with accommodations in place to support the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs for people take part in society.
- Make suggestions as to how stakeholders can collaborate to share learning and contribute to the knowledge base for best practices in adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills development while supporting access, transfer and progression options within Foundation, Bridging and Progression programmes.

NLN work with about 7,000 students each year between the ages of 16 and 65. This includes people who have a long-term illness or have a disability, have experienced a life setback, had an accident, are autistic or have a mental health condition.

NLN specialises in the delivery of inclusive, person-centred education and training services which we believe is key to support a student's literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. NLN will spotlight some real stories/case studies relating to literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills development inclusive of:

- adults with disabilities including sensorial, cognitive and communication disabilities
- people with low or no literacy, numeracy or digital literacy skills,
- people for whom English is a Second Language,

- people with no access to personal technology devices.

These student stories from across our centres are outlined throughout this submission to support the statement that inclusive practices and person-centred planning are critical success factors in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills development.

The severity of the digital divide became evident this year when centres closed in March due to Covid-19. Many students were engaging in remote learning from home for the first time. This included online learning. A survey of our students earlier in the year indicated the barriers they faced in accessing ICT equipment and reliable broadband connections, and highlighted student's varying levels of digital literacy.

Another issue that has stood out, this year in particular, is the manner in which government departments and agencies communicate with people with limited literacy skills. Our experience has shown us that important letters of communication from government departments and agencies, and the increasing move to online applications, has hindered many people with low literacy and digital literacy skills from exercising their right to entitlements.

Information and awareness on literacy, numeracy and digital literacy supports are integral to reducing stigma felt by adults with little or no literacy, numeracy, or digital literacy. An accessible awareness campaign would help to normalise accessing supports and encourage more adults to engage with education and training.

The key points suggested for the Strategy are as follows:

1. Promote person-centred planning and a universal design for learning approach to delivery of literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills.
2. Include a plan for essential Information and Communication Technology equipment to Specialist Training Providers who have not been comprehensively included in ICT funding strategies to date
3. We ask that the National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy include a plan to improve literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for Deaf people and people who are hard of hearing and the inclusion of ISL on any awareness campaigns.

4. Ensure that every Government Department takes a pro-active approach to recognising people with challenges engaging with services and has specific communication strategies and processes in place for people with low literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.
5. Work to update the Disability Act 2005 to provide for a right to understandable information for all people with an intellectual disability, acquired brain injury or mental health condition, and seek to broaden to all people with disabilities
6. Roll out a campaign across traditional media to encourage more people to access information and support on developing their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. Seeking such support needs to be normalised. Ensure all members of our communities can see themselves as included in these opportunities.

NLN services are diverse with varying degrees of educational focus and supports for life-long learning that work with people distant from the labour market and people who are ready to progress to higher education or further education and start or restart their careers. NLN delivers over 250 training programmes offering QQI major awards at levels 1-5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

NLN's education and training services span the following:

- Vocational Training in every county in Ireland funded by the 16 Education and Training Boards
- Day Service Provision including Rehabilitation Training on behalf of the HSE covering 9 Community Health Organisation (CHO) areas.
- Disability Support Services - we provide disability support services in eight mainstream Colleges of Further Education on behalf of City of Dublin ETB.
- Educational Support Services - we provide education support services in seven Higher Education Institutions. (Maynooth University, Technological University of Dublin (Blanchardstown), Institute of Art, Design and Technology, the National College of Art and Design, National University of Ireland, Galway and University College Cork.
- NLN are partners in delivery of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) with the HSE. IPS is an evidenced approach to Inclusive Employment Services specifically working people with mental health conditions in 4 CHO areas. It is a 'place, then train' rather than 'train, then place' approach.
- NLN are on the framework for delivery of contracted training on behalf of four ETBs.

On behalf of the students within NLN, we welcome any opportunities for students to engage directly with decision makers and people working on the strategy to give further direct feedback. This may also be an opportunity to consider the promotion of co-production of adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy materials with people with lived experience of disability.

