

# A Literature Review of International Adult Literacy Policies

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**National Adult Literacy Agency**  
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent organisation that:

- is the voice of adults wishing to improve their literacy skills, and
- is committed to raising adult literacy levels.

Our mission is to be the voice of adult literacy in Ireland and, with our partners, influence policy and practice to support people in developing their literacy.

### **How NALA define literacy**

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

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## Foreword

Central to NALA’s definition of literacy is that literacy is a social practice. This means it is always linked to the contexts, practices and purposes of its use, and that literacy and numeracy cannot be seen as a discrete set of ‘technical skills’. Literacy development happens in families, communities, workplaces as well as in a wide range of further adult education and training programmes. European policy over the last decade has emphasised the fundamental connection between basic skills, social cohesion and economic competitiveness, and OECD studies have measured the positive impact of enhanced literacy levels on wider social and economic development<sup>1</sup>. Adult literacy development is relevant therefore to a range of policy areas, including but not confined to education.

One of the National Adult Literacy Agency’s (NALA) strategic objectives is to ensure that adult literacy policy priorities are implemented. Adult literacy has been a policy priority in Ireland since 2000. The Department of Education and Skills provides funding for a range of part-time back-to-education programmes aimed at this group, recording 130,000 participants in 2008. These participants include 45,000 adult literacy students served by VEC adult literacy services. This figure, however, is less than 10% of those with significant literacy difficulties and includes people who are learning English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). On average, most of these students can access only two hours’ tuition a week, which is the equivalent of two weeks’ full-time education a year.

The Irish parliament identified in 2006 that the “high level of literacy problems in Ireland is unacceptable and it should be a national priority to reduce it within as short a time as possible”<sup>2</sup>. Raising literacy levels is increasingly central to government policy in Ireland. The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (2007-2016) sets the target to halve by 2016 the extent of significant literacy difficulties as experienced by 25% of the population. However, we will not know how much progress has been made towards this target until the results of the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) are published in 2013. The National Skills Strategy<sup>3</sup> sets out qualification targets for the labour force to 2020 that require the upskilling of 330,000 adults from Level 1, 2 and 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications. The greatest challenge to date in achieving these qualification targets has been identified as supporting the cohort of people with the least qualifications, many of whom are likely to have literacy and numeracy issues.

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<sup>1</sup> As well as EU policy from the Lisbon agenda to ET2020, evidence of the impact of enhanced literacy levels on economic performance can be found in Coulombe, S., J.F. Tremblay and S. Marchand, *International Adult Literacy Survey, Literacy Scores, Human Capital and Growth across Fourteen OECD Countries*, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science, 2006 *Adult Literacy in Ireland* Dublin: Stationery Office.

<sup>3</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, Forfas, 2007. *Tomorrow’s skills – Towards a National Skills Strategy*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

It is also recognised in Ireland, as in other countries, that there is an implementation gap between developing adult literacy policy and finding ways to put it fully into effect. In the current environment, progress will depend on finding new ways of addressing the adult literacy challenge that are rooted in an evidence base and that stay within current resourcing levels.

In this context, and on foot of a public tender, NALA commissioned the NRDC, Institute Of Education, London, to carry out a literature review of adult literacy policy internationally. This complements recent NALA work such as the *Review of Adult Literacy Policy in Ireland*, and a *Cost Benefit Analysis of Adult Literacy Training*, both published in 2009, and builds on NALA's advocacy work going back to 1980.

The literature review focuses on research from 1990 to date and identifies specific policy developments and interventions aimed at people with literacy and basic skill needs from eight countries. As well as education policies, there are examples which impact on wider policy agendas, such as health, employment and active citizenship. As well as providing national perspectives, the review addresses cross-cutting themes, before identifying key messages for adult literacy policy development in Ireland.

The review is essential reading for decision makers in Irish public services, particularly in education and skills. More generally it will be of interest to people working in education and social justice in Ireland. The examples of policy, and of approaches to implementation, provide a valuable reference resource to inform policy making and development. The key messages are keenly relevant to Irish policy, and to its enhanced implementation. These include the integration of literacy and numeracy into wider education and training contexts, referred to as 'embedding' in the report. But also the importance of media campaigns in attracting hard to reach groups, and the value-added impact of flexible provision that embraces family literacy and workplace literacy provision. Critically, the report will challenge our thinking about adult literacy priorities and how these can be achieved in an Irish context.

NALA believes that a world-class economic and social infrastructure is beyond our reach unless there is a clear and measureable strategy that brings new thinking to old problems, and that effectively tackles the intolerably low literacy and numeracy levels in Irish society.

I would like to thank all those who contributed to this review, including the NRDC, John Vorhaus, and his team in the Institute of Education. I would also like to acknowledge the expert input and guidance from Inez Bailey and Helen Ryan in NALA. In particular, I would like to thank the lead researcher, JD Carpentieri, for his skill, clarity and thought provoking style in presenting this work.

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March 11 2011

## Executive summary

This report summarises and discusses research on adult literacy policies and initiatives in the following countries: Australia, Canada, Finland, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden, the United Kingdom (England), and the USA. Initiatives and countries were chosen based on their relevance to the Irish context. In all countries chosen, as well as at European level, the importance of good adult literacy to economic, social and personal well-being continues to grow, as skills in general and literacy in particular become more important.

In the research on adult literacy policies in each country, a range of themes and messages appear. In this report, we discuss those themes and messages which may offer particular lessons for Ireland. These are discussed briefly in the executive summary, and more fully in the body of the full report.

### Key themes and messages

1. Countries which have not actively strived to maintain momentum in the development of adult literacy policy have experienced policy and programme stagnation. Australia, for example, was viewed in the 1990s as a world leader in the development of adult literacy policy and provision, but since has suffered from a lack of coherent, long-term policy vision and strategy. In Canada, an impressive attention to producing adult literacy research has not been matched by policy efforts to produce sustainable, high-quality adult literacy programmes. Canada is therefore characterised by isolated, often short-term initiatives, leading to inefficiency, waste, and a lack of progress in tackling poor adult literacy.
2. In contrast, Sweden and other Nordic countries have been successful at creating a culture of adult learning which encourages high levels of participation by removing barriers to learning.
3. Cross-country evidence suggests that while short workplace literacy courses, like short courses provided in other settings, do lead to improved self-confidence and social engagement for learners, such courses do not tend to be long enough to yield quantifiable literacy gains for most participants. Research in the US

suggests that the most successful courses in terms of producing such gains are those which involve more than 100 hours of coursework.

4. There is limited evidence either for or against the capacity of adult literacy initiatives to produce meaningful short-term employment or earnings gains for learners – more long-term research is required. However, there is clear evidence that such initiatives do lead to improved employability skills, improved health, increased social capital and greater civic engagement.
5. Some nations have primarily emphasised the potential for adult literacy provision to improve human capital, with particular emphasis on the potential economic gains associated with skills improvements. In contrast, other countries have placed equal emphasis on the social, health and citizenship benefits associated with provision.
6. In England, researchers have found striking evidence for the value of embedding adult literacy provision within Vocational Education and Training.
7. In the US, the state of Massachusetts has been particularly successful at improving adult literacy provision. Researchers have argued that five primary lessons can be learned from Massachusetts' success:
  - a. Reform requires long-term leadership and advocacy
  - b. Policymakers must focus on programme quality before quantity
  - c. Programme improvement depends on staff development
  - d. An expanded range of education providers should be utilised, as long as they are all working to a common set of standards
  - e. Change takes time. Policies and programmes need time to have an impact, and to refine and improve themselves through internal and external evaluation.
8. Research has found that good family literacy programmes improve parents' ability to support their children's cognitive and non-cognitive development, leading to long-term educational benefits. Such initiatives support the development of the human, social and cultural capital parents need to better support their children, while also providing parents with motivation to engage in learning.

## Section 1: Introduction

This report consists of five main sections, including the Introduction (Section 1). Section 2 looks at the policy contexts underlying and influencing adult literacy initiatives, while also discussing some of the challenges associated with attempts at policy borrowing and programme transfer.

Section 3 provides overviews of adult literacy policies and initiatives in several nations. When choosing countries to include in this section, we were driven by two main considerations: availability of research evidence, and relevance to the Irish context. The availability of research evidence is discussed below. In order to improve relevance, we have focused on countries or regions sharing similarities with Ireland. For example, in the US we provided an overview of national policy, but focused on Massachusetts, a state with a similar population to Ireland, and one which has achieved marked improvements in its adult literacy system.

Section 4 provides a thematic discussion and analysis of the initiatives discussed in the national overviews.

Section 5 highlights key messages that may be of particular value to Irish policymakers.

### **Limitations of the available research evidence and this review**

The objective of this review is to provide policy stakeholders in Ireland with examples of initiatives in other countries; therefore, the report does not include examples of policy and practice in Ireland. NALA completed a review of Irish adult literacy policy in 2009 (Dorgan, 2009). In looking at initiatives in other countries, the report reviews a broad range of evidence covering a variety of policy areas and issues. Inevitably, such a review will have limitations. In particular, it was not always feasible during our review to find detailed descriptions and/or analyses of implementation processes and procedures. While it is feasible that such descriptions and analyses exist, in many cases we were not able to locate them using standard research review search methodology – e.g. the use of academic databases such as ERIC and Google Scholar, in addition to more general searches using standard search engines.

These difficulties point to one of the most significant challenges for researchers and policymakers seeking to analyse and learn from adult literacy policy initiatives around the globe: such initiatives are often under-investigated by researchers. Where analysis has taken place, it is often along theoretical lines rather than focusing on what actually

occurred during implementation. Examples of theoretical focuses include analyses of the complementary and at times conflicting roles of human and social capital in shaping adult literacy policy objectives. We have drawn on such analyses when they have offered potentially relevant messages or lessons applicable to Irish adult literacy policy development.

Detailed analysis of implementation was not often available, and when it was it tended to be in the form of project evaluation reports of varying quality, rather than more methodologically rigorous research. These gaps point to a clear need for more rigorous, empirically based research of the field, for example on blended learning and distance learning. In both of these areas, our literature search revealed there is limited relevant evidence.

Such gaps also highlight an important message for policymakers: lack of evidence of success is not evidence of failure. Our research for this project suggests that in more cases than not, lack of evidence for initiatives' success must, in the first instance, be attributed to lack of research. There is also a lack of research investigating why and how particular programmes worked or did not work. That is, even when there is evidence about particular programmes, there tends to be little or no research on specific components of those programmes, and how those components contributed to the initiative's overall success or failure. This lack of evidence – both general and specific – has serious implications for policy development and policy borrowing, as it means that countries are less able to learn from each other's experiences.

