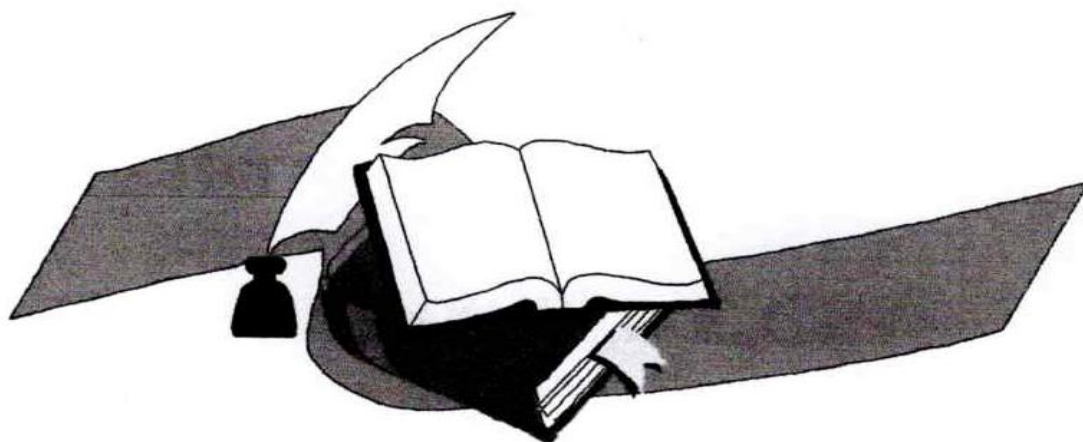


*On the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ALOA 2019*

**A Short History of the Adult Literacy Service  
and  
The Foundation of the Adult Literacy Organisers  
Association**



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<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Getting Organised</b>	<b>1</b>
On The Move	1
NALA	2
The Eighties	2
The Nineties a Time of Great Change	4
The Pivotal Year of 1997	5
Moving towards ALOA	6
Allies	7
Launch of ALOA and The Green Paper on Adult Education	8
Permanent Adult Literacy Positions	9
Adult Literacy Organisers' Association – Timeline	10
<b>Developments within the Adult Literacy Service 2000+</b>	<b>11</b>
English Language provision for ESOL students	11
FÁS/VEC Return to Education Programme	12
Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE)	13
HSE/VEC SkillVEC Project	14
ICT a New Literacy	15
Themed Literacy	15
<b>Adult Literacy Services reaching out to Local Communities</b>	<b>16</b>
Drug Rehabilitation Groups	16
Family Literacy	17
Working with Traveller Communities	18
Adults with Learning Disabilities	18
<b>Quality Assurance Measures</b>	<b>19</b>
Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education	19
Mapping the Learning Journey	20
Supporting the Development of Accreditation Standards	21
<b>To Close</b>	<b>21</b>

# **A Short History of the Adult Literacy Service and the Foundation of ALOA**

## **Introduction**

Until the 1970s it was believed that all adults in Ireland could read and write. In 1960 Charles McCarthy, the General Secretary of the Vocational Teachers Association, claimed that the population of Ireland was almost universally literate or more accurately-- “only the unteachable are illiterate”.

The economic growth in the 1960s brought about a great emphasis on modernising our education system. Adult education didn't feature in the discussion until 1969 when a commission was set up to advise on the development of Adult Education. The “Murphy Report” was published in 1973 and for the first time it was recognised that a significant number of adults in Ireland experienced difficulty with reading and writing and the need for research into the area was suggested. However, there was no change, no funding and no policies were developed.

## **Getting Organised**

### **“On The Move”**

As is often the case in Ireland, change was influenced by an occurrence outside the country. In 1975, the BBC broadcast a series on TV called *On The Move*, an educational programme aimed at adults with literacy difficulties. BBC could be picked up on the East coast and some other parts of Ireland. For the first time adults with reading and writing difficulties began to realise that they weren't alone and that it wasn't too late to do something about improving their skills. In Dublin, adults literally turned up in local Vocational Schools where they knew there were night classes and asked were there classes for them to work on their reading and writing.

And so, in response to demand, Adult Literacy classes were set up on an ad hoc basis around the country. Most tuition was on a one to one basis delivered sometimes in the home of the student or tutor by volunteers who for the most part had no teaching background and were sourced by ads in local newsletters and read out at Mass. Gradually, those organising literacy

groups became aware of similar groups and began to meet up to share their ideas and experiences.

## **NALA**

AONTAS, the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation, an Irish non-governmental organisation for the promotion and facilitation of adult learning, was founded in 1969 by Fr Liam Carey of the Dublin Institute of Adult Education. It was in Mountjoy Square that the first Adult Literacy Service in Ireland was set up in 1974 by the Dublin Institute of Adult Education. In 1975 AONTAS, in line with what the Murphy Report had recommended, commissioned a report into the broad issue of adult literacy in Ireland in an effort to work out the means to tackle literacy issues among adults.