The teams in NLN are excited to be part of the consultation and as an organisation we would be supportive of development of communities of practice in adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills development throughout Ireland.

Focus Area 1: Person-Centred Planning & Adult Literacy, Numeracy & Digital Literacy

Skills Development in areas of Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Skills is strengthened by a person-centred planning approach linked to each person's own needs and desires to develop literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

At NLN, the emphasis on person centred planning supports the development of adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. NLN vocational trainers and resource teachers collaborate and communicate with each student to understand their:

- perception of their literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills
- prior experience of learning literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills
- personal drivers to develop skills in literacy, numeracy, and digital skills for personal and professional reasons

NLN use an initial assessment to screen student abilities in literacy, numeracy and digital skills in relation to the course of study they have chosen. A student's goals are recorded in their Individual Action Plan (IAP) and are reviewed and monitored within that framework. This allows each person to track their progress and shows their improvement in literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills throughout the programme. A person-centred approach emphasises the importance of learning literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy contextualised to daily life and the specific course of study.

Contextualised to Daily Life: Example Shopping

To support in developing financial literacy skills, practical skills development activities are structured around planning a meal versus buying a meal in a fast-food restaurant.

Student Teams:

- Plan identical meals
- List the ingredients
- Agree a budget
- Decide on the supermarket
- Complete the shop using a calculator gathering each ingredient



- Make the payment and confirm receipt of the correct amount of change

To practice digital literacy skills, using a fast-food restaurants website, the teams identify the cost of the same meal for 1 person from a fast-food restaurant and compare it to the cost of buying food for 4 people.

Contextualised to Vocational Skills Training and the World of Work: Examples Sports and Leisure and Catering

On our Sports and Recreation programme, the running track is used to work on numeracy skills; the track itself, measurements, distance, staggered placings, timings. From there, students look at energy (calories) expended and research calories and nutrients in different foods.

Similarly, on the Catering programme students improve numeracy through learning about cooking temperatures, measurements of ingredients and reading recipes.

Both examples showcase how literacy is integrated into curriculum supporting people in entering the world of work and becoming more independent in numeracy and financial literacy skills.



Figure 2: Literacy and Numeracy and Catering Skills

Figure 3: Numeracy and Sport

Case Study 1: Literacy and Numeracy Skill for the World of Work

Mark completed his Learning Certificate in mainstream school with accommodations. He got accepted onto a course in hairdressing. He attended the first year and completed all his practical assessments but could not complete the theory exams and was not successful in the overall course. Due to this, he dropped out of the course. He gave up on his dream of being a hairdresser.

Mark took the opportunity for a second-chance education and training with National Learning Network. Mark tried different types of work as an Employer-Based Training Student and this included work samples to review options for a career. In the end, he went with his original career choice, hairdressing. A local salon was identified and agreed to be a host company for a placement. Mark continued this placement through Employer-based Training. This training included a professional hairdressing traineeship in the salon.

Mark identified through his person-centred planning process that he would require literacy and numeracy supports on the theory of hairdressing. Mark took part in small group learning and some 1-1 classes weekly, with the resource teacher. His learning focusing on the technicalities, language, and vocabulary of the practical hairdressing classes. A lot of time was spent on the literacy and numeracy relating to theory of colour, measurements, and chemical use. Each month, Mark asked his workplace supervisor to give an overview of the work for the month ahead so he could be familiar with the technical language and measurements around the work area.

Mark found an alternative pathway through NLN to hairdressing. After completing his course, he was employed by the salon and continued his traineeship in hairdressing.

It is evident that Mark was driven by his desire to train as a hairdresser, which in turn drove him to improve his literacy and numeracy skills in this occupational area. The person-centred planning approach meant listening to “what to learn” and “how to learn” from the person’s perspective. It was also to understand the person’s motivations to learn and their preference for how to engage with learning.

National Learning Network Asks:

1. Promote Person-Centred Planning and Person-Centred Thinking for Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Skills Training.
2. Promote a Universal Design for Learning Approach in delivery of Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Skills Training.
3. Consider targeted community or service-based placement of NALA Services by embedding these in local communities or at touch points in services where needs arise e.g. Doctors waiting room, motor tax office.