This problem is exacerbated by a worrying but perhaps unsurprising level of “short-termism” in the research base. By this we mean that policies are sometimes evaluated and assessed earlier than they can reasonably prove their true worth, or lack thereof. For example, in England, Skills for Life's impact on participants' earnings and employment rates was assessed only three years after individuals first joined a literacy program, even though many individuals maintained participation in such programs for several years (Metcalf et al, 2009). While such short-term assessments have value, a more useful evaluation of program efficacy would look at the long-term benefits of such initiatives over the course of participants' working lives. Such an approach would be particularly useful in understanding the true impacts of programmes such as Skills for Life: that initiative did lead to clear improvements in participants' employability skills, and it would be reasonable to hypothesise that these improvements might later benefit employment and earnings. Unfortunately, policy “churn” and the lack of coherent, long-term research strategies means that this hypothesis is unlikely to be tested. Many initiatives, if they are properly researched at all, are investigated only with regard to their short-term impacts.

## Section 2: Policy context and background

### European policy context

From 2000, the Lisbon Strategy to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world has brought lifelong learning into focus as a key mechanism through which the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy might be met. The education of adults in the form of second chance education and upgrading adult skills, including literacy, forms a vital part of the lifelong learning response both to the changing global market and to demographic change.

The adult literacy sector serves as a key component of adult learning systems and as a central mechanism for helping national governments to achieve their educational and economic goals. These goals are increasingly linked to the need for more highly skilled workforces. As observed in the European Union's 2008 progress report on the Education and Training 2010 work programme (European Commission, p. 3): "Education and training are crucial to economic and social change. The flexibility and security needed to achieve more and better jobs depend on ensuring that all citizens acquire key competences and update their skills throughout their lives." As this report observes, adults with poor basic skills are at "high risk of economic and social exclusion" (*ibid*). The heightened negative risks associated with poor literacy skills – both at individual and national level – make it imperative that governments develop and maintain comprehensive, proactive adult literacy sectors as part of their efforts to improve national skills systems. In its analysis of these issues, the European Commission report *New skills for new jobs: action now* (2010) makes the pan-European case for such efforts. The report argues that to achieve the goal of bringing the "worlds of education, training and work closer together" (p. 5), skills systems need to develop appropriate incentives to encourage individuals to invest in their own skills, and to encourage employers to make the best use of the skills available to them. This includes developing adult literacy initiatives which respond to the needs of individuals and employers, while also incentivising both groups' uptake of provision.

The need for improved and better integrated adult skills systems was emphasised at European level in the *Education and Training 2010 Work Programme*, which established Europe's overall strategic direction in lifelong learning, including adult

literacy. Although the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning was adopted in 2000, a series of policy statements on adult learning were not consolidated into key messages until the 2006 Communication from the Commission, *Adult learning: It is never too late to learn*. These statements were operationalised in the Action Plan on Adult Learning of 2007, *Adult learning: It is always a good time to learn*.

In May 2009, the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme was followed up with the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'). These Council conclusions emphasise that the "efficient investment in human capital through education and training systems is an essential component of Europe's strategy to deliver the high levels of sustainable, knowledge-based growth and jobs that lie at the heart of the Lisbon strategy" (European Commission, 2009, p. 1). The Conclusions also emphasise the importance of education and training in "promoting personal fulfilment, social cohesion and active citizenship" (*ibid*).

The Conclusions build on existing benchmarks, with, among other items, Member States agreeing that by 2020 an average of at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning. However, while there is a benchmark for 15-year-olds' literacy rates, no such benchmark exists for adults.

### **"The most complex public policy problem that exists today"**

Seeking to develop the adult literacy sector is, in most countries, a relatively new idea. For example, as Hamilton and Hillier (2006) note in England, until the development of Skills for Life, adult literacy in that country was fragmentary and clinging to the margins. The same is true in most other countries: until the 1990s, adult literacy education, if it existed at all, tended to be piecemeal, poorly funded and on the margins of policy, if it was on the radar at all.

All developed nations, including Ireland, are currently facing a range of skills-related challenges affecting national economies. The most immediate and pressing challenge is the global economic crisis. More long-term but no less significant is the ongoing transition from industrialised economies to modern knowledge societies. Both the immediate and long-term challenges require governments to make difficult and often risky policy decisions regarding skills development, including adult literacy.

One of the key developments in education and economic policy over the last 20 years has been the increased focus on literacy and numeracy policy, as governments have come to view good basic skills as essential to national economic success and competitiveness in the global market. At the same time, a growing body of research has

demonstrated strong correlations between adult literacy and numeracy levels and a wide range of indicators of individual well-being, both economic and non-economic.

For most governments, the clear solution to these and related issues is to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of adult populations. However, doing so is far from straightforward. Over the last two decades, countries have taken a variety of approaches to addressing adult literacy and numeracy needs. Most generally, this includes the development and/or refinement of coherent adult literacy education systems.

Within the context of policies aimed at developing adult literacy sectors or systems, a range of countries have adapted specific initiatives or strategies aimed at achieving a range of literacy-focused objectives, often in response to perceived economic or educational crises. In this review, we will look at many of these adult literacy initiatives, while also providing information about more general policy developments across a range of nations.

In as much as the available research makes it possible, this review will look not only at policy in intent (Veeman, 2004) but also policy in implementation. The first category – policy in intent – includes the goals, strategies, guidelines and tools established by policymakers seeking to improve literacy skills. The second category – policy in implementation – focuses on how policy worked in the real world, what it got right (and why), and when and how – or on why it failed to achieve its objectives. Unfortunately, most of the available research focuses on policy intentions or goals; there appears to be less research evidence regarding policy in implementation. However, where such evidence is available we include it in our analysis.

Research gaps are one challenge for those seeking to analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of adult literacy policies. Other challenges include the fact that adult literacy can be viewed as what Peters (2005) defined as a "complex policy problem". Complex policy problems are those which have neither straightforward causes nor straightforward solutions, in part because they are caused by and impact upon issues and actions across a broad range of policy fields, complicating the potential for coherent government action. (Regarding coherent, cross-field policy action, observers in many countries will note a great deal of rhetoric around "joined-up" policy, but relatively limited cross-silo working, particularly at national level.)

Complicating the field of adult literacy policy making even further is the growing understanding that as nations make the transition from industrial economies to knowledge societies, addressing skills problems in general and literacy problems in particular becomes ever more important but no less problematic. In fact, Keep (2009) argues that part of the current challenges characterising the skills sector is that all of the

easy problems are more or less solved – what remains are more intractable issues, or, as Keep refers to them, the "wicked problems". This makes skills policy in general and adult literacy policy in particular especially challenging. As Adair Turner, ex-Director General of the Confederation of British Industry, once observed (Keep, 2009): "When I joined the [National Skills Task Force](#) I thought skills was a simple problem. By the time we finished our work, I had come to realise that skills is the most complex public policy problem that exists today."

## **Policy borrowing: learning from other countries and contexts**

The complexity of the policy challenge is matched by its urgency and importance, making it essential that countries learn from one another. However, policies cannot simply be borrowed from one country and rolled out in another. Policies and programmes are creatures of context and culture. In discerning the potential for cross-national policy learning, policymakers must: study policies and programmes in other countries; discern what is key to the effectiveness of those programmes, and what can if necessary be jettisoned; adapt these key elements to their country's own circumstances; evaluate processes and outcomes; and adjust policies and programmes as necessary. In as much as the research evidence has permitted us, we have sought to derive practical lessons or messages about key elements of policy and programme development.

Most importantly, as analysts of the policy borrowing and transferral process have argued, policymakers must resist the temptation to borrow and/or enact policies simply because those policies appear to be in favour in a number of other countries (see e.g. Steiner-Khamsi, 2010). Doing so often leads to the transfer not of best practices but of worst practice, or of practices which are inappropriate in their new settings. Therefore, in this review we seek not only to summarise potentially relevant policy developments, but also to provide a brief analysis with regard to potential messages for Ireland.

## **Section 3: Policy development and initiatives: national overviews**

In this section, we summarise the available research on policy development and initiatives in a selected range of countries. Countries were selected based on the potential usefulness of their experiences to policymakers in Ireland, as well as the availability of English-language research and evaluation reports. Along with descriptions of policy developments, initiatives and outcomes for each country, we provide analysis and key messages that may be of relevance to Ireland.

Due to gaps in the research evidence, we were unable to discuss and analyse each country using exactly the same framework and metrics. For example, in some countries there was very limited evidence available on implementation issues, while in other countries there was more analysis for us to draw on in this category. Our choice of descriptive and analytic categories for each country has been guided by the available evidence.

# Australia

## Policy context

Falk and Miller (2001) describe three traditional Australian conceptions of adult literacy: the basic skills approach; the growth and heritage approach; and the critical-cultural approach. In the former, literacy is viewed primarily or even exclusively as a cognitive skill which is readily transferable from one context to another, i.e. as a skill which is part of an individual's human capital. In the growth and heritage approach, literacy acquisition is viewed as part of the social context in which it occurs. In the critical-cultural approach, literacy is viewed as a social practice.

Tensions between these approaches have been apparent throughout the history of Australian policy development. Prior to 1986, literacy programmes and provision tended to be modelled on the example set in the United Kingdom through its early literacy campaigning work (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004). Programmes were community-based and dependent on volunteer tutors, with little government funding and limited requirements for assessment and accountability (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004, p. 66).

While our focus on this report is the 1990-2010 period, it is worth briefly highlighting Australia's 1974 Kagan report (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education). Consistent with prevailing notions both in Australia and elsewhere around the globe of adult literacy provision as a means of personal development, active citizenship and social transformation, the Kagan report emphasised the role of adult literacy and numeracy as part of broader discussions of social equity and social justice (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004). With regard to provision, the report recommended the development of literacy programmes within the vocational education and training (VET) sector. Despite the recommended location of adult literacy and numeracy training in a vocational policy space, the Kagan report also advocated a humanist perspective in which adult education, including literacy and numeracy provision, served primarily social justice and equity aims while also contributing to employability. According to McKenna and Fitzpatrick, the Kagan report's effort at seeking compatibility between a vocationally-oriented focus and a more holistic conception of the benefits of adult literacy epitomises the tensions between a human capital approach and broader citizenship and social transformation approaches to adult literacy that would prove to be a recurrent area of conflict as adult literacy policy developed in Australia.

### ***Australian Language and Literacy Policy, 1991-1996***

The years between 1987-1996 have been referred to as Australia's "literacy decade" (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004). During this period, Australia became a globally recognised world leader in the development of adult literacy policy and provision.