By the mid -1970s there was enough of a groundswell of activity in literacy tuition at local volunteer level to create the impetus for a representative organisation to be set up. The first steps in doing so were taken by AONTAS which set up a sub-committee to deal with the issues that had been highlighted in its report. Its findings included the stigma and embarrassment of the learners, the lack of resources and training for those endeavouring to deliver tuition, the need for publicity and raising awareness. Very soon AONTAS realised that the scale of the adult literacy issue was too big to be addressed as part of its own work and it was suggested that a separate body be established to focus solely on the subject of adult literacy. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) came into being in 1977 and its first constitution was written in 1980. With the establishment of NALA and its main objective of creating public awareness, the work of those delivering literacy expanded to fit the developmental needs of the service and it included such tasks as: advertising the service, dealing with enquiries, interviewing and assessing students, arranging meeting times and venues for students and tutors. An emerging need was the training of tutors and tutor training courses were drawn up organically, based on the needs of the students, to be improved on with the growing experience and development of the service.

## **The Eighties**

Adult Education began to emerge as a recognised sector in its own right around this time. In 1979, Adult Education Organisers were appointed to VECs. In 1980, an Adult Education Section was established in the Department of Education and Adult Education Boards were set up in VECs in 1984.

Through the 80s the Adult Literacy Service developed in many ways but the role of the people who organised literacy activity was not formalised and financially there was very little development. For the most part the Service was still run on a voluntary basis with some VECs supporting tuition on the basis of a part-time tutor being allocated a few hours each week as part of the night school to organise the adult literacy tuition. Gradually the title Adult Literacy Organiser started to be used. In her Estimates speech in March 1984 Gemma Hussey then Minister for Education, promised that literacy provision would receive special attention and she pledged for the first time a grant of £10,000 to NALA. In the 80s however, Ireland was in recession and even the number of hours paid by the VECs was not guaranteed and couldn't be relied on from year to year. Typically, the Adult Literacy budget available to the Adult Literacy Organiser at the end of the eighties comprised 7 hours for the organiser, a resource budget of £250 to cover all books and materials and 200 hours per year for tuition.

The poor support and recognition of the work of the Adult Literacy Service was evident in the Programme for National Recovery published in 1987. In that document Adult Literacy got a single mention. In the Education Section it was stated: "It is intended that the programmes of Community Education and Adult Literacy will continue and be intensified to the limits that resources permit".

However more importantly, from the point of view of adults with literacy difficulties, throughout the 80s new ways of working with adults were being developed. Because they had been let down by the system adults with reading and writing difficulties had a deep rooted distrust of the formal education system. Adults returning to learning needed to know that it would be different second time around: it needed to be kinder, more respectful, better suited to their individual needs. The *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* devised by those involved in adult literacy work in the 80s are the same principles that pertain today. Students were to be recognised as equal and knowledgeable partners in a learning process where they had the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how they wished to learn. Adult literacy work was to relate to the whole person; it was concerned with personal development and not just about improving reading and writing skills.

## **The Nineties a Time of Great Change**

A number of publications and initiatives introduced in the 90s brought about a sea change in the greater recognition of adult literacy deficits in Ireland and the development of the Adult Literacy Service.

In 1990, the Social Partners and the Irish Government drew up a Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP). It contained a specific commitment to tackling adult literacy and to providing resources for adult literacy programmes. In that same year the Community and Adult Education Budget was renamed the Adult Literacy and Community Education (ALCE) Budget with a higher priority being given to literacy work. It was stipulated that each Adult Education Board would have an Adult Literacy Organiser as a member. In 1992, the Green Paper “Education for a Changing World” was published and it gave adult literacy a specific section with proposals and recommendations for its future development. *Charting our Education Future –White Paper on Education 1995* also included a paragraph, “Literacy Programmes”, and acknowledged the importance of basic levels of Literacy and Numeracy as an indispensable prerequisite for independent living. It set a policy priority to ensure that “suitable and effective programmes are in place for all who wish to overcome Literacy and Numeracy problems”.

The Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) was established by the Department of Education and Science in 1990 for DEIS schools. The role of HSCL Coordinator was established and part of their remit was to implement literacy/numeracy initiatives. As a result, connections were made between the HSCL coordinators and the Literacy Organisers in their areas and so broadened out the traditional Education System to the community. The National Programme of Second Chance Education, the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) was introduced in 1989 and was aided by the European Social Fund from 1990. The Department of Social Welfare agreed in the same year to allow unemployed recipients to return to learning and keep their Social Welfare Allowance. The introduction of VTOS also identified an increased number of adults who needed to improve their literacy skills if they were to make the most of the new opportunities for Education and Training available to them. During the Irish Presidency of the E.U., 1996 was proclaimed the European Year of Lifelong Learning. It was envisaged that the year would stimulate a wide ranging exchange of ideas, experiences, hopes and concerns and thereby find the means to

bridge some growing gaps in the Education System. Lifelong Learning it was stated should further the fight against the failure at school level which leads to marginalisation. Another important message of the year was that all individuals have a fundamental right to a proper level of education and training in order to develop their potential and achieve economic, social and cultural integration.

### **The Pivotal Year of 1997**

March of 1997 saw the publication of the results of IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) which had been carried out by the Education Research Centre St Patrick's College Drumcondra in 1995. This research confirmed the extent of the adult literacy problem in Ireland with 1 in 4 adults or 25% of the population having very low levels of basic skills and a further 30% with below average literacy skills.