Focus Area 2: Digital Literacy Skills Development and The Digital Divide

As stated in the Consultation Paper, nearly half of adults in Ireland score below the basic level of digital literacy. Digital literacy is an integral part employment and education, particularly in a post-Covid19 world.

There is strong evidence from our students' perspective on the negative impact of the digital divide on their educational development. The move towards digitisation and learning and working online has created barriers for people with no access to personal devices to learn and those with little or no digital literacy.

Our 2020 survey of our student's experience revealed that two in five of our students did not have full-time access to their own computer, and worryingly, 20% had no access to a computer at all. Almost half of the respondents struggled with connectivity issues because of patchy broadband, particularly in rural locations. 20% had no broadband access at all.¹ Issues around accessibility, affordability and digital literacy were also raised.

Some of the comments from students included:

"I can't afford broadband and only get 50GB data on WiFi. My phone only has 20GB data and that uses up quite quickly."

"My signal is terrible. It's very difficult to work at home..."

"The laptop I use is my sisters, so I don't get to use it much."

A lack of access to ICT equipment at home and poor broadband connection are barriers to learning for some NLN students. The need to improve digital literacy among our students has also been highlighted this year, with the use of online communication platforms. While all training programme have an element of ICT training it became more critical to support students to use tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Team to engage with both instructional staff and student support service such as the resource teacher and psychologist.

All NLN staff are surveyed through a Digital Competence questionnaire to establish their needs across key areas of digital competence. In parallel to address specific digital competence needs, the following training is available to all staff, in order to increase digital literacy at an individual staff level and to support the teaching and achievement of digital literacy for students.

- Microsoft Office 365

¹ https://www.rehab.ie/what-we-do/advocacy/submissions/final_pre_budget2021.pdf

- Using Office 365 functionality to support teaching & Learning
- Accessibility Features in Office 365 and Assistive Technology

In August 2020, the Government announced a new fund of €15m to address the digital divide in further education and higher education. It was very welcome but by December 2020 less than 100 NLN students have been able to access it. Two ETBs have included NLN students in their core Student Loan Scheme.

In November 2020, each Education and Training Board announced the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Fund for Community Education in efforts to bridge this divide. NLN have been successful in securing financial support for students without access to personal learning devices across 5 Education and Training Boards.

Our experience is that support under Digital Divide measures is patchy and inconsistent. There should be clear, unequivocal support for students who attend specialist training settings, given that they all experience disadvantage - in whatever guise that may present.

National Learning Network Asks:

1. Facilitate Students with Disabilities and Students within Specialist Training Provision to have equitable access to funds or schemes to bridge the digital divide which supports digital literacy skills development
2. Promote usage of accessibility features in all teaching and learning activities surrounding adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills training to promote inclusion of more people. This is particularly relevant for people who are blind and people with low vision.

Case Study 2: Improving Digital Literacy Skills Development Journey and Career Development

Alice was a student in NLN who began her learning journey on a Level 3 programme. She enjoyed being creative but not necessarily creative using digital tools.

In 2018, NLN promoted the opportunity for students to enter a national competition “Show Racism the Red Card”. Alice wrote the story “A Bear in many Colours”, and went on to develop and draw the characters, and then digitise the story using MS Paint. Alice’s submission was successful under the national youth category of the competition.