In 1987 the implementation of the seminal National Policy on Languages led to a three-year initiative known as the Adult Literacy Action Campaign. During this period, policy actors and activists interested in adult literacy successfully drew on internal and international concerns and policy trends to advocate for more extensive policy focus on adult literacy, which was brought "in from the margins" (Wickert et al, 2007, p. 255) by persuading central government and industry leaders that expanded literacy and numeracy provision could help achieve economic aims.

In 1991, Australia produced the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP), which established national goals and a national coordinating structure for Australian literacy policy. Influences for this policy development came both from social justice and human capital arguments. Broader policy developments in Australia at the time included rising support for multiculturalism and social justice. At the same time, the Australian Language and Literacy Policy was strongly informed by theories suggesting that improving one's literacy skills enhanced one's economic chances in modern, knowledge-based societies. Consistent with this increased emphasis on the economic possibilities of literacy improvement, the ALLP sought to expand literacy provision from its traditional roots in community volunteer programmes. In particular there was an emphasis on workplace provision (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004).

### ***Post- Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP)***

According to Searle (2004), the 1996 election of a Conservative national government in Australia both exemplified and contributed to a policy shift which had significant effects on adult literacy policy. Beginning in 1996, ALLP implementation structures set in place over the previous five years were disbanded, and initiatives launched during the period, such as the National Reporting System, the Literacy Research Strategy and the Workforce Professional Development Strategy, could not be implemented nationally due to a lack of policy champions and momentum (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004). Since this period, Australian states and territories have developed their own adult literacy strategies, with limited coordination from the federal government.

The 1996 election marked a move away from policies, both in adult learning and other fields, focused on and informed by social justice issues; in their stead was a shift towards market-focused policies and programmes, including increased deregulation of the adult education training market and an even greater focus on employability (Searle, 2004). There was a significant decline in federal contributions to funding adult literacy provision, with funds diverted instead to other labour market-focused welfare programmes (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004). For example, the Special Intervention Programme, which provided literacy and numeracy provision for the unemployed, fell out of favour. Overall, the government redirected more than AU\$193 million (equivalent to approximately €147 million in 2011) previously set aside for adult literacy and ESOL

provision targeted at the unemployed, with the funds now earmarked for employment schemes which did not include literacy provision. Unfortunately, this shift of funds and policy attention makes it very difficult to assess the impacts in Australia of the ALLP on employment outcomes. However, according to McKenna and Fitzpatrick (2004), structural gains made under the Australian Language and Literacy Policy were largely lost after the policy was disbanded, with adult literacy policies and provision becoming fragmented and many systems falling into disrepair or disregard. Should Australia later seek to once again develop a coherent national adult literacy strategy, these institutions will need to be redeveloped.

Despite the shift in policy, there was some continued focus on literacy for employability. The new welfare arrangements required the long-term unemployed to undergo literacy and numeracy assessments and attend mandatory provision if their skills were deemed inadequate. Originally targeted only at young jobseekers who were required to engage in literacy provision, the programme expanded to be available to any jobseekers. Writing in 2004, McKenna and Fitzpatrick note that the programme provided up to 400 hours of basic literacy and numeracy training, and was designed to lead to measurable improvements in those skills. Provision for these mandatory programmes was via competitive tender (Searle, 2004).

Australia's emphasis on literacy as human capital development has continued or even increased since ALLP folded. In particular, Balatti et al (2006) point to the integration of adult literacy policy and practice into the mainstream vocational education and training policy agenda and modes of provision. For example, literacy and numeracy training became part of vocational National Training Packages. Evaluation of these embedded literacy and numeracy programmes conducted by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (Sanguinetti and Hartley, 2000) found that the implementation of the embedded training packages had been uneven, with some sites having more success than others. Key findings from the evaluation were:

- efforts to quickly roll out National Training Packages often meant there was insufficient time for proper implementation. In many cases, this meant that literacy and numeracy concerns were pushed to the back burner
- evaluators found considerable variation in the quality and quantity of literacy provision offered as part of training packages. In some cases, little or no attention was paid to literacy
- proper embedding of literacy in vocational training requires ongoing professional development for teachers and trainers
- the financial costs and funding for literacy and numeracy training was generally not accounted for in vocational training plans, and funding arrangements tended to be overly rigid.

These evaluation findings are valuable, as they provide excellent lessons for policymakers with regard to mistakes to avoid when seeking to embed LLN provision in vocational training.

## **Workplace learning**

### ***Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programme***

The Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programme assists businesses and other organisations which want to train employees in literacy, language or numeracy. The programme, which has been in existence since 1991, aims to help employees to undertake LLN training that will benefit them in their current jobs or careers. It also encourages employers to see the value of such training (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006). Through WELL, the Australian government provides funding for three types of activities:

- LLN training and support provided in the workplace and integrated with vocational education and training
- resources to support LLN training
- national projects which aim to promote and/or support LLN training across a range of industries.

A 2006 evaluation of WELL found "strong evidence" of satisfaction on the part of employers, training providers and employees participating in the programme (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006). Employers reported that WELL produce a range of business benefits, including addressing skills shortages, reducing staff turnover and reducing the number of health and safety incidents. Participating employees reported a range of work-related benefits, including improved confidence and communication skills and better ICT skills. They also reported an increased use of computers at home and an increased willingness to undertake further education and training.

### ***Literacy and Numeracy Training programme***

Integrated/embedded programmes first became popular in Australia in the 1990s. Beginning in 1997 industry training advisory boards were responsible for developing vocational training packages containing adult literacy components. In 1998, following the demise of ALLP, the federal government introduced the Literacy and Numeracy Training programme, which provided literacy training for unemployed jobseekers aged 18-24. This training was obligatory if jobseekers wanted to continue to receive unemployment benefits, a policy known as Mutual Obligation. The programme was later expanded to cover a broader range of jobseekers.

A 2002 evaluation of the Literacy and Numeracy Training programme had the following findings (Rahmani et al, 2002):

- 84% of the jobseekers referred to the programme participated in it, with the majority of participants saying that the primary reason for enrolling on the programme was to improve their literacy and/or numeracy skills, rather than because they were required to
- 30% of those not enrolling on the programme cited the fact that they had got a new job as the reason
- 60% of programme participants did not complete their literacy training. The majority of participants who withdrew from the programme did so because they had found employment
- 17% of programme participants achieved a successful outcome, with success measured as achieving one of the approved outcomes of the National Reporting System
- 80% of responding programme participants felt that the training had improved their literacy or numeracy skills
- the evaluation found little difference in employment outcomes between eligible jobseekers who engaged in literacy training and those who did not
- comparing the same groups, the evaluation found little difference in earnings.

Regarding evaluations of the programme's impact on earnings and employment rates, the evaluators urged caution, for a range of reasons, including the following. First, individuals participating in the programme had less time and opportunity to seek employment than did those not participating. Second, the evaluators had access only to short-term results, as the evaluation was carried out soon after programme completion. Overall, the evaluators concluded that programmes such as the Literacy and Numeracy Training programme can be a valuable step in improving a wide range of outcomes for participants.

### ***Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme***

In 2002 the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme (LLNP) was launched. Originally formed as an amalgamation of the Literacy and Numeracy Training Programme and the Advanced English for Migrants Programme, LLNP was implemented in the context of the Australians Working Together policy initiative (2001), which sought to improve the employability of certain disadvantaged groups, including young people and older workers (DEEWR, 2010).

In 2006, the programme was revised in order to focus efforts on improving educational outcomes. Funding for the programme is approximately AU\$5 million per year (approximately €3.8 million). Three primary forms of training are offered.

Complementary training is targeted at the most disadvantaged participants. Advanced, vocationally-oriented courses provide embedded literacy and numeracy training. Small-group training is targeted at participants who are uncomfortable or struggling in larger classes, and who need extra attention in order to build their confidence (DEEWR, 2010).

The programme seeks to achieve measurable improvements in literacy, language and numeracy. Participant learning outcomes are reported via the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF), a recent update of the National Reporting System (DEEWR, 2010).

### **National Reporting System/Australian Core Skills Framework**

In Australia, most informal, non-accredited literacy instruction is provided in community programmes, many utilising volunteer tutors. Some of these courses used the National Reporting System (NRS) as a teaching framework, and now use the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). Most informal provision, particularly that targeted at disadvantaged groups, aims to provide education for personal development and citizenship. According to McKenna and Fitzpatrick (2004), very little data is collected on this type of provision.

Formal, standalone literacy provision has generally been mapped to the NRS/ACSF (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004). A range of certificates are issued through this form of provision, but the certificates do not provide the equivalent of school exit qualifications. The National Reporting System (NRS) for Adult English Language, Literacy and Numeracy was originally implemented in 1996 to report on outcomes of labour market programmes. It was primarily used for reporting entry and exit standards for learners, including those in literacy provision. It is not a broad programme reporting system (in contrast to the US's National Reporting System), in that it refers only to competences rather than to a broader range of learner outcomes or provider performance measures. (For example, the US National Reporting System refers to outcomes such as improved employment opportunities.) The Australian ACSF provides these indicators of competence at five levels. Use of it is mandatory for federally funded jobseeker and workplace literacy programmes (Balatti et al, 2006). Other current hallmarks of implementation of Australian literacy policy include a focus on workplace competency-based measures for courses, and extensive monitoring and validation processes (Balatti et al, 2006).

### **Teaching workforce**

Under the Australian Language and Literacy Policy, the National Staff Development Committee developed a set of accredited professional development courses for adult

literacy teachers. However, limited policy attention has meant that teacher training and CPD have shown little evidence of progress (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004).

## **Analysis and potential messages for Ireland**

While Australia was regarded as being at the vanguard of adult literacy policy and provision in the mid-1990s, as early as the turn of the century it was seen as lagging behind many other developed countries, in part because those countries had begun engaging in policy and programme development, but primarily because Australia's momentum had been lost, and the country now found itself without any coherent national adult literacy policy (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004), with the notable exception of workplace literacy programmes.

Balatti et al (2006) argue that Australian adult literacy policy has focused almost exclusively on human capital development over the last 20 years, a focus crystallised in ALLP but continuing long after its demise. This focus on literacy training to increase human capital and to benefit economic skills is particularly evident in Australia's Literacy and Numeracy Training Programme for Jobseekers, and the subsequent Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme.

Balatti et al (2006) argue that Australia's focus on the potential economic benefits of literacy training have weakened literacy policy and provision in the country through neglect of other achievable objectives, particularly with regard to social capital-related outcomes such as social engagement and civic participation.

As Searle (2004) argues, in Australia's case the mainstreaming of adult literacy provision into VET contributed to a loss of identity and policy leverage for the adult literacy provision. Wickert et al (2007) concur, suggesting that ALLP's positioning within economic policy strategies focused on the economy, industry, job training and welfare reform, while beneficial in the short-term, also brought significant long-term problems. In particular, LLN policies conceptualized as primarily focusing on employment found themselves competing with other employment policies, to the detriment of the former.