**Comparison of Ireland's Performance in IALS with Other Countries in IALS**  
**Proportion of the adult population with Level 1 (lowest) literacy**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Prose</b>	<b>Document</b>	<b>Quantitative</b>
Canada	16.6	18.2	16.9
Germany	14.4	9.0	6.7
Netherlands	10.5	10.1	10.3
Sweden	7.5	6.2	6.6
Switzerland (French)	17.6	16.2	12.9
Switzerland (German)	19.3	18.1	14.2
USA	20.7	23.7	21.0
Belgium (Flemish)	18.4	15.3	16.7
UK	21.8	23.3	23.2
Australia	17.0	17.0	16.8
New Zealand	18.4	21.4	20.4
<b>Average</b>	<b>16.6</b>	<b>16.2</b>	<b>15.0</b>
Poland	42.6	45.4	39.1
<b>Ireland</b>	<b>22.6</b>	<b>25.3</b>	<b>25.0</b>

These findings could not be ignored and the government was propelled into action and showed its commitment to tackling the adult literacy problem. For the first time in the history of the state, a Minister for Adult Education, Willie O'Dea, was appointed and in a meeting with NALA confirmed his commitment to secure an increase in funding. This commitment was confirmed by freeing up money from the Structural Funds and in 1997 the

ALCE budget was increased from a very small base to £1 million and increased again in 1998 to £2 million. The new minister also committed that a National Literacy Policy would be included in the Green Paper on Education which was in preparation.

It became obvious to Adult Literacy Organisers at this time that their work load was about to increase considerably. All of these initiatives and the increase in funding would have an impact on the workload of the Adult Literacy Service and particularly the Adult Literacy Organiser. However little had changed from the point of view of supports being put in place for the Adult Literacy Service. Although the VECs were now, through the ALCE budget, nationally the funders of the Adult Literacy service, progress was slow with regard to putting in place proper remuneration for Adult Literacy Organisers and they had no status, no job contracts and no job security. It was time for action, we were the people at the coal face, we set the standards and delivered the service, we needed to get ourselves organised as nobody else was going to do it for us. In May 1997, the idea of forming an Adult Literacy Organisers' Association was first mooted at a Dublin Region Organisers' meeting.

### **Moving towards ALOA**

In 1991, an Organisers' Conference was held in Killaloe organised by NALA. The Organisers' Forum became an annual event as we met in Howth, Cork, Tramore, a different venue each year. They were very special events for Adult Literacy Organisers at that time. The Killaloe conference was described by one organiser as "a great leap forward in our perception of ourselves as a homogenous group with the power to direct our own circumstances". Each year we networked, identified our needs and issues, exchanged information and reached a consensus regarding the actions that needed to be taken to propel ourselves forward. We also received training that helped us grow in confidence in our roles.

In 1996 it was decided that once a year was not enough, that in order to achieve our potential as a cohesive group we needed to channel our energies in a more structured manner. That year, with the support of NALA, regional networks were set up around the country. In the regional groups organisers had a bigger pool of ideas to draw from, a larger support network and a reinforced sense of the value of our work. Each of the regions was represented at national level through a regional co-ordinator. The co-ordinators met with NALA on a regular basis to report on needs and concerns.

The informal nature of the service had in some respects been beneficial to the service in that it was practice driven and based on a learner-centred philosophy which attempted to offer a



positive experience of education to adults who had been let down by the mainstream system. However, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the lack of professional status and lack of qualifications could place the Adult literacy Organiser in a vulnerable position as the service expanded and the funding for the service was becoming more substantial.

After an extensive process of consultation between the Department of Education, the Vocational Education Committees, NALA and WIT, finally in 1997 the NALA-WIT (Waterford Institute of Technology) Accreditation Project was established. The National Certificate in Training and Development Adult Basic Education Management was launched and in 1997 twenty-seven organisers attended the course which was delivered in All Hallows College Drumcondra. This created another context for organisers to meet and consolidate. The course highlighted the management status of Literacy Organisers and the pivotal role Organisers held in the area of Adult Literacy and Community Education and was a key element in the professionalization of the service.

Coincidentally, in 1997, NALA was in the process of conducting a Review of its work to develop a strategic plan for the future. A consultant was appointed to conduct a series of 5 regional workshops. These workshops looked at the role of organisers, their aims and objectives and their future in the broader context of literacy development. The outcome was clear, as with the setting up of NALA in 1977, the momentum was there for a separate Adult Literacy Organisers' Association to be formed. NALA had done amazing work in raising awareness of the adult literacy problem, in lobbying politicians for funding and in developing best practice. We had played a major role in all that work but NALA is a membership organisation of students, tutors and organisers. In order to have a voice in the fast moving world of Adult Literacy provision we came to the conclusion that having our own representative organisation was a necessity.

It was 1997 and we set to work to bring about the formation of ALOA, the Adult Literacy Organisers Association. Much needed to be done, we needed to define the role of the Adult Literacy Organiser, draw up a job description, clarify who we would represent, develop a constitution, define our aims and objectives, work on pay and conditions and organise to join a union.

## **Allies**

We needed allies. NALA continued to be our most important ally and through their representation, meetings with the IVEA, CEOA and AEOA were established. Rodger Curran

the CEO for Kilkenny, became a true ally and offered to host meetings in Butler House and so what came to be known as the “Kilkenny meetings” commenced. It was at these meetings with all the relevant organisations in attendance that proposed job descriptions, qualifications and criteria for the employment of organisers were ironed out.

An ALO from the Dublin region who was already a member was in contact with TUI to organise for ALOs to become members of that trade union. TUI assigned Annette Dolan to negotiate for us, another ally.

Margaret Kelly, Principal Officer in the Adult Education sector of the Department of Education also became an important ally.