To further develop digital skills, Alice developed “Making of Panda’s Life behind the scenes”, and “Making of Panda’s Life behind the scenes part 2.”, where the process and software that they learned about was document. Alice then started to use animation software and video creation. She examined the use of social media uploading her work to YouTube. The student animated and narrated the Panda Life story, which can be seen here: https://youtu.be/No8sxGHbb_k

At this point it was clear that Alice’s talent and desire to be creative motivated her to learn more digital literacy skills. With support, Alice successfully applied for funding from the Embrace project with the local Arts Office. This also included securing a residency with an artist (Shona MacGillivray) who could work with Alice on a one-to-one basis to develop their skills further. Using the story of “Mal agus Cu Chulainn”, the artist worked with Alice to produce a cut-out stop-motion animation. Alice used this opportunity to learn how to interpret and develop ideas from a brief not of their own creation. <https://youtu.be/FMntzDveaVY>

The final part of Alice’s journey developing digital literacy skills at NLN was completion of the the QQI Level 4 Digital Media module. Alice had to produce work to given specifications, and using the many skills learned, was successful in creating a 1 minute 20 second video. This was uploaded to a website which Alice had to design to promote a business idea, which can be seen here: <https://storycreatorsennis.wixsite.com/website>

Alice progressed to study QQI Level 5 Multimedia Animation and Game Design at a Limerick College of Further Education.

Focus Area 3: Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Skills Development with Deaf People and People who are Hard of Hearing

The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 has finally been commenced. This will ensure the rights of the Deaf community to access State services through ISL are protected. It is an important time to ensure that Deaf people and people who are hard of hearing are represented within the design and development of a 10-year strategy for Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy.

Some deaf people and people who are hard of hearing experience low levels of literacy as English is not their primary language. This may, at times, make communicating in written English difficult.

National Learning Network Asks:

1. Ensure inclusion of the views and experiences of the Deaf community in developing the strategy making ISL available at any virtual or face-to-face events.
2. Consider the resourcing requirements for inclusive virtual or face-to-face training or upskilling activities in literacy, numeracy and digital skills to include ISL.
3. Ensure all public awareness campaigns surrounding literacy numeracy and digital literacy are fully accessible in all formats with the inclusion of ISL.

Focus Area 4: Right to Inclusive and Accessible Communication

One of the significant disadvantages faced by some of the people we work with is their struggle to understand information supplied by Government Departments/Agencies and to navigate important Government schemes. We believe the National Strategy on Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy should seek to address this.

The problem is particularly pronounced in the area of entitlements. An anonymised Case Study 3 is used to highlight the challenge.

Case Study 3: Experience of Inaccessible Communication

Majella is a student who has an enduring mental health condition. She applied for Disability Allowance on the basis of her rights to this based on her diagnosis. Her application was initially refused by the Department of Social Protection on the grounds of her condition not being considered acute. When she appealed, the Social Welfare Appeals Office reviewed the case and found that she did in fact meet the disability conditions of the payment. However, Majella was refused the payment as one document requested in the process, and relating to the means test for disability allowance, was not supplied by her.

The Appeals Office communicated this decision to Majella in a four-page letter which set out the reasoning and quoted complex tracts of the relevant legislation. Majella did not understand the letter. She assumed she had been refused on the same basis as before. She did not realise all she needed to do was supply a document so that the case could be fully considered.

The issue was only later resolved when an advocate working for Rehab Group intervened on Majella's behalf.

Majella's experience is far from unique. Her case highlights the vulnerability of people with an intellectual disability, mental health difficulty, cognitive and communication difficulties or those experiencing other challenges in understanding especially important information from Government Departments. It highlights the lack of consideration by Government Departments in their communication strategies for those who have a disability or a condition which impacts on their ability to understand.

While, in our experience, Government Departments and agencies are very forthcoming in addressing issues once they are notified of a lack of understanding on the part of a client, we believe the systems themselves need to be reformed to ensure that people of all literacy levels can understand basic information provided to them. Not everyone has an advocate to intervene on their behalf. Government Departments and Agencies should be more proactive in seeking information from clients as to their literacy needs and have systems in place to tailor communication to meet these specific needs.

Section 28 of the Disability Act 2005 contains certain provisions in relation to how public bodies must communicate with certain people with disabilities. There are some provisions in 28 (1) of the Act for people with hearing or sight loss in relation to personal communication. We believe these provisions should be broadened to include all people with disabilities, or at the very least to include those with an intellectual disability, mental health difficulty and acquired brain injury.

We also believe there is a lack of awareness of the provisions of Section 28 (3) relating to publications intended for people with intellectual disabilities and that this should be addressed in the Strategy.