# Canada

## Policy context

Despite the country's well-deserved reputation for research excellence in the field of adult literacy, Canada lacks anything that could be considered a cohesive, coherent or systematic policy approach to adult literacy. As Veeman (2004) argues, "there has been a lot of talk but little concrete action" on policy (p. 178). While there are national literacy organisations in Canada, the country lacks a formal basic framework for adult education policies, and adult literacy education is provided largely through the volunteer sector (Veeman, 2004).

In large part this is due to the federal structure of Canadian government. However, even at provincial levels, approaches to adult literacy tend to be project-based rather than systematic and well-integrated into policy. For example, according to Belanger and Tuijnman (1997, pages 18-19): "Adult education is provided by a bewildering array of sponsors.... Most of them depend heavily on user fees for support .... and participation tends to widen rather than narrow the gap between the most and least educated". As Movement for Canadian Literacy has observed (2003, page 6): "The lack of consistent and adequate funding, vision, strategy, and coordination has meant that literacy needs have tended to 'fall through the cracks.'" Within this context, community-based organisations recruit, train and match tutors with adults seeking to improve their literacy skills. Funding for such initiatives tends to be project based and/or via charitable donations. Tutors tend to be unpaid volunteers with very little training.

There have, however, been some efforts directed towards national policymaking. In 2003, the federal government produced a report entitled "Raising adult literacy skills: the need for a pan-Canadian response" (Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, 2003). This report made a number of recommendations, including the development of a Canada-wide accord on literacy and numeracy skills development, coupled with increased federal investment. However, policy continues to be disjointed.

## Policy actors and institutions

In policy development terms, Canada is highly pluralist (Veeman, 2004). A broad range of organised interest groups seek to influence adult literacy policy, but there is no single, highly powerful central actor. This is likely a reason why Canada has crafted no major, systematic adult literacy initiatives, despite the great deal of research and other work devoted to the field. In lieu of coherent national or provincial policy, Canada is marked

by the presence of a range of different organisations serving as policy actors and advocates. These organisations include (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004):

- The National Literacy Secretariat, which works with the provincial and territorial governments and other stakeholders, including businesses and the volunteer sector, to address literacy issues. The Secretariat is part of the federal Human Resource Development Canada Department, reflecting the Canadian emphasis on improving the literacy skills as a means of improving employment opportunities. The Secretariat has no legislative powers, nor does it fund literacy provision; instead it is meant to serve as a focal point for the sharing of information and expertise
- Movement for Canadian Literacy, which provides a national forum for the promotion and support of literacy issues in Canada.

In addition, the National Adult Literacy Database serves as an electronic clearinghouse for literacy resources which can be used by local literacy organisations.

## **Funding**

As suggested above, literacy education in Canada tends to be community-driven, and provision is largely provided by volunteer agencies. These agencies are "numerous and fragmented" and "rarely have core funding for operations, more typically relying on private donations and short-term project grants" (Veeman, 2004, p. 172).

In contrast to countries such as Sweden which emphasise a funding approach aimed at ensuring a strong and sustainable infrastructure for adult education, Canadian funding for literacy initiatives has been primarily project-based. Canadian funding systems tend to encourage, whether accidentally or on purpose, a short-term approach to literacy provision. Funding policy in Canada has traditionally made it much easier to fund new projects than to continue funding currently existing ones. This has had the unfortunate outcome of meaning that successful projects have not been eligible for refunding – perhaps based on the theory that project success would attract ongoing funds from different sources (Veeman, 2004). As Veeman observes, this means that Canadian programmes tend to devote a high percentage of staff resources to fundraising, writing grant proposals, and fulfilling auditing requirements, to the detriment of teaching and learning.

What funding is available tends to be minimal. According to Veeman (2004), the federal allocation of funds to adult literacy in Canada during the years 1999-2002 equated to approximately 1 Canadian dollar per Canadian (approximately 78 cents, in 2011 terms); in contrast, she points to Sweden, where spending per capita on adult education was 56

times that amount (i.e. just under 44 euros per person, in 2011 terms), on top of already existing high levels of infrastructure funding for Swedish adult education.

Locally, each province and territory has at least one organisation which is funded to provide support and services to literacy providers within the region. For example, in Saskatchewan the province provided annual funding for literacy initiatives to seven regional colleges and to community groups at a rate of C\$45,000 per region (equivalent to approximately €35,000 in 2011) (Veeman, 2004). However, despite major differences in education levels and immigration patterns in the different regions of the province, funding for each region was the same.

Canada has no national curriculum framework. There is a tradition of workplace education, but no federal policies on the issue. Our review of the literature suggests no firmly embedded, long-term workplace literacy strategies. Canada has developed an essential skills framework, somewhat similar in nature to the Equipped for the Future Framework in the US (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004).

## **Teaching workforce**

Not surprisingly given the lack of funding, volunteers deliver much of the literacy instruction available in Canada. There is no general agreement nationwide regarding how adult literacy teachers should be trained and assessed (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004). The Movement for Canadian Literacy has long encouraged the professionalisation of the sector, but with little success. Lack of professionalisation may have significant impacts on quality, suggests the National Literacy Secretariat. For example, volunteer, minimally trained teachers are unlikely to utilise new teaching methods, e.g. with regard to ICT.

## **Analysis and potential messages for Ireland**

Despite being an international leader in adult literacy research, policy development in Canada has been minimal, both at federal and provincial/territorial levels. Despite a general conception of literacy as an essential component of human capital and employability skills, provision is largely provided by poorly funded non-governmental organizations which devote a significant percentage of their time and resources to pursuing funds. Because of a lack of policies aimed at consistent funding, sustainability of successful programmes is not encouraged. Research suggests that policymakers may feel that successful programmes will be able to ensure their own sustainability by winning funding from new and varied sources. However, evidence indicates that the field of adult literacy is an area of market failure, which must be supported by government if provision is to succeed (Jarvis, 1993).

The absence of policy is a policy. In lieu of coherent national and/or provincial/territorial policies, adult literacy in Canada remains fractured and piecemeal. This offers a salutary lesson for other countries. Canada is well known for its interest in adult literacy and numeracy, and boasts an extensive record of important research in the field. However, because federal and provincial/territorial policymakers have not sought to craft coherent adult literacy policies and to integrate them with broader policy focuses such as employment, inequality and community cohesion, the field of adult literacy has languished and has been unable to contribute to Canadian society as it should.

# England

## Skills for Life

In 2001 the UK government launched Skills for Life, a high profile, comprehensive, very well funded strategy aimed at improving the literacy, language and numeracy of adults with low level skills. The strategy marked a significant break from the past, when, as Appleby and Bathmaker observe, adult basic skills “had remained beyond the gaze of national policy makers” (2006, p. 703). Economic rationales were central to Skills for Life. Writing in the strategy document that launched SfL, then Education Minister David Blunkett argued that the cost to the UK of poor adult literacy and numeracy skills “could be as high as £10 billion a year” (DfEE, 2001, p. 1).

Though there was discussion of the wider, economic benefits of adult learning, the focus was on improving skills in order to increase economic well-being. The strategy also emphasised achievement as opposed to participation: ‘It is not enough that people are on courses. They also need to improve their skills’ (DfEE, p. 23). In order to help adults improve those skills, SfL offers free literacy and numeracy courses up to Level 2 (IALS level 3) to working age adults (aged 16 to 65).

The focus when the strategy was launched was on improving the skills of the most needy individuals (DfEE, 2001). These groups were listed as: unemployed people and benefit claimants; prisoners and those supervised in the community; public sector employees; low-skilled people in employment; and other groups at risk of exclusion. Disadvantage among these groups was closely tied to poor literacy and numeracy skills, argued the strategy paper, which promised that Skills for Life would ‘ensure that those who face the greatest disadvantage will receive help soonest’ (ibid, p. 13).

Key to achieving these objectives were targets. Beginning in 2001, the Department for Education and Skills was committed to a Public Service Agreement that called for 750,000 adults to achieve a first SfL qualification by 2004, 1.5 million adults to do so by 2007, and 2.25 million to do so by 2010. Young adults were meant to account for 15% of the target between 2001 and 2004, then just 8% of the target between 2004 and 2007. All told, between 2001 and 2007, they were meant to account for just under one in nine SfL qualifications: 11% of the target.

In 2004, the Government achieved the first objective of its Skills for Life targets: between 2001 and 2004, 750,000 adults attained a first SfL qualification at Entry Level 3, Level 1 or Level 2. Three years later, the next stage had also been successfully reached: more than 1.5 million adults had achieved a first SfL qualification. One year later, Skills for Life achieved its 2010 targets - two years early.

However, one of the keys to meeting these challenging targets lay in the contribution of 16-18-year-olds, who, as noted previously, were meant to account for 15% of the target over the first three years, then eight per cent over the next three. Looking at the first three-year period of SfL, more than half the qualifications were by 16-18-year-olds (House of Commons, 2006). A 2008 National Audit Office (NAO) evaluation found that between 2001 and 2007, more than half the qualifications that counted towards the target were gained by 16- to 18-year-olds. However, the percentage of target-bearing qualifications gained by adults aged 19+ had increased from 38 per cent in the first year of the strategy to 52 per cent in 2006-07. Discussions with policy experts in England indicate to us that, to some degree, the apparent growth in the percentage of older learners gaining relevant targets is a result of provider-focused government incentives designed to encourage those learners to take literacy courses which counted towards the national targets.

The NAO also found that "hard to reach" priority groups made only a very minor contribution to the target. Additionally, there is evidence that some providers neglected provision targeted at the lowest level literacy and numeracy learners, as this provision did not contribute to the PSA targets.

Looking more closely at the above achievement and participation figures, evidence is available covering the period 2000-2005 (Bathmaker, 2007). Between 2000/01 and 2004/05, enrolments in Skills for Life provision more than doubled, rising from roughly one million to nearly 2.2 million. The increase was in the form of a smooth gradient, with enrolments increasing by about the same proportion each year. Over the same period, learning aims completed (but not necessarily achieved) rose from roughly 700,000 in 2000/01 to more than 1.5 million in 2004/05. Achievements increased from roughly 440,000 to nearly 1.3 million.

There are two interesting facts to take from this data. First, even as enrolments soared, completions as a percentage of enrolments held steady, and in fact rose slightly from 71% in 2000/01 to 73% in 2004/05. The significant increase in participation over this half-decade did not lead to a higher proportion of learners dropping out, as some might have expected it to. This suggests a level of implementation success. Perhaps more notably, and also suggestive of implementation success, the percentage of enrolments that led to achievements rose from 42% in 2000/01 to 59% in 2004/05. As a percentage of completion, achievement rates nearly quadrupled from 21% in 2000/01 to 81% on 2004/05. This means that despite far more learners participating in Skills for Life, individuals became significantly more likely to achieve their learning aims.