The timing was perfect. In 1997, the Social Partnership process, which was set up in 1987 as part of the Programme for National Recovery, was expanded to include the Community and Voluntary sector through the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF). With the inclusion of the C and V pillar, a voice was given at national level to disadvantaged communities and people with disabilities and it was hoped substantial progress regarding social inclusion would be made. Through the anti - poverty strategy, links were made between poverty and lack of literacy skills. The Department of Education had to take notice and act. In 1997 Micheál Martin was appointed Minister for Education and he became an ally of the Adult Literacy Service.

The Department realised the value of the flexible, innovative, supportive, learner-centred approach of the Adult Literacy Service and they were concerned to keep this community based approach. They were worried about impractical financial demands for out of hours work if the service was to be delivered by the traditional education sector, so they were open at that time to engage with ALOs to develop the new permanent position of Adult Literacy Organiser. Margaret Kelly had the support of the Department and her minister Micheál Martin and the timing was perfect to bring about a successful negotiation with ALOs.

### **Launch of ALOA and The Green Paper on Adult Education**

Work continued on all the other aspects of forming an organisation. The Mid Western region did Trojan work on drafting a constitution. Eventually everything was in place and the Adult Literacy Organisers’ Association was officially launched at 6pm on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> January 1999 in All Hallows College in Drumcondra. Although we continued to be closely aligned

with NALA we now had the autonomy of a separate organisation with our own aims, objectives and voice.

In November 1998, the Department of Education published the *Green Paper on Adult Education “Adult Education in the Era of Lifelong Learning”* and the Adult Literacy Development Fund was announced.

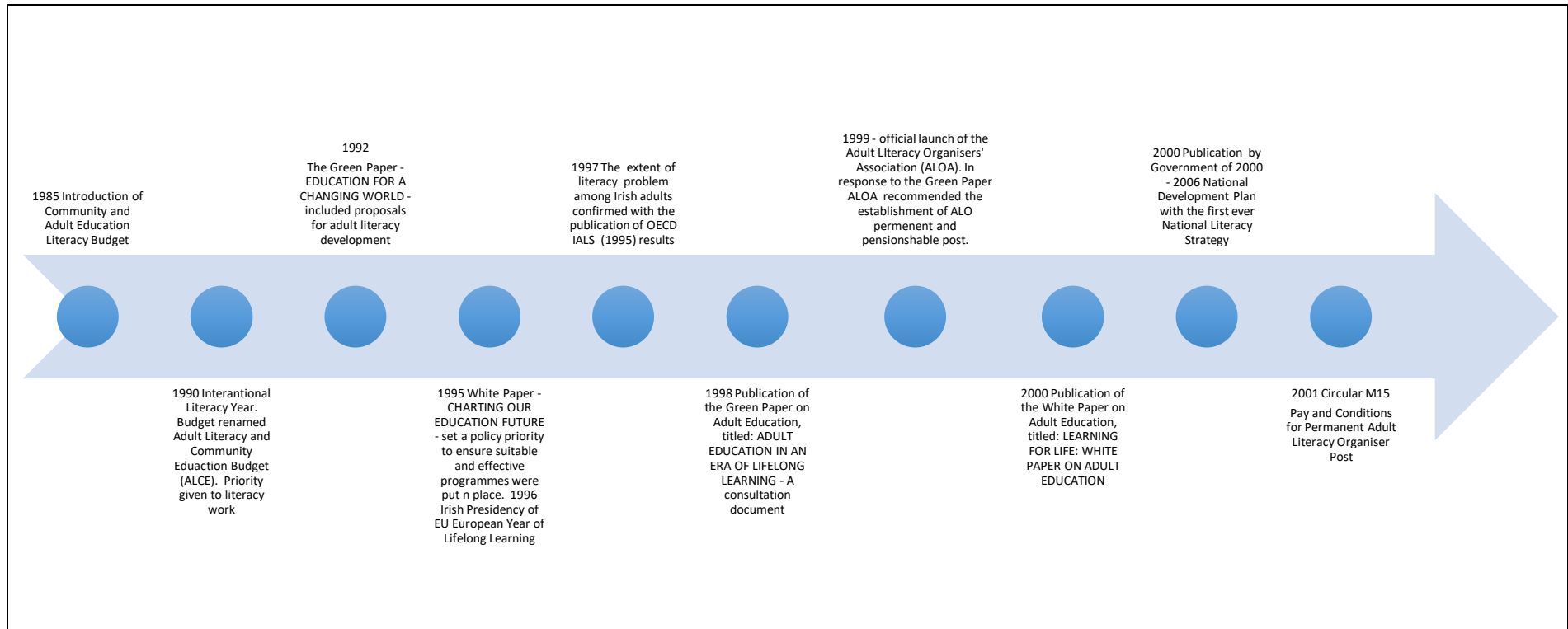
Early in 1999 we were in a position to give our response as an organisation to this important document. We welcomed its publication and the substantial focus on Adult Literacy needs and its commitment towards developing a National Adult Literacy Programme. However, at that time 2/3 of ALOs were still employed on a temporary, part-time basis and approximately 85% of tuition was provided by volunteers.

We pointed out in our response the absence of any mention of local Adult Literacy Schemes and the scant recognition of the VECs and the expertise developed by Adult Literacy Organisers in identifying and addressing literacy needs at local and national level. We recommended the establishment of the post of Adult Literacy Organiser as a permanent, pensionable position. A further recommendation was the need for the support of administration staff, resource tutors, premises and equipment to ensure that the proposed National Adult Literacy Programme could be successfully implemented.

