



## **Irish Congress of Trade Unions**

# **Submission to Consultation on Adult Literacy, Numeracy & Digital Literacy 10 Year Strategy**

**January 2021**

*“Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.”*

## **Principle 1, European Pillar of Social Rights**

### **Introduction**

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is the largest civil society body on the island of Ireland, representing some 750,000 workers in both jurisdictions and across all sectors of both economies. Congress welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the development of a new strategy on Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy.

Congress strongly believes that the consultation process currently taking place under the aegis of Solas can play a key role in enhancing literacy skills across society, augment the national skills base and facilitate a broader, more diverse and fuller participation in wider civil society.

Congress shares many of the views and concerns put forward as part of this process, both from affiliated trade unions and also from key bodies such as the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and Aontas.

### **A Public Good**

The starting point for any debate on education, literacy or skills must be a reaffirmation of its essential role as a ‘public good’ and one which delivers benefits not just at an individual level, but across the whole economy and wider society.

Poor skill levels and low participation rates for learners serve only to hamper economic development and social progress.

As noted in the *Literacy for Life*, the joint report from NALA and TASC:

“Current educational policies that are oriented to universal primary education but neglect literacy for adults and out-of-school youth are therefore insufficiently oriented to goals of social justice and human development.

“They implicitly penalise the most unfortunate members of any society, who for various reasons (such as lack of access to equitable and good quality schooling, gender discrimination, poverty, illness, child labour, war, or lack of aptitude) are not able to achieve literacy and numeracy capabilities during their childhood.”<sup>1</sup>

In that context, it is incumbent on policymakers to ensure the creation and ongoing maintenance of a strong, well-resourced and progressive learning framework that facilitates, supports and encourages continuous participation in education, at all levels.

Over time, individual trades, occupations and industries will change and evolve. Some will fall foul of technology and others will arise as a result of technological developments.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nala.ie/publications/literacy-for-life/>

Therefore, the focus of any sustainable skills or learning policy must be on equipping people with the skills necessary to participate fully in civil society and adapt to changes in the world of work.

Many of these change processes are already underway and their impact is currently being felt at both a regional and national level.

In March 2020, the National Economic & Social Council (NESC) published a highly significant report that outlined the two key challenges confronting our economy and society, namely the twin transitions to the digital and low carbon economies.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, planning for both should have begun some years ago, particularly in the case of the low carbon transition, which has clearer timelines and targets.

These were largely determined by the Paris Agreement, which Ireland signed up to in 2015, an event that should have triggered immediate large scale preparatory and planning work across the broader education and skills sector sector.

That did not happen and that failure is reflected in the widespread policy incoherence on the issue, the loss of jobs in the Midlands region and the absence of any bespoke training or skills initiatives for affected workers, let alone the creation of new and replacement jobs for those impacted by the low carbon transition.

Such policy failure invariably erodes public and worker trust and makes any future transition planning far more difficult to implement.

As NESC pointed out in their landmark report, both transitions will almost certainly have a transformative impact on our economy and society and can yield many positive benefits - but only if they are delivered in a just and fair manner:

“The transition to a low-carbon and digital Ireland must be just: lifelong learning, training and education, effective support for viable but vulnerable companies, and ensuring that funding has the greatest possible local impact must be the priority for government as part of making sure it is.”

This requires that “the State plays its part in ensuring mission-oriented actions to achieve a high-quality jobs economy, and proactively addresses employment vulnerability as part of a Just Transition.”

The NESC report notes that “substantial preparation is required for a Just Transition, whether it is led by government, regional or local/community-based actors, and that plans must be followed up with government support.”

Crucially, as multiple international examples demonstrate - the transition carried out in Germany’s Ruhr region being one - “the Council’s work also shows how Social Dialogue is an effective mechanism for fostering trust and adopting a problem-solving approach to transition.”