## **Implementation mechanisms**

Skills for Life has been an extremely comprehensive strategy, and has established or utilised a range of institutions (not all of them still in existence) to facilitate delivery of the policy. Examples include:

- The Learning and Skills Council (LSC), which had responsibility for planning and funding all post-16 vocational education and training in England, including Skills for Life
- The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), which has a remit of stimulating improvement in the Further Education sector
- The Skills for Life Improvement Programme
- Train to Gain, a brokerage service designed to advise and encourage businesses to work with education providers to offer literacy and numeracy training for staff.

Many providers and researchers (e.g. Coffield, 2008) have argued that Skills for Life has been too comprehensive, in the sense that central government and policy implementation arms such as those listed above have sought to micro-manage provision, both through the curriculum and through strict targets and funding regimes.

Skills for Life has been supported by major media campaigns, running on television and in private. These campaigns have led to very high public recognition of adult literacy as an issue and of the provision available.

### ***Funding***

It is estimated that between 2001 and 2007 central government spent at least £5 billion on Skills for Life (equivalent to approximately 6 billion euros). The expenditure budgeted for 2007-2010 was £3.9 billion (NAO, 2008). It is difficult to estimate average expenditure per learner, as costs differ depending on course.

### **Embedding**

Research by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) (Casey et al, 2006) found very strong benefits associated with embedding literacy, language and numeracy training in vocational education courses. Persistence was improved, with 15% more learners staying on embedded courses than on stand-alone Skills for Life courses. Achievement was improved even more, both with regard to Skills for Life and vocational outcomes. For example, on fully embedded courses 93% of the learners achieved a literacy or language qualification, compared with 50% on non-embedded literacy and language courses. Based on the strong evidence, the government supported a range of activities designed to embed LLN

training in vocational education. However, we were unable to find evidence of additional quantitative research assessing the impact of embedding.

Via a website known as the “Excellence Gateway”, the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) provides a range of support materials for providers seeking to embed LLN provision. To the best of our knowledge, there has been no published quantitative research clearly indicating the amount of embedded LLN provision in England. However, tentative results from unpublished research conducted by NRDC in 2008 suggested that roughly one-third of literacy provision at a range of providers was embedded.

## **Workplace learning**

A key mechanism for encouraging workplace learning in Skills for Life was Train to Gain (T2G), which was the Labour government's main service aimed at encouraging employers in England to provide training for their employees. Basic skills training through Skills for Life represented only approximately 15% of Train to Gain's targets. As a 2008 National Audit Office evaluation of Skills for Life observed, uptake of LLN courses through T2G was lower than expected. In part this was because Skills for Life courses are qualification-bearing and thus required more time and resources than most employers were willing to give. In general, employers expressed support for shorter, more flexible LLN offerings.

Analyses of workplace literacy programmes in England have suggested that while employees and employers experience a range of benefits, such as improved self-confidence and job satisfaction for the former and reduced staff turnover for the latter (Carpentieri, 2007), quantifiable literacy gains from these programmes are minimal at best, in large part because programmes tend to be very short, for example offering approximately 30 hours of provision (Wolf et al, 2008). Such programmes may provide valuable employability skills and improve workplace-focused literacy, but are unlikely to significantly improve general literacy skills.

Looking more broadly at the relationship between Skills for Life courses and employment policies, the National Audit Office (2008) criticised the lack of joined up thinking between the UK's employment service, JobCentre Plus, and Skills for Life. In 2006-07, for example, it was estimated that only around 3% of JobCentre Plus clients with LLN needs were referred to relevant provision.

## **Teaching workforce**

The Skills for Life strategy has placed great emphasis on improving the quality of the teaching workforce, with the primary mechanism for this approach being a focus on teacher qualifications. Regulations were put in place requiring new Skills for Life teachers to possess teaching qualifications and a subject-specific qualification (Carpentieri et al, 2009). As of 2006, 35% of teachers were deemed to hold the appropriate teaching qualifications. Beginning in September 2007, all new adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL teachers need a full generic adult teaching qualification and a specialist qualification in teaching literacy, numeracy or ESOL. Professionalisation of the adult learning workforce is one of the central goals of government policy, and the SfL teaching workforce is probably the most well-qualified (in terms of credentials) in the world.

In a 2010 study (Cara et al) of the impact of Skills for Life on the basic skills teaching workforce, most trainers concluded that while Skills for Life imposed too many restrictions and conditions on provision, the strategy had been largely successful and had improved the status and quality of adult literacy provision in England.

Looking more broadly at the long-term development and status of the adult literacy teaching workforce in England, Hamilton and Hillier (2007) have argued that as the field of adult literacy has grown in size, budget and importance, instructors in England have had less influence on shaping that growth, in comparison to adult literacy instructors in countries such as Canada, Australia and Ireland. Hamilton and Hillier pointed to the lack of strong political institutions representing adult literacy teachers in England as the primary cause of this lack of professional voice and influence. As Bailey (2006) has observed, adult literacy instructors in Ireland have been somewhat successful in having a professional voice and advancing professional interests. This may have implications for ways in which policy and programmes develop. For example, the limited professional voice in England may have contributed to the development of a Skills for Life strategy which placed relatively little emphasis on teachers' ideas of best practice.

## **Effectiveness of provision**

Effectiveness of Skills for Life provision can be assessed looking at two key questions:

1. Does Skills for Life provision improve learners' literacy, language and numeracy skills?
2. Does participation in Skills for Life provision lead to improved economic outcomes, i.e. improved employment rates and/or earnings?

Despite the extensive implementation of Skills for Life and the large amount of money devoted to researching the programme, very little research was actually carried out to investigate the strategy's effectiveness. Looking at the ability of Skills for Life provision to improve learners' skills, Rhy Warner et al (2009) found encouraging results: small to medium sized gains in most domains. However, there is not enough evidence available to allow us to assess whether or not Skills for Life has contributed to national skills gains. A survey of national literacy and numeracy levels was carried out in 2003 (DfES), but the proposed follow-up to this survey has been repeatedly delayed. These delays highlight the numerous challenges associated with adequately assessing the impacts of policy initiatives.

Only one study thus far has sought to assess whether or not Skills for Life learners have benefited economically from their participation. A longitudinal research project by Metcalf et al (2009), followed adult literacy and numeracy learners over a period of three years, comparing their outcomes with a matched group of individuals who did not take literacy or numeracy courses. This study found that college-based literacy and numeracy courses for adults had a range of positive impacts including increased learner self-esteem, improved commitment to education and training, and beliefs by learners that their literacy and numeracy skills had improved and continued to improve. The researchers also found evidence suggesting that literacy and numeracy provision was associated with improved health, increased independence and a greater ability to conduct a wide range of everyday activities. Looking at learners' earnings, the study found no evidence of improved earnings for Skills for Life participants after three years. Nor was the study able to establish that Skills for Life was not associated with improved earnings. More research is needed to determine the strategies effectiveness, but given the change of government in the UK this is unlikely to be forthcoming. Looking at return to employment, here again the study did not find evidence of gains for Skills for Life learners. However, the study found clear and strong evidence of improved employability skills, and the authors caution that longer term study may be required to assess the true effects of the intervention, particularly given the improved employability skills of Skills for Life participants.

## **Analysis and potential messages for Ireland**

Skills for Life is the most comprehensive and well funded adult literacy strategy the world has ever seen. The strategy provides an excellent case study of top-down development and management of policy and practice. Accountability and assessment regimes have ensured tight control over local provision and encouraged consistency throughout the country.

Challenging targets were used as a key mechanism for shaping provision, with funding being directly linked to those targets, both at provider and national policy level. Sfl's use of targets was explicitly linked to notions of global competitiveness, and Skills for Life fit naturally into national skills strategies. Despite the challenging nature of the targets set for it, Sfl achieved them in only eight years, as opposed to the proposed ten.

The only major evaluation of Skills for Life suggests that it did not provide the employment and earnings benefits it was expected to. However, this evaluation was only able to assess short-term impacts; additional research would be required to assess the medium- and long-term impacts of the policy. The evaluation did find positive evidence of improved employability, health and other social outcomes.

Feedback from Skills for Life teachers indicates that while they were unhappy with the limits of the initiative placed on their professional autonomy, they appreciated the strategy's strong focus on a well-qualified workforce, and also appreciated how the strategy increased learner participation and achievement.

A tension currently facing Skills for Life under a new national government is one related to perceived benefits and goals of adult literacy initiatives. Skills for Life was very successful at increasing participation, achievement and qualification rates – albeit often to the detriment of non-Skills for Life provision, e.g. non-qualification-bearing leisure courses. However, the limited available evidence suggests that rapid gains in participants' employment and earnings have not been delivered. Ewart Keep (2008) argues that adult literacy policymakers in England, driven by anxieties about the country's global competitiveness, have failed to focus on the many clear benefits delivered by adult literacy provision.

# Finland

## The Noste programme

In Finland, the Noste programme ran from 2003-2009, with the aim of improving the general education and skills level of disadvantaged adults (Ministry of Education and Culture Finland 2010). Among the aims of the programme were to forestall a projected skilled labour shortage, to raise the employment rate and to further equality in society. The programme was part of an ongoing Finnish emphasis on improving educational and labour market opportunities for the most disadvantaged groups in society.

In Finland, adult education policy is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture, which allocates approximately 12% of its budget to the adult sector (Ministry of Education and Culture Finland, 2010). Noste was launched within the context of Finnish efforts to increase the participation rates of disadvantaged groups, particularly those with no vocational education and training and those whose qualifications are deemed to be outdated. The Finnish government also sought to increase participation by employees of small and medium-sized enterprises, immigrants and older adults.

With regard to subject matter, Noste was a very wide ranging programme, providing funding for a range of vocational qualifications, ICT literacy ("computer driving licences"), and unfinished compulsory-level education (Ministry of Education and Culture Finland, 2010). The programme was primarily targeted at 30-59-year-olds, although those aged 25-29 were eligible, if they were seeking to complete the comprehensive school education. The programme was targeted at individuals in employment, rather than the unemployed. The aim was to achieve participation figures of at least 10% for each target group.

Funding came from central government and was mainly granted to local and provincial projects (Ministry of Education and Culture Finland, 2010). In exchange for funding, education providers were required to work with employees and employers to develop workplace-specific implementation approaches. Over the seven-year period of the programme, central government contributed €124 million to local projects. For learners, studies were free of charge, but those wishing to take examinations leading to qualifications were required to pay examination fees.