### **Permanent Adult Literacy Organiser Positions**

Through 1999, 2000 and early 2001, the ALOA and TUI had numerous meetings with Margaret Kelly in the Department of Education and finally after much discussion and many drafts on the 5<sup>th</sup> April 2001 “Circular M15 2001 Pay and Conditions for Permanent Adult Literacy Organiser Post” landed on the desks of Chief Executive Officers of VECs. It had been a long time coming but with the support of Principal Officer Margaret Kelly and Annette Dolan of TUI a fair and progressive agreement was arrived at and the very welcome new post of Adult Literacy Organiser was launched.

## Adult Literacy Organisers' Association – History Timeline



## **Developments within the Adult Literacy Service 2000 +**

The *White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life* (2000) provided a template for the development of the Adult Education sector as part of an overall Government commitment to establishing a comprehensive system of lifelong learning for all citizens. It prioritised adult literacy and included a National Adult Literacy Programme.

Since the publication of the IALS results funding allocated to Adult Literacy increased considerably from £0.85 million before IALS and increasing incrementally to £2 million in 1998, £7.8 million in 2000 and then to €18 million in 2004. The increase in resources brought with it a requirement for the expansion of the existing Adult Literacy Service. The coming together of a wide range of stakeholders e.g. DES, Department of Social Welfare, FÁS and Teagasc to discuss Adult Literacy around this time brought literacy into a wider context beyond Education.

The National Adult Literacy Programme set out specific priorities including:

- Expansion of the client base, prioritising in particular those with the lowest literacy levels;
- Initiatives to encourage more participation of particular sections of the population including, Unemployed people, Travellers, Refugees and Asylum seekers;
- Innovative approaches to include ICT;
- Family Literacy Programmes;
- Increased training content within Community Employment Schemes;
- Literacy in the Workplace.

The National Adult Literacy Programme also stipulated the implementation of quality assurance measures.

### **English language provision for ESOL students**

The *White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life* (2000) set the policy context for the development of ESOL provision and emphasised the need to encourage immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers to engage in education. The Department of Education and Science (DES) stated that this support was to be made available within the limitations of the Adult Literacy and Community Education (ALCE) budget.

The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) published the *Framework for Educational Provision for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and other Non-Nationals*; this was based on the IVEA Working Group Report (2001). The key objectives of the framework, to

be applied nationally by the thirty-three VECs, referred to lobbying Government and political parties to implement the recommendations of the report; establishing communications and working in coordination with other relevant organisations and developing a model of provision with a focus on language and literacy.

The adult literacy schemes responded to the language and literacy needs of the target group as they emerged in local communities. Adult Literacy Organisers worked in co-operation with Government services and statutory bodies, meeting potential students, assessing their needs and arranging appropriate tuition.

The structure of ESOL provision varied considerably from VEC to VEC despite the key objectives of the IVEA Working Group Report (2001). Some VECs allocated funding from the ALCE budget and created a separate scheme or service for ESOL provision, while other VECs sanctioned the appointment of ESOL Co-ordinators working within the adult literacy service with responsibility for ESOL students and provision.

### **FÁS/VEC Return to Education Programme**

The Return to Education programme (REP) involved three organisations, NALA, FÁS and VECs. It was designed to meet the basic education needs of Community Employment (CE) participants, which was the main state-funded work experience programme for unemployed adults. The programme, funded and administered by FÁS, was established in 1998 following a research report by NALA *Access and Participation in Adult Literacy Schemes* (Bailey and Coleman). Bailey and Coleman identified the need for work-based programmes to support access and participation of those with literacy difficulties in education. This coincided with FÁS identifying literacy difficulties, of a proportion of CE participants, as a barrier to progression into mainstream employment. The REP was intended to give CE participants an opportunity to participate in intensive basic education provision. Participation was voluntary and participants were released from their (CE) workplace to attend. Programmes generally took place three mornings a week, were student-centred with a maximum of fifteen participants in each programme. The curriculum included literacy, numeracy, personal development and IT. Adult Literacy Organisers played a key role in establishing and supporting REP on the ground. Community Employment Supervisors were crucial in recruiting and supporting the CE participants with regard to their participation in the programme.

From October 1999 – June 2000 REP was delivered on a pilot basis in fifteen settings throughout the country and the expansion of the initiative was planned. The evaluation of the fifteen original programmes was positive, with participants citing a high level of satisfaction. The REP model was clearly beneficial, CE participants with literacy needs were being identified, their needs addressed and education was a key element of the work experience programme. Some of the recommendations from the evaluation were implemented and the key findings informed future REP.

The Return to Education programme was expanded nationwide and continued until 2012. The experience and learning gained from the programme informed future intensive education provision within the adult literacy service.

### **Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE)**

In December 2005, the Department of Education & Science (DES) announced the introduction of a model of tuition in adult literacy and basic education for adults who were educationally disadvantaged: “Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education” (ITABE). The aim was to provide participants, in groups of 6 to 8 students, an opportunity to access 6 hours tuition per week over a 14 week period. This was a joint initiative led by the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) in partnership with the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). It was supported by an Advisory Group, comprised of representatives of the DES, the IVEA, the VEC Adult Literacy Forum, NALA and the National Centre for Guidance in Education. The timeframe for completion of this pilot project was 6 months, January to June 2006.