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nesc.ie/news-events/press-releases/nesc-publishes-council-report-no-149-addressing-employment-vulnerability-as-part-of-a-just-transition-in-ireland-2/>

Existing and potential skills deficits have also been identified in the context of the *Future Jobs Ireland* which noted that skills associated with ‘economic resilience’ were cognitive skills, problem-solving, logic, social and emotional skills.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, Cedefop has also repeatedly highlighted the need for ‘future-ready societies’ to develop a renewed approach to upskilling, underpinned by lifelong learning.

But as NALA has pointed out, Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025 set a target to reduce the numbers of adults with less than upper secondary to 7% by 2020, the same target included in the 2007 National Skills Strategy - and a target we have yet to reach.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The EU Context

In 2016, the European Council expressed concern at emerging skills and learning deficits across EU member states.

Unfortunately, this emerging and disturbing trend will almost certainly have been fuelled by the short sighted policies of economic retrenchment and austerity promoted by key EU institutions in response to the 2008 financial crash.

Nonetheless, a resultant Council recommendation - *Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults* - called for member state action to address and arrest this trend.<sup>5</sup>

Highlighting the need for urgent action, the Council noted that almost one in five adult Europeans struggled with basic reading and writing, basic calculation and digital skills:

“Without these skills and with low levels of qualification they are at higher risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.”

The Council’s 2016 recommendation called on member states - “in close cooperation with **social partners and education and training providers**” - to provide adults with low skill levels access to ‘upskilling pathways’ that would help them acquire “a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital competence...”

Such skills and competencies, the Council noted, were “relevant for the labour market and active participation in society.”

Revisiting the issue in 2019, the Council sought to introduce a further note of urgency into an EU wide process that had clearly seen insufficient progress, to date.<sup>6</sup>

With ‘major transformations’ occurring in labour markets the delivery of quality and inclusive education had now become “even more crucial, and the Union faces an upskilling and reskilling imperative requiring strategic approaches towards lifelong learning and skills development.”

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<sup>3</sup> <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Business-Sectoral-Initiatives/Future-Jobs/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nala.ie/publications/literacy-now/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC\\_2016\\_484\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001)

<sup>6</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/>

The Council sounded the alarm on this growing learning deficit, pointing out that by 2022 some 54% of all employees across the EU could require significant upskilling/ reskilling.

Closer to home, the EU Commission's **2020 Semester report for Ireland** highlighted the fact that digital skill levels here remain below the EU average, stating: "Progress in the share of people with basic and above basic digital skills requires close monitoring."<sup>7</sup>

Following from the report, country specific recommendations for Ireland required that initiatives around upskilling be taken "in cooperation **with social partners.**"

They also called specifically for the government to take action to: "Support employment through developing skills. Address the risk of (the) digital divide, including in the education sector."

### **3. Social Dialogue & Workplace Learning**

It is clear that no successful or sustainable programme of this nature can be delivered in the absence of social dialogue and the involvement of worker organisations.

Indeed, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) - to which Congress is affiliated - has repeatedly emphasised the "shared responsibility" among unions, employers and government, in respect of the learning and skills agenda.

In response to the EU Commission's Skills Agenda (2020), the ETUC noted that: "European workers demand strong commitments from employers on upskilling and reskilling and expect the European Commission to take effective steps to engage employers to ensure that all workers have equal access to quality and inclusive training as a right."

This approach is mirrored by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) which has highlighted how "establishing an effective lifelong learning ecosystem is a joint responsibility, requiring the active engagement and **support of governments, employers and workers** as well as education institutions....governments must broaden and reconfigure institutions such as skills development policies, employment services and training systems."<sup>8</sup>

Speaking in December 2020 before the Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise Trade & Employment, Congress General Secretary Patricia King pointed out that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) had cited specific weaknesses in training provision here:

"Irish businesses provide less training to employees than those in other OECD countries. Just one in ten manufacturing workers in Ireland took part in training in 2019. This compared to one in four in Sweden and Finland."