### *Outcomes*

While Noste did not achieve its participation goal of 10% of each target group, it did manage to enlist 7.3% of the 350,000 individuals eligible for the programme (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). During the life of the programme, approximately 26,000 learners undertook studies through Noste, with just under 20,000

achieving qualifications, and approximately 12,000 of that group achieving full qualifications. Thus while not achieving its ambitious targets, the programme did succeed in raising national qualification levels, and did succeed in reaching a large number of disadvantaged adults.

Looking at strategies which helped to increase engagement and participation, the programme evaluation says that key success factors included:

- free tuition
- outreach activities, particularly those targeted at workplaces
- expansion of local educational offerings
- the possibility to study while working.

However, the evaluation found that for the vast majority of learners, new qualifications did not lead to better jobs or pay rises. It should be noted, though, that this evaluation was only able to assess the short-term economic impacts of programme participation and achieving qualifications. A longer term study would be required to assess whether or not qualifications contributed to greater economic success over the lifecourse.

The evaluation did find a range of other benefits (Ministry of Education and Culture Finland, 2010). These included these increased learner self-esteem, sense of security in working life, and work motivation. Learners also felt that their professional competence had increased.

Looking at institutional impacts, the evaluation found that the programme improved the capacity of adult education providers to work with employers, and to engage in outreach activities aimed at attracting more disadvantaged learners (Ministry of Education and Culture Finland, 2010). Evaluation also found that workplace-focused outreach activities enjoyed some success, and that a rising number of skills needs assessments were conducted for businesses each year, with the expectation that this practice will continue growing.

Looking at participation in general, the evaluation found that Noste had success in encouraging participation amongst groups who had previously been less interested in adult education.

## **Analysis and messages for Ireland**

Finland's Noste initiative shares a range of features with Sweden's Adult Education Initiative. Both were large scale policies covering all of adult education, not just literacy. Both were targeted at workers with relatively poor skills, aiming to increase their rate of participation in adult education as well as improve their qualification levels.

While Noste did not achieve its challenging participation targets, it did have a significant impact on participation among low skilled employees. It also enabled the achievement of a large number of qualifications, and has been shown to have provided a range of employability-related benefits. However, the programme does not appear to have improved participants' economic or occupational status, at least in short-term assessments. Data on long-term impacts are as yet unavailable.

# New Zealand

## Policy context

New Zealand is currently one of the most active countries in the world with regard to the development of adult literacy and numeracy policy. New Zealand policy development in this field saw its first major activity in 2001 when the New Zealand Adult Literacy Strategy was published. The strategy focused on three primary objectives (Walker, 2010):

1. improving the quality of the adult literacy teaching workforce
2. improving the quality of provision
3. increasing the number of opportunities for learners and potential learners.

Unfortunately, only limited steps were taken to achieve these goals at that time; however, these objectives have remained consistent over time. In 2006 New Zealand crafted its first Tertiary Education Strategy and created the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), with the responsibilities of this organisation including the allocation of funding for all post-compulsory education. Significantly, adult literacy was specifically cited as part of the TEC's responsibility. As Walker (2010) details, this development gave adult literacy a policy home, thereby helping to move provision from being viewed as residual and outside the mainstream of education policy, to being an institutionalised part of the education system. At the same time, New Zealand policymakers grew ever more focused on the importance of having a forward-looking skills strategy, and adult literacy policy found itself at the heart of that strategy. In 2008, New Zealand published both the New Zealand Skills Strategy and the Literacy, Language and Numeracy Action Plan 2008-2012.

## Literacy, Language and Numeracy Action Plan

The Action Plan has two primary objectives, the first focusing on demand and the second on supply (TEC, 2008):

1. raising employers' and employees' awareness of the benefits of improved literacy, language and numeracy
2. increasing the number, quality and relevance of literacy and numeracy training opportunities.

Objective one seeks to target employers, employees, industries and regions which feature high numbers of workers with poor basic skills. Objective two aims to increase

funded learning opportunities from 15,000 in 2008 to 45,000 in 2012. The focus is on individuals in the workforce and those "near work" (TEC, 2008, page 4).

As of the time of writing, no evaluations of the Action Plan are available.

## **Workplace learning**

Throughout the last decade of New Zealand adult literacy policy development, a key focus has been on learning in the workplace. Beginning in 2001, the Workplace Literacy Fund has subsidised as much as 85% of the cost of workplace programmes designed to improve employees' work-related literacy skills (Walker, 2010). An evaluation of this initiative's implementation (Gray and Sutton, 2007) found limited but increasing demand for LLN programmes from employers. Participation was largely driven by providers actively seeking out clients, a process which providers deemed inefficient and expensive. These problems also led providers to target larger companies. The evaluation found that companies needed more information and support to understand a range of inter-related issues, including: LLN problems in the workplace; how those problems can be addressed; and the benefits of improving employees' LLN. However, demand has risen, and the 2010 programme was fully subscribed (TEC, 2010).

In 2006, the Upskilling Partnership project was set up to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of workers with poor basic skills (Department of Labour, New Zealand, 2010). This project, which ran for three years, involved collaboration between stakeholders including employers, industry training organisations, providers, unions, government agencies and community groups to implement and analyse workplace partnerships in 15 businesses. The courses offered 20-100 hours of instruction, usually in blocks of 1-2 hours per week. Average course length was 45 hours, and average employee attendance was 35 hours.

While these short courses did not improve learners' reading and writing skills as measured on quantitative exams, the learners themselves are very positive about their experiences, with the majority reporting that they felt they had improved their literacy skills. Most participants reported a range of positive benefits in the workplace, including improved confidence, communication skills, job satisfaction and attitude towards their job (Department of Labour, New Zealand, 2010). Supervisors reported a similar range of workplace benefits, and in the final evaluation company managers rated the course highly.

Throughout the life of the Literacy, Language and Numeracy Action Plan (2008-12), New Zealand plans to treble the number of individuals engaging in workplace LLN provision (TEC, 2008).

## **Adult literacy teaching workforce**

New Zealand's adult LLN workforce has traditionally been largely untrained (TEC, 2008). However, over the last several years, New Zealand has invested heavily in improving its LLN teaching workforce, and has established workforce development as one of its primary policy goals. According to Benseman and Sutton (2008, page 5), while implementing workplace learning has been New Zealand's primary focus over the last several years, significant emphasis has also been devoted to building "the infrastructure necessary to support tutor training, develop teaching resources and offer a flexible range of professional development opportunities". In 2006, a competency standards-based National Adult Literacy Educator Qualification was introduced and established as equivalent to the first year of a degree course. A qualification has been developed for vocational tutors who want or need to provide literacy, language or numeracy tuition as part of embedded/integrated education.

## **Analysis and potential messages for Ireland**

Like Australia, New Zealand has focused much of its policy effort on developing the field of workplace literacy. Such an approach gives rise to particular challenges – for example, how to provide appropriate incentives for employer uptake while also making the service financially worthwhile for colleges or other organisations to provide. A related challenge is how to provide the short, focused training packages employers seem to prefer, while also providing policymakers and the Treasury with quantifiable evidence of programme effectiveness.

In developing its Literacy, Language and Numeracy Action Plan, New Zealand has engaged in extensive analysis of other countries' policies and programmes. New Zealand tends to be a policy borrower, as well as a borrower of research.

For a country the size of New Zealand and Ireland, this is a sensible approach. Primary research can be prohibitively expensive for smaller countries, particularly those seeking quantitative, longitudinal data. For such countries, a more sensible approach may be to focus national efforts on reviewing policy and practice undertaken in other countries. However, this approach brings its own set of challenges. All countries are different, and the shared language of Anglophone countries may encourage policymakers to overlook significant cultural and political differences which make policy borrowing more complex than it might first appear.

New Zealand's current adult literacy strategy draws heavily on England's Skills for Life, while placing greater emphasis on workplace learning. Given recent evidence suggesting that participation in Skills for Life is not associated with improved economic

outcomes, at least in the short-term, it remains to be seen whether or not New Zealand policymakers will find this to have been an appropriate strategy.

# Scotland

## Policy context

In Scotland, adult literacy policy is part of the national lifelong learning strategy, but is also an important aspect of community regeneration (OECD, 2008). This is perhaps not surprising, given Scotland's emphasis on literacy as a social practice. In Scotland, literacy is conceptualised as a range of complex, context-dependent capabilities, rather than a readily transferable set of easily defined and measured skills. Everyday literacy practices are emphasised, as is the role of literacy in contributing to community well-being (Merrifield, 2005) and social capital.

## Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (ALNIS) strategy

In 2001 Scotland produced the Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (ALNIS) strategy, which gave Scotland's 32 local authorities responsibility for development, monitoring and funding of Community Learning Strategies (OECD, 2008). Partnerships were allowed to decide locally and collectively how centrally-provided funds should be used to address literacy and numeracy issues at community level. Each local authority is required to fulfil statutory obligations and meet national and local priorities agreed with central government, but has the freedom to develop and manage adult literacy and numeracy provision based on local needs and priorities (Scottish Government, 2009).

At national level, Communities Scotland's Learning Connections Adult Literacies Team provided support under the 2001 strategy. (This is now known as the Communities Team of Learning and Teaching Scotland.) Targets were set nationally, with local partnerships submitting action plans and reports to the national body, which monitored progress. According to the strategy, its success would be measured not via achievement targets but based on learners' goals and their improvement.

A key recommendation of the strategy was that the quality of adult literacy and numeracy teaching and learning needed to be improved, in part through the development of a learner-centred approach to provision. A 2006 evaluation of the strategy (Tett et al) concluded that these objectives have largely been met. Learners rated the quality of teaching very highly, with more than 90% saying they were satisfied with the quality of teaching, learning environment and the social environment. Tutors were equally positive. However, both learners and tutors said that the quality of guidance and support received by learners was poor.

Local community control of adult literacy provision is encouraged by Scotland's Curriculum Framework. This framework focuses not only on skills that learners should

develop through participation in literacy and numeracy provision, but also emphasises the differences learning can make to people's lives with regard to self confidence, self-esteem, improved attitudes towards learning, and improved capacities for social engagement and civic participation (Scottish Government, 2009). As Merrifield (2005) argues, this Curriculum Framework empowers teachers and learners by resisting the temptation to dictate in fine detail what should be taught and learned on literacy and numeracy courses.

Scotland's emphasis on community education is long-standing (Merrifield, 2005), and represents a belief that adult literacy provision should develop not just skills but also capabilities, to enable individuals and communities to improve the quality of life over a variety of domains. This approach also highlights a Scottish emphasis on education for citizenship and social engagement.