ITABE programmes were allocated to VECs and Adult Literacy Organisers as well as Adult Education Officers and Adult Education Guidance Counsellors were encouraged to participate in the initiative. ALOs were invited to apply to their VEC for ITABE programmes. The funding was quite generous and included hours for project co-ordination, pre-programme planning and direct tuition as well as an allocation for materials. The DES set guidelines for the design of local programmes and while the subject areas were clearly stated, it was acknowledged by the DES that a level of flexibility needed to be maintained to meet the needs of individual students in order for the project to be effective.

The course content of the ITABE programme was literacy, numeracy, oracy, learning to learn and an introduction to IT, and while accreditation was not compulsory, the option to achieve accreditation at FETAC Level 3 was to be made available to students. Each

programme was to be designed to meet the basic education needs of the students in the programme and a measureable increase in the literacy and numeracy levels of students was expected. Each student skills' levels were to be measured and documented pre and post course. A standard assessment instrument was used across all ITABE programmes to facilitate a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the project.

The ITABE pilot project was successful. Amendments were made to the initial project and it was extended. ITABE has stood the test of time and is now an integral part of adult literacy provision.

### **HSE/VEC SkillVEC Project**

In 2004/2005, the Health Services Executive (HSE) under the SKILL Project (Securing Knowledge Intra Lifelong Learning) – Education, Training and Development Initiative for Support Staff in the Irish Health Services identified the skills and competencies deemed necessary for its staff at two levels (a) Support Worker and (b) Supervisor.

The HSE sought tenders from organisations to deliver these competencies through a programme that would lead to national certification. After much consultation it was decided that the CDVEC, in association with other VECs, would deliver identified training to HSE support workers and supervisory staff on a country-wide basis. The project was named the SkillVEC Project.

The programme for Support Workers was deemed appropriate at FETAC Level 5 and for Supervisory Staff at FETAC Level 6. The development of the programme involved examining existing FETAC modules, identifying the gaps between the competencies covered by the existing modules and writing new FETAC modules to bridge the gaps, this was done in consultation with HSE staff.

In their tender for the project the CDVEC cited the wide range of specialist support services available, including the Adult Literacy Service. The expertise of the Adult Literacy Service in working with adults returning to education after many years' absence was seen as important in order to ensure that any additional supports needed to make it a successful experience for participants were in place.

The CDVEC with the help of its Adult Education Organisers, Adult Education Guidance Service and Adult Literacy Service developed an assessment template and it was agreed that all participants would have a pre-learning assessment and any needs identified would be



addressed by offering supports to participants as part of the programme. If a literacy need was identified an appointment was made with the local ALO.

For some participants FETAC Level 3 or Level 4 programmes rather than, FETAC Level 5 or Level 6 were considered more appropriate as a starting level. The Adult Literacy Service delivered the Level 3 and Level 4 programmes where the tutor/learner ratio was agreed at 1:5 and the class contact time, was set at 315 hours for a major award. Participants were released from their workplace to attend SkillVEC programmes, demonstrating a high level of support by HSE management to the professional development of their staff. The programme was deemed successful from all perspectives: from that of the participants, who had the opportunity to upskill with supports as required built in to the programme; from the organisational perspectives of the HSE who met the objectives of the SKILL Project through this initiative; and the VEC who successfully developed, delivered and managed a national accredited programme to enhance the competencies of HSE support workers and supervisory staff.

### **ICT a New Literacy**

As set out in the National Adult Literacy Programme, the definition of literacy was expanded to include ICT, thereby allowing adult literacy services to offer ICT classes as part of a broader adult literacy programme. This additional component or element attracted many adults who wished to address their ICT skills shortage. The range of ICT tuition options varied from introductory taster courses to accredited courses at FETAC Levels 2, 3 and 4. The inclusion of ICT in adult literacy provision/programmes had an unanticipated outcome, as many of the adults who made contact with the service to address ICT needs became involved in other courses available through the service, namely literacy and/or numeracy.

### **Themed Literacy**

Themed literacy was introduced as a ‘vehicle’ to improve skills. It utilised topics or areas of interest of the students to improve literacy and numeracy skills. Many adult literacy services developed programmes, both accredited and non-accredited, based on the interest, knowledge and experience of their students. Subjects such as Cookery; Gardening; Photography, History Family Literacy, Intercultural Studies and more recently Driver Theory Test provided the content of the programme. The focus of the programme was to enhance the students’

knowledge and understanding of the subject while at the same time improving their literacy and numeracy skills. The benefits of themed literacy were numerous, the adult had an interest in the topic or content and in many cases built on prior knowledge and experience. The content was often immediately relevant and applicable to the student's everyday life. The literacy and numeracy skills being taught were personally relevant and therefore meaningful. The content was adult appropriate regardless of the literacy and/or numeracy skill levels being taught

## **The Adult Literacy Services reaching out to Local Communities**

### **Drug Rehabilitation Groups**

In many urban areas the Adult Literacy Service have been involved in supporting Community Employment Drug Rehabilitation Schemes. These Special Status Community Employment Schemes provide a rehabilitation, training and development opportunity for individuals recovering from substance misuse. They focus on providing opportunities for training and development for participants working towards recovery and re-integration into active community and working life.