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<sup>7</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2020-european\\_semester\\_country-report-ireland\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2020-european_semester_country-report-ireland_en.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---ifp\\_skills/documents/publication/wcms\\_711842.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_711842.pdf)

Indeed, the OECD 2020 report made for interesting reading, in that context.

While acknowledging that progress had been made in recent years, the OECD also echoed alerts from NESC in its March 2020 report with regard to the changing nature of the global economy and our capacity to respond:

“Nevertheless, increasing trade openness and rapid changes in industrial structures are calling for updating the Irish adult learning system with greater urgency,” the OECD pointed out.<sup>9</sup>

The report also warned that the Irish adult learning system “performs worse than the OECD average in terms of its flexibility and guidance of individuals and financial arrangements.

“While recent decades have seen an increase in the participation rate in lifelong learning activities in Ireland (European Commission, 2019), it was still only around the median of European countries at 12.5%, in 2018.”

In addition, participation rates were also relatively low for young Irish workers with lower-secondary and tertiary education, the OECD said.

In addition, there were low levels of awareness around the issue training needs which was problematic as “a lack of perceived need for training is the primary reason for individuals not participating in programmes across all age groups.”

The OECD said that this underlined the need for better promotion of “the benefits of education to workers and orienting them towards relevant courses” but noted the persistence of barriers to learning, with cost cited as a major issue.

“For example, the cost of training (in Ireland) is cited as an obstacle by 26.8% of those aged between 25 and 34, higher than in some other countries with higher participation such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden.”

The key issue of cost had to be tackled as a matter of priority, with both the State and employers failing to deliver for learners:

“Public financial support for lifelong learning should be designed taking into account that cost is a particularly strong impediment to training participation at early stages of work life.

“In Ireland, per participant public spending on training, firms’ investment in non-formal training as a share of gross value added and provision of employer-sponsored training are lower than the OECD average.

“Since 2000, firm funding of structured training as a share of payroll costs has steadily fallen for both locally-owned and multinational enterprises.”

The OECD linked this failing to a fundamental weakness of the skills and learning provision system in Ireland:

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-economic-surveys-ireland-2020\\_dec600f3-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-economic-surveys-ireland-2020_dec600f3-en)

“Ireland provides no statutory entitlement to training leave, which is common in the majority of European countries that have comparatively high training participation.

“Provision of paid training leave and preferential loans alongside statutory leave would encourage training uptake by both older and younger workers, who tend to face higher opportunity costs and liquidity constraints on learning, respectively.”

The OECD cited examples across a range of EU states whereby workers enjoy the right to such leave and are financially supported and assisted to do so, thereby removing the cost impediment.

In Northern Ireland - where Congress has some 200,000 members affiliated through a range of trade unions - a separate **Union Learning Fund** was established by the UK government in 2002, in order to promote worker learning through trade unions.

Thus, Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) in workplaces across Northern Ireland are resourced to actively promote and encourage learning uptake.

Under a provision of the 2003 Employment Order (NI), ULRs are legally entitled to take paid time off during working hours to undertake their duties and for relevant training.

Clearly, without the introduction of a statutory entitlement to paid training leave in this jurisdiction - as recommended by the OECD - skills training and adult learning provision will continue to underperform, relative to other EU states, with clear and obvious implications for the economy and for wider social cohesion.

### **Key Learning Issues**

Overcoming obstructions and barriers to learning is acknowledged as crucial, within the Department of Education.

The Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group established by the Department of Education in March 2020 (under the aegis of the Tertiary Education System Steering Group) developed a framework for supporting learners that, among other points, emphasised the need to actively support and assist learners.

In addition, the positive response to awareness-raising work carried out by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) through its *Take the First Step* campaign underlined the need for promotion and targeting of key audiences.

As the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) has pointed out, a major challenge for any future learning provision programmes lies in reaching those who have not been exposed to date “specifically those whose needs are greatest.”