More recent policy developments have increased the community focus. In 2007, Scotland produced a Concordat which revised the relationship between the Scottish central government and local authorities. Under the Concordat, central government establishes the overall direction and desired outcomes for policies across a range of areas, but avoids effort to manage local service delivery. This shift towards greater devolution of power means that adult literacy and numeracy partnerships are no longer required to submit annual reports to the central government for monitoring purposes (Scottish Government, 2009).

Currently, most funding for local authorities is provided by means of block grants. Funding is distributed from national level to local authorities, who then apportion funding to Community Learning Strategy Partnerships. These Partnerships then distribute funds to Numeracy Partnerships. Between 2001 and 2008 the Scottish adult literacy strategy served more than 100,000 adults and invested more than £66 million in that service (OECD, 2008).

## **Other strategies and revisions to ALNIS**

In 2007 the Scottish Executive published *Skills for Scotland: a Lifelong Skills Strategy*, which provides a framework showing how different education sectors can work together in a complementary fashion to contribute to the country's skills goals. In 2010, a refreshed skills strategy, *Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth*, was published. As with skills strategies in all of the countries we studied, Scotland's emphasised that improving levels of adult literacy and numeracy was essential to promoting economic competitiveness.

Despite its emphasis on adult literacy as social practice, Scotland has advanced some workplace learning policies, encouraging employer take-up of workplace literacy and numeracy provision through effort such as the report *Delivering Work-based Learning* and the “Big Plus for Business” campaign, which aimed to raise awareness of literacy and numeracy needs within the workplace and encourage employers to help employees improve their basic skills.

In 2010 Scotland published a draft version of a refreshed literacy strategy, entitled *Literacy Action Plan: an Action Plan to Improve Literacy in Scotland*. The strategy addresses literacy across the life course and throughout all sectors of the education system. Looking specifically at adult literacy, the Action Plan says that following the 2009 publication of the *Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies* (St. Clair et al, 2010), Scotland is reassessing its long-standing adult literacy and numeracy strategy, with the aim of placing particular emphasis on improving literacy in deprived communities. As of the time of writing our report, a draft strategy was out for consultation by interested stakeholders. A final strategy is expected by Spring 2011.

## **Analysis and potential messages for Ireland**

In some regards, the Scottish adult education system is the most analogous to Ireland's. This is particularly true regarding how literacy is conceptualised. Ireland is respected the world over for its broad, multifaceted understanding of literacy, and the effort it has made to ensure that literacy policy and provision focus not only on economic rationales, but on helping individuals develop their capacities and improve their lives in a broad range of ways. Scotland shares this approach, and both countries place a great deal of emphasis on the role adult literacy in encouraging social engagement and full citizenship.

Like Ireland, Scotland has successfully maintained its more holistic approach to adult literacy policy and practice, despite economic pressures. Importantly, key Scottish policy documents and mechanisms, including the Curriculum Framework, support and facilitate a social practices-driven, community-embedded approach to literacy, as opposed to a focus on individuals and their skills (or lack thereof).

In Scotland, policy emphasises participation and its manifold benefits, which manifest themselves across a range of policy fields, such as mental well-being, physical health and civic engagement. These benefits are discussed in greater detail in Section 4.

# Sweden

## Policy context

In Swedish policy-making and policy documents, the concept of "adult literacy" provision or policies is rarely referred to. Instead, the focus tends to be on "adult education", which is seen to include adult literacy. For example, as noted by Veeman (2004), Swedish policy documents tend to discuss raising the educational level of the population or specific groups within it, rather than mentioning adult literacy specifically. Therefore, in this section we will generally refer to adult education rather than adult literacy, so as to avoid drawing unsubstantiated conclusions.

When seeking to analyse any Swedish initiatives affecting adult literacy provision, it is important to understand the long and important history adult education has in Sweden, and the central place it has in Swedish culture. In Sweden, most forms of adult education are free of charge, with participants often entitled to some form of financial assistance to encourage uptake (Veeman, 2004). This state support of adult education is emblematic of a long history of national support for adult learning, for example as exemplified by the Swedish study circles. These were developed in the late 19th century as a popular movement to address inequalities in society and to provide civic and citizenship-focused education for adult Swedes. Study circles remain the country's primary mechanism for adult civic education (Veeman, 2004). The emphasis of study circles is on helping adults understand and address structural problems affecting society; this stands in contrast to adult education approaches aimed at helping adults overcome individual problems they have or are deemed to have.

Since 1968, Swedish municipalities have had a legal obligation to provide free adult education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Policies and funding are provided by the national government. The Municipal Adult Education system, Komvux, was established as a compensatory system for adults who had been excluded from higher education in the country's previously hierarchical school system. In the long term, it has had the effect of ensuring that adult education was not a marginal activity, but is seen as an important component of a coherent and well-integrated lifelong education system.

Despite the strong emphasis on citizenship and social justice running through the history of Swedish adult education, when Swedish adult education reforms were originally undertaken in the 1960s, the country's policymakers were heavily influenced by Human Capital Theory (Veeman, 2004) and its attendant focus on individual agents and education for skills. Adult education was seen as a necessity if historically disadvantaged Swedes were to develop the skills required for full economic and political participation. In the 1970s and 80s, Swedish adult education policy placed a greater

emphasis on the role of adult education in improving civic understanding and engagement, and in increasing social justice. In the 1990s, the emphasis shifted back to economic rationales and an emphasis on individual skills, as broader policy focus shifted to the global competitiveness of the Swedish economy (Veeman, 2004). Much of the change in the 1990s was driven by reaction to a national economic and employment crisis. Changes included a shift from a highly centralised education system to greater local control; however, funding continued coming from the centre, as did policy direction. Implementation was shifted to local level.

The Swedish education system is integrated over the life course in a way that few if any other education systems are. As opposed to emphasising discrete educational *sectors*, there is a greater emphasis on the education *system*, with adult education commonly viewed as a natural continuation of compulsory education. Alongside other Scandinavian countries, Sweden's education and skills system is an example of what Keep (2009) refers to as a "deep model" of education and training. Germany offers another example of this deep model, while England represents a shallower model, according to Keep. For example, comparing lorry driver training in the UK and Germany, training in the former consists of a basic Heavy Goods Vehicle licence, plus health and safety training. In Germany, training includes maths, physics, German, logistics management, vehicle maintenance and a large component of citizenship learning. In a "deep model" of education and training, individuals are seen to have careers as citizens as well as workers – and adult education is seen as helping individuals develop both as citizens and as workers – i.e. providing a wide range of benefits across a number of domains central to human well-being.

### **The Adult Education Initiative, or "Knowledge Lift"**

Early in the 1990s, Sweden suffered a severe recession. Between 1990 and 1993, unemployment soared from 1.7% to 8.2%, before gradually decreasing to 4% in 2000. As one of its primary responses to the unemployment crisis, the Swedish government began increasing the funding available to municipalities for providing courses for the unemployed (Sternberg, 2008).

In 1997 Sweden launched the Adult Education Initiative (AEI), a five-year adult education and training programme with the aim of halving Sweden's unemployment rate. Also known as the "Knowledge Lift", the initiative sought to reduce unemployment not through providing specific workplace vocational training, but by achieving a general, rapid boost in the overall knowledge and skills of the population, with particular emphasis on individuals with lower levels of education (Ministry of Education and Science Sweden, 1999). The AEI was viewed as both education policy and employment policy, government having pledged to halve unemployment by the year 2000

(Rubenson, 2006). For Rubenson, the AEI represented a form of active labour market policy typical of Nordic countries, but with the focus shifted to adult education as a means of increasing the supply of skills available to the labour market. In contrast to typical labour market programmes which focus on vocational skills, AEI aimed to raise the general educational level of all unemployed adults.

## **Implementation**

The main target group for the initiative was unemployed adults who completely or partially lacked three-year upper secondary school competence. The initiative also focused on employees with low educational levels. With regard to measurement, this means that the initiative focused on the stock of qualifications rather than attempting to measure skill levels. Key objectives were improving economic growth and reforming adult education. As noted above, the aim was not to provide specific vocational training, but rather to provide the low educated with general skills – it is perhaps significant that the English translation is "knowledge lift" rather than "skills lift".

The AEI, which was run through the existing municipal adult education system, Komvux, is by some measure the largest adult education programme ever undertaken in Sweden. AEI sought to increase the national supply of general knowledge, skills and capabilities, but to be demand led. It aimed to achieve the latter objective – being demand led, within a broader emphasis on supply – by offering a wide range of choices regarding type of study, subjects, timing and location.

AEI courses lasted for one year and financial support was extensive: unemployed learners were entitled to a Special Grant for Education and Training equal to their unemployment insurance. Only adults aged 25-55 were eligible, suggesting that even though the initiative did not focus on vocational skills, the policy objectives were centred on improving employability. Participation rates were high, with more than 10% of the labour force taking advantage of the initiative. It has been suggested that one of these subtexts or implicit objectives of the AEI was to reduce unemployment rolls by shifting the unemployed into training.

The central government funded the municipalities, who administered the programmes. When the initiative was launched, AEI funding was based on the level of unemployment in each municipality. Later, the formula changed so that it was based on the number of course completions in adult education. Later it changed again to be based on population of the municipality. According to Albrecht et al (2005), a conservative estimate is that in the early years of its existence, Sweden was spending roughly \$350 million per year (equivalent to approximately 270 million euros in 2011) on the initiative to fund the creation of roughly 100,000 annual study slots. According to these authors, the high

levels of funding meant that there was no need for rationing of quantity or quality of the provision.

As a case study in policy development, the Adult Education Initiative provides interesting insights into the types of implementation strategies available in different countries. Veeman (2004) argues that the policy development process in Sweden tends to be very top-down and central government-driven. Tracing the process through which the AEI was developed and implemented, she notes that it went from policy idea to full implementation in slightly more than a year. Import, she attributes this speed to consensus-based policy-making tradition in Sweden, but also points to a lack of consultation with the municipalities charged with implementing the policy. During the life of the initiative, municipalities in Sweden complained that they were required to devote too many resources to assessment, reporting and reapplication for funds - they also argued that policy decisions were taken so rapidly at national level that it was impossible for central government to take on board messages from local evaluation reports (Veeman, 2004).

Additionally, there was a lack of direct outreach work targeting individuals (Veeman, 2004). While local adult education providers engaged in advertising, there was no national mass media campaign or advertising. However, the programme did get a fairly large amount of media coverage because of its size and ambitions.

### ***Outcomes***

The AEI has been extensively studied, with the bulk of research evidence suggesting that the initiative did not achieve the majority of its primary employment-related aims. However, the initiative did produce benefits, and some positive surprises regarding employment.

Looking first at earnings, no positive wage effect was found for men or women. Turning to employment rates, Albrecht et al (2005) found that a positive employment effect for young men. The fact that young men benefited from the programme was surprising for several reasons, argue the authors. First, it was notable that any positive employment effect was found; the vast majority of previous employment programmes in Sweden had produced no employment effect.