The services provide comprehensive day programmes which usually include Recovery, Education, Outdoor Activities and Holistic strands. The different strands complement each other, helping participants to improve their physical and mental well-being, develop healthy ways to cope with stress and develop problem-solving skills. The aim, ultimately, is for service users to progress to independent living; to reduce or abstain from substance misuse and to reach individual goals in terms of employment and/or further education.

The Education Strand, which is provided by the local Adult Literacy Service plays a considerable part in these Drug Rehabilitation Programmes, particularly in helping the participants reach their individual goals. Literacy tutors go into centres and deliver core education and training components such as maths, communications and computer applications/skills. They often contribute to the holistic strand also by delivering activities like Art & Design, Crafts and Drama. The courses provided by the Adult literacy tutors are QQI accredited and enhance employment and progression opportunities for the participants.

Those in recovery from drug abuse have often become addicted at a young age and have missed out on second level education. Drug use also affects your attention, memory and ability to learn. The flexible, innovative, supportive, learner-centred approach of the Adult Literacy Service is particularly suited to working with adults in recovery. Adult Literacy Tutors working on these programmes are often working with groups where learners are at different levels and different abilities to engage on a particular day.

### **Family Literacy**

Family Literacy validates the home as a place of learning in itself, not just as an adjunct to school learning. Courses focus on working with parents and carers to encourage them to discover and understand their importance as their children's first teachers and to develop their own literacy and numeracy skills. Adult learners are motivated to improve their literacy skills for many reasons, including personal development or the demands of their job. Sometimes adults choose to return to education themselves in order to improve their own level of literacy or numeracy so that they can help the children in their lives. Family literacy programmes respond to this need and have their basis in local communities.

Family literacy programmes are delivered in various community settings, Adult Literacy Services, Adult Education Centres, Traveller Centres, Family Centres and ESOL Projects. The Home School Community Liaison Scheme is a particularly important point of connection for family literacy work in local areas. The HSCL programme was set up in 1990 in DEIS schools which are based in areas associated with educational disadvantage and early school leaving. The HSCL co-ordinators have vital links with families and, because their role specifically connects school and home, their work is clearly related to the aims of family literacy projects. Adult Literacy Organisers and HSCL co-ordinators set up important alliances and effective partnerships to deliver meaningful courses to parents and carers based on their specific needs. Courses which are delivered in local schools aim to build the confidence of parents in their role as children's first teachers, help adults to understand the importance of books in their children's lives and help them to enjoy reading to their children. Parents are also helped and supported if they wish to work on their own literacy and numeracy skills. Specific modules are delivered such as Storysacks, an innovative tool which can be developed by parents and with the aid of props, Storysacks can bring stories alive for children and families. Other relevant courses such as Cookery, First Aid, Computers, Maths and Irish are also offered to parents, some as short courses but also as longer accredited courses.

When parents are involved in their child's learning, it positively impacts on early years literacy, their performance at school and educational outcomes into the teenage years.

### **Working with Traveller Communities**

The Travelling Community is an important priority group with particular needs. The Adult Literacy Services offers support to groups of travellers in their own settings where possible or in community centres. Learning opportunities which include literacy, numeracy, computers and the arts are provided in one-to-one and/or group settings depending on the needs of the learner. The learner-directed approach of the Adult Literacy Service is particularly suited to working with travellers. Tutors recognise that travellers come with their own unique experience, knowledge and skills which can be used as a rich resource for learning.

Family Literacy programmes as described above are also delivered to traveller groups and in common with other parents are used to build capacity amongst traveller parents who themselves for the most part missed out on school.

A special themed literacy and numeracy project was the building of a Barrel Top Wagon by traveller men in Clonmel in 2006. This was a project based in South Tipperary VEC Adult Learning Scheme where a group of traveller men, drawing from their own traditional way of living and supported in their learning by two dedicated literacy tutors, not only improved their reading, writing and numeracy skills but also gained many other skills. The success of the project and the learning of new skills also enhanced their confidence and self-esteem.

### **Adults with Learning Disabilities**

Due to the growth, development and increased publicity of the literacy movement and the increased integration and inclusion in the community of people with learning disabilities, from the mid-90s on increasingly adults with learning disabilities wished to avail of VEC literacy classes. The Adult Literacy Service was approached by individuals often through parents or family members and by local agencies working with adults with learning disabilities seeking tuition for groups or individuals within the scheme. With an increase in demand for places generally and an increasing demand for inclusion of adults with learning disabilities, Adult literacy Schemes found themselves under pressure.

There was an increasing demand for guidelines to be developed and a standard of good practice to be introduced. In May 1999 NALA commissioned a consultant Monica MacNamara. ALOs were consulted at the Adult Literacy Conference in Ennis in May 1999

and incorporating their experience and expertise and the expertise of learning disability agencies, guidelines for the inclusion of adults with learning disabilities into literacy schemes were drawn up. It was intended that the guidelines would provide a clear and helpful framework which individual literacy schemes in conjunction with the relevant agencies could fine tune to meet their particular needs and resources. The Guidelines included 12 recommendations in addition to very useful resources for assessment and review.

The Adult Literacy Service has a clear interest in facilitating adults with learning disabilities and according to the resources available endeavours to facilitate and integrate those who seek tuition into their schemes. Adults with learning difficulties are assessed and are accordingly offered one to one tuition or tuition in small groups.