In addition, the move to online application processes for entitlements significantly disadvantages people with an intellectual disability. It means they are less likely to have the support of advocates in the application process, particularly after the initial application or if anything goes wrong or needs to be clarified. If people have a poor understanding of digital processes or even lack confidence in them, online application processes represent a significant barrier.

Finally, we would like to see a commitment in the strategy to review how regulators consider, support and protect people with low literacy levels in our consumer markets. People with low literacy skills are significantly disadvantaged in our consumer markets and those most disadvantaged will tend to pay higher costs for everyday utilities and services. This is because

most of our consumer markets are currently structured on a “switch and save” model – a model that relies on informed active consumers who are comfortable switching regularly to reduce their costs. Such a model does not work for everyone, particularly those who face literacy and numeracy challenges, and there have been moves in other jurisdictions to protect people who find it difficult to navigate switching processes. Currently Irish regulators play only a very marginal role in protecting people in these circumstances. There should be a clear commitment in this strategy for a review of the protections that exist for disadvantaged consumers, and for regulators to play a much more pro-active role in protecting them.

National Learning Network Asks:

1. Update the Disability Act 2005 to provide for a right to understandable information for all people with an intellectual disability, acquired brain injury or mental health condition, and seek to broaden to all people with disabilities if possible. Specifically, the provision of Section 28 (1) of the Act should be extended to ensure that public bodies must provide information to such people in a manner that they can readily understand and that takes account of their disability.
2. Ensure that every Government Department takes a pro-active approach to identifying people with literacy challenges and has specific communication strategies and processes in place for clients with low literacy levels or where English is not a first language – this can include Plain English, ISL and graphical representation of information.
3. The strategy on literacy must ensure that traditional application avenues are open for people who struggle with understanding and using online application processes.

Focus Area 5: Awareness and Access to Information on Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Skills.

Fear and embarrassment around having low literacy, numeracy and digital literacy is a significant barrier to those who would otherwise access supports. Our consultation with staff further underpinning the importance of awareness around adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy supports and skills development in the public to reduce stigma.

Normalisation of accessing support and information can be achieved through traditional media, such as a television advertisement or radio campaign.

Some of our resource teachers mentioned the use of local community settings, like community centres and the GAA, to raise awareness and share information as a way of engaging with people who wish to access support. Community engagement can also help to reduce stigma associated with having little or no literacy, numeracy, or digital literacy.

National Learning Networks Asks:

1. Roll out a campaign across traditional media to encourage more people to access information and support on developing their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. Seeking such support needs to be normalised. Ensure all members of our communities can see themselves as included in these opportunities.
2. Highlight inclusion of people with disabilities by using ISL, large font, alt text on social media – any accessibility features that promote active inclusion

Conclusion:

The key points suggested for the Strategy are as follows:

1. Promote person-centred planning and a universal design for learning approach to delivery of literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills.
2. Include a plan for essential Information and Communication Technology equipment to Specialist Training Providers who have not been comprehensively included in ICT funding strategies to date
3. We ask that the National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy include a plan to improve literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for Deaf people and people who are hard of hearing and the inclusion of ISL on any awareness campaigns
4. Ensure that every Government Department takes a pro-active approach to recognising people with challenges engaging with services and has specific communication strategies and processes in place for people with low literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.
5. Work to update the Disability Act 2005 to provide for a right to understandable information for all people with an intellectual disability, acquired brain injury or mental health condition, and seek to broaden to all people with disabilities
6. Roll out a campaign across traditional media to encourage more people to access information and support on developing their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. Seeking such support needs to be normalised. Ensure all members of our communities can see themselves as included in these opportunities.

On behalf of the students within NLN, we welcome any opportunities for students to engage directly with decision makers and people working on the strategy to give further direct feedback. This may also be an opportunity to consider the promotion of co-production of adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy materials with people with lived experience of disability.

The teams in NLN are excited to be part of the consultation and as an organisation we would be supportive of development of communities of practice in adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills development throughout Ireland.

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