The ASTI says this includes “migrant workers, adults whose first language is not English, early school-leavers, Traveller and Roma communities and people with complex learning needs.”

Therefore, any future strategy that evolves from this consultation “should contain dedicated actions for all such groups.”

The ASTI also highlights the critical role that must be played by employers in terms of increasing awareness and participation by workers.

“The employer’s role is under-acknowledged at policy level. They have first-hand knowledge of employee skill levels and are in a prime position to provide guidance and support.”

In addition, community education remains critical to Adult Literacy provision. Indeed, the ASTI points out, that most of these groups have evolved organically from within their own communities in response to obvious educational deficits and are therefore extremely well-placed to deliver targeted learning to those that need it most.

In doing so, it would be important to consider the critical and central role played by Education and Training Boards and Congress would see the ETBs as key to delivery of adult literacy services, particularly as consideration is given to expanding such provision.

Existing problems with literacy were also exposed by the Covid 19 pandemic, particularly in the context of remote learning, according to the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO).

As one in six Irish adults has unmet literacy needs and one in four has unmet numeracy needs essential tasks associated with remote learning proved difficult for many and this, in turn, will have impacted on students at both primary and secondary level.

Teachers often sought additional support and guidance from their unions, when confronted with issues such as this.

Surveys carried out during the pandemic of families facing the challenges associated with remote learning found that “parents with unmet literacy needs reported concerns and a lack of confidence about helping their child learn,” the INTO says.

As a result, any new strategy must ensure learning options are available to improve the literacy, numeracy, and digital skills of people at any age.

Equally, an effective strategy to tackle literacy, numeracy, and digital skills will require a whole of government approach, particularly given the key role of digital literacy in our emergent and changing technological society.

Tackling the ‘digital divide’ must also be central to such a strategy, in order to overcome the lack of access to devices and technology experienced by many, the INTO points out.

In addition, the pandemic has also highlighted the importance of key resources and programmes, such as NALA’s Distance Learning Service, which allows learners to work with tutors remotely. Such initiatives help overcome geographical barriers to learning and facilitate more flexible forms of learning.

Improving access and availability of such flexible services will be key to the success of any future strategy.

As part of the consultation process to develop a new strategy, Congress believes that a number of key issues must be addressed:

- i. The role of trade unions is critical in supporting the development and successful targeting of workplace based learning - including literacy, numeracy and digital skills. This key role must be reflected in any new strategy. It must also reflect the fact that employers are major beneficiaries of skills training and have an essential role to play in terms of identifying skill and literacy needs and in assisting access to learning for workers.
- ii. Ireland is an outlier in the EU in terms of targeted, paid learning leave, the absence of which is a major obstacle to the take up of learning and of literacy provision. This failing harms skill levels nationally and hampers the personal development of many workers and citizens. Thus, a paid learning leave programme specifically tailored for literacy and numeracy provision could be a key component of a new strategy in this area.
- iii. In order to be effective, such leave must be placed on a statutory basis such that workers and learners would enjoy the *right* to take up paid learning leave, which would encourage uptake and participation rates.
- iv. A new strategy on literacy must include specific actions to target those most in need of literacy skills and set out how they are to be reached and included. This includes minority populations, older people and those with more complex learning needs.
- v. Any new strategy must be community-based and develop a sustainable model - including funding - for such community education initiatives and programmes, working in conjunction with the Education & Training Board (ETB) networks.
- vi. The strategy must ensure it is underpinned by a whole of government approach, given the key role of all forms of literacy in the society and economy of the future.
- vii. The strategy must address the existing digital divide in terms of access of devices and networks for families and learners.
- viii. Ensuring flexibility in provision of services - such as NALA's Distance Learning Service - is key to increased take up and participation. Such flexible, learner-centred services need to be enhanced and expanded.
- ix. The strategy must aim to ensure that all citizens have the literacy, numeracy, and digital skills necessary to meet their needs and participate fully in society.

ENDS