## **Quality Assurance Measures**

### **Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education (ABE)**

The Quality Framework (QF) was a system of Self Evaluation in ABE developed by NALA following extensive consultation with stakeholders. It was a strategy to guide and monitor quality standards in ABE. The aim was to support Adult Literacy Services to develop good practice and to endorse existing good practice. The QF, which was funded by the Department of Education and Science (DES), facilitated Adult Literacy Services to examine and improve practice using an action research approach.

The QF was piloted in a number of Adult Literacy Services in early 2002 with plans to evaluate and refine the Framework by 2006 for continued usage within the ABE sector.

The QF was underpinned by Guiding Principles: Voluntary participation; Confidentiality; Respect for cultural difference; Social interaction and informality, and Inclusiveness, which are the values or ethos of ABE.

The QF was a systematic approach to self-evaluation in ABE, it was practical and user friendly and allowed each service to take control of the process. It was not prescriptive in *what* was to be evaluated but it set out *how* aspects of the service should be evaluated. The QF promoted reflection on practice in a practical way and encouraged a cyclical approach to service improvement. Examine - reflect – plan – implement plan – re-examine – reflect – plan. The development of the QF provided Adult Literacy Services nationally with the tools

to systematically examine and improve practice. This allowed the service to respond in a systematic way to the many changes taking place at that time. The funding and support of the QF by DES acknowledged the benefits of reflection and planned change and also the need for additional resources if this was to become an integral part of ABE practice.

### **Mapping the Learning Journey**

Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ) came about as result of the Quality Framework Process. It was a tool to be used by student and tutor in a practical way, it provided a framework to support the teaching and learning process and maps progress in basic literacy and numeracy. MLJ was an aspect of the Quality Framework, under the Teaching and Learning quality area and was grounded in the core principles of good adult literacy practice.

The framework could be adapted to suit the requirements of each student at the different stages of their learning journey. It could help student and tutor to review their work, identify strengths and highlight areas that needed further work. The four cornerstones of MLJ were (1) Knowledge and skills; (2) Fluency; (3) Depth of understanding and critical awareness and (4) Range of application. They helped give the ‘full’ view of how well students could use what they knew in their daily lives. They illustrated the breadth and depth of learning and encompassed much more than the development of technical skills and knowledge.

Knowledge and skills include communication by *speaking* and *listening*, *writing* to convey information, ideas and feelings, *reading* with understanding and *using numbers* to carryout everyday tasks. The *process* cornerstones, 2, 3 and 4, provided a way of recording the growth in self-confidence; self-belief and independence of the student and how well the student carried out everyday tasks and activities.

MLJ allowed students and tutors to assess progress on a nine-point scale taking account of (a) the level of difficulty of the task or activity and (b) how well the students could carry out a task or activity. It was a process of on-going reflection and review by student and tutor of the student’s progress towards reaching his/her own goal. It supported students in three key ways: students could see their own progress and blocks to progress and students could work out how best to tackle or address the blocks. It placed the student at the centre of the learning process and supported the tutor to work strategically with the student to achieve his/her goals.

## **Supporting the Development of Accreditation Standards**

Achieving accreditation can be an important milestone for adult literacy students returning to education. In the 80s and early 90s, in the absence of a suitable Irish Awarding System, ALOs relied on City and Guilds to deliver a flexible, relevant and personalized route to accreditation for students. To become an approved City and Guilds Centre local Adult Literacy Services were involved in a rigorous assessment procedure. Students submitted portfolios for City and Guilds Wordpower.

The National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was set up in 1991 with responsibility for quality assurance and monitoring of national standards in vocational education and training programmes. Ireland now had its own awards system suitable for adult students. Originally NCVA awards were offered at Levels 1 and 2, which were the equivalent of Leaving Cert and Post Leaving Cert. Adult Literacy Organisers became involved with the NCVA to develop standards for a Foundation level accreditation at the equivalent of the Junior Cert.

The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) founded in 2001 was the successor to the NCVA. The NCVA Foundation Level award became Level 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Again the expertise of Adult Literacy Organisers was called upon to assist in developing the missing awards at levels 1 and 2. ALOs formed part of a FETAC Expert Working Group of stakeholders in 2004 to develop awards at Levels 1 and 2 which were suitable for some adult literacy students. From 2008 FETAC awards were available at Level 1 and 2 and were an important resource to the Adult Literacy Service.

## **To Close**

The publication of the results of IALS was the catalyst for a substantial increase in funding, leading to major developments in adult literacy services nationally. This spiralled the expansion of the workload of ALOs. The time was right for the establishment of a representative organisation for Adult Literacy Organisers. January 1999 saw the birth of ALOA, who together with our allies, worked tirelessly to negotiate a fair and progressive agreement for the new permanent Adult Literacy Organiser post. April 2001 saw the arrival of Circular M15/2001, which detailed pay and conditions for full-time Adult Literacy Organisers.

Through ALOA, ALOs have a structure to support effective communication across the country. Regional meetings facilitate discussion and debate at local level and provide a mechanism for peer support. Post 1997 was a time of great change in the field of Adult Literacy and the formation of ALOA in 1999 supported ALOs in managing that change, while the establishment of the ALO post in 2001 was a very important milestone.

Establishing a representative organisation for ALOs in the form of ALOA was deemed to be a necessity in 90s and played a major role in ALOs managing the changing landscape at that time. Change is constant, thereby ensuring the relevance of ALOA and acknowledging that it has an important role to play in supporting ALOs as they manage developments within Adult Literacy in the future.



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