Second, employment gains tend to be the hardest to achieve for the least qualified. Given that the AEI was specifically targeted at this group, the fact that there were some employment gains can also be seen as a surprise.

Third, employment programmes that do achieve gains typically do so for women rather than men. This phenomenon is likely attributable to the fact that many women participating in such initiatives are mothers returning to the workforce after a child

rearing-related break. Most males do not take employment breaks for this reason. This means that men who experience lengthy spells of unemployment do not tend to have comparable education levels, backgrounds, socio-economic status or other characteristics as mothers who took time off to rear their children. That is, males on employment training programmes tend to be more disadvantaged than females on the same programmes. Therefore, there is some evidence that AEI was able to positively influence the employment outcomes of what in Sweden has traditionally been the hardest group to help.

According to Albrecht et al (2005), the policymakers behind the AEI were overly optimistic view about the extent to which an individual's human capital can be improved in a short space of time. However, they qualify this observation by arguing that the capacity for earnings and employment improvements via initiatives such as AEI may differ depending on country. In particular, they suggest that countries such as Sweden with relatively compressed skills distributions may benefit less from initiatives such as AEI, because such countries have fewer individuals with serious human capital deficits. In contrast, countries with higher levels of disadvantage may benefit more from initiatives focused on improving education and skills.

Looking at participation outcomes, Veeman (2004) argues that despite the existence of incentives such as study grants, paid leave and additional classroom spaces, AEI struggled to reach all its targeted groups, particularly middle-aged men and older workers. However, the initiative and its accompanying incentives did succeed in significantly increasing participation in adult education, despite struggles to raise participation levels in all target groups.

## **Analysis and potential messages for Ireland**

### ***Upskilling***

Looking specifically at the Adult Education Initiative, some researchers, e.g. Stenberg (2009) conclude that its outcomes were not commensurate to its extensive inputs, particularly with regard to funding. However, the initiative did produce employment gains for young men, in contrast to most other employment-focused initiatives in Sweden. Albrecht et al (2005) also suggest that the initiative might have been even more successful in a country such as Ireland, where a greater percentage of the population suffers from low skills and/or the levels of education. Examples of countries with greater levels of skills inequality include Ireland, the UK and the US.

The programme served a broader purpose as well. In a time of relatively high unemployment, it transferred individuals from the welfare rolls to educational provision, and increased the chances of improving the human and social capital of individuals made unemployed by the recession.

***Adapting to 21st-century economic realities: creating a culture of learning and improvement***

Sweden, along with the other Nordic countries, has been significantly more successful than its international competitors in creating a culture of adult learning which encourages high levels of participation and views adult education and adult literacy provision as institutionalised parts of a lifelong education system, as opposed to residual welfare support mechanisms. In Sweden, adult basic skills education is viewed as improving human capital while also providing benefits to families, communities and society as a whole through improved civic engagement and social cohesion.

# United States of America

## Policy context and background

Adult literacy policy has a relatively long history in the US compared to other countries. According to Sticht (2002), four key social forces have worked together over time to shape adult literacy policy in America:

- The US military, which provided literacy training to recruits and developed standardised measurement instruments
- A shift from a view of adult education as being primarily a middle class activity for self-improvement to one that viewed adult education as a charitable function targeted at the disadvantaged
- America's long history of immigration, which created a "persistent need for a system [providing] instruction in the English language and knowledge of American culture"
- Ongoing conflict between the views of adult literacy as liberal education or as human resources development, similar to that which has occurred in other countries, e.g. Australia.

Federal funds have been legislated for adult literacy since 1964, and the 1966 Adult Education Act established a permanent adult basic skills system (Benseman and Comings, 2008). In 1990, the President and all state governors adopted a range of educational goals which, among other objectives, gave adult literacy and equal standing with other educational sectors (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004).

In 1998, the federal government passed the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which consolidated more than 50 literacy, employment and training schemes into three block grants that could be used by states for adult literacy provision (OECD, 2008). The WIA has two primary focuses: family literacy and preparing individuals for employment. The policy encourages coordination between employment programmes and adult literacy programmes through the establishment of "one-stop" agencies within each state where learners can access a range of services, including adult literacy, job training and employment assistance (Benseman and Comings, 2008). As this suggests, the emphasis in the US is on adult literacy as a tool for improving employment opportunities. However, Benseman and Comings (2008) suggest that while the pursuit of other objectives, such as learning for citizenship and personal development, are considered secondary by policymakers, they are considered viable aims.

In 2003 the Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE) Act was established. This act reinforced the emphasis on adult literacy for economic skills, while increasing federal

and state obligation to make adequate literacy provision available to individuals (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004). Compared to Canada, policymakers in the US have greater responsibility for developing adult literacy institutions and structures, rather than putting the obligation on individual learners and projects. Some of the key strategies of the Act are:

- to hold state agencies and local programmes accountable for learner achievement
- to require states to develop or adopt standards for course content and assessment
- coordinate the delivery of educational and employment services through the system of "one-stop" career centres.

While accountability is required from state and local providers, the federal government has not established a national curriculum. States are free to administer and design adult literacy policy and provision as they see fit, so long as federally established accountability requirements are met. The mechanism through which this is achieved is the National Reporting System (NRS), which establishes three core indicators of programme success at the level of the individual learner (OECD, 2008):

- quantitatively measured improvements in literacy skills. The benchmark for this is a learner moving up one NRS level, which is equivalent to two grades of compulsory education. There are six NRS levels of literacy
- progression to unsubsidised employment, post-secondary education or relevant training; or career advancement
- receipt of a GED certificate, high school diploma or recognised equivalent.

In order to ensure accountability regarding NRS levels, all learners are pre-and post-tested.

Regarding programme quality, the federal government has developed a framework known as Equipped for the Future. Designed as a tool to guide instruction and assessment, Equipped for the Future defines the knowledge and skills that adults are expected to have in order to successfully function in a modern knowledge society. According to McKenna and Fitzpatrick (2004) the framework is increasingly used to guide course content or as a curriculum framework. However, the Adult Basic and Literacy Education Act 2003 did not endorse a particular framework, and states are free to choose their own.

## **Funding**

WIA is funded in part by federal block grants which are provided to each state. The states then fund programmes. WIA requires that each state at least match the federal share of funding devoted to adult literacy in that state. Writing in 2008, Benseman and Comings observed that only 10 of 50 states exceeded that minimum total.

## **Teaching workforce**

The US has a long history of attention to the professionalisation of the adult literacy workforce: the adult literacy teacher professionalisation movement began as long ago as the 1920s, says Sticht (2002). Despite this long history, the adult literacy teacher workforce in America is primarily made up of volunteers. Among paid instructors, nearly 9 in 10 work part-time. Staff turnover is high. Few full-time jobs are available in the sector, and those which do exist offer poor pay and few if any benefits (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004) – a particularly significant issue in a country where healthcare is optional and is provided not by the government but by employers.

## **Case study: Massachusetts**

Massachusetts is a geographically small American state with a population of approximately 6.4 million. Like all other US states, Massachusetts has responsibility for its own adult literacy system, but in exchange for the receipt of federal funding must comply with a range of federal accountability measures.

Between 1987 and 2002, total state and federal funding for adult education in Massachusetts increased from less than \$4 million to more than \$44 million (i.e. from roughly €4.4 million to €34 million<sup>4</sup>), with only one-third of the latter figure coming from the federal government (Comings and Soricone, 2005). Over that period, expenditure per learner rose from \$150 to \$2000 per year (i.e. from approximately €170 to €1,600). According to Comings and Soricone (2005) this additional expenditure was part of a concerted and successful effort by the state to significantly improve its adult education system, including adult literacy provision, which accounts for approximately 30% of all adult education learners. Comings and Soricone argue that Massachusetts' experiences and successes offer a number of important lessons for other adult education systems. Drawing on their analysis, this case study summarises Massachusetts' adult education

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<sup>4</sup> The value of the dollar relative to the euro declined over this period from approximately €1.1 to the dollar down to approximately 77 cents to the dollar.

improvements during this period, focusing on adult literacy, and highlighting key success factors.

### ***Funding***

The Massachusetts Department of Education (MDOE) administers the state's adult education system through the Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) unit. The MDOE provides the majority of funding for adult education in Massachusetts, but some cities and towns also provide their own funding (Comings and Soricone, 2005). Most funding goes to community-based organisations providing adult education, with a smaller amount going to school districts and less still going to community colleges and other providers. The funding system is informed by a framework which details minimum standards for effective provision and provides guidelines for programme aspects such as teacher-learner ratio limits, instructional duration and intensity, required levels of programme and staff development, and teacher salaries. A review of this system has determined that, compared to the previous system, the current framework has significantly reduced funding and administrative problems associated with "unrealistic requirements and unfunded mandates, and represents an institutionalised effort to bring equity to funding decisions" (Comings and Soricone, 2005).

### ***Teaching workforce***

In Massachusetts, adult education teachers tend to be relatively highly educated, with 94% having at least a four year college degree, and just under half (47%) possessing a graduate degree (Comings and Soricone, 2005). However, working conditions have continued to be relatively poor. Only 11% of teaching positions are full-time, and the sector experiences a very high rate of turnover. 57% of teachers have been with their current programmes for under two years, with only 19% having been with their current programme from more than five years (Comings and Soricone, 2005). Within this context, Massachusetts has sought to improve teacher salaries and increase the number of full-time teaching positions.

### ***Outcomes and effectiveness***

The Massachusetts adult education system has been evaluated internally and externally. External evaluation found a high rate of progression for adult literacy students, with 56% gaining at least one grade equivalent and approximately 30% gaining at least two grade equivalents (Comings and Soricone, 2005).

One likely key to these high achievement rates is the relatively large amount of instruction received by each learner. In 2000, learners received an average of 120 hours of instruction per year, compared to 97 hours per year in 1998. Both figures are well above the national average of 66 hours per year (Comings and Soricone, 2005).

These extra learning hours are likely to be highly significant. Comings and colleagues have found that additional learning hours are correlated with the likelihood of achieving learning gains (Comings and Soricone, 2005). Looking specifically at adult literacy and ESOL learners, they found that those who received at least 150 hours of instruction had a 75% chance of achieving a learning gain of at least one level. For literacy learners, this equates to one grade level. Additional hours of instruction were also found to be positively correlated with obtaining a high school credential, and the authors found that additional hours of instruction appeared to offset a range of individual characteristics associated with reduced likelihood of achievement: age, ability at the beginning of instruction, and receipt of public assistance. This research suggests that it takes adult literacy learners an average of 129 hours to achieve an educational gain of at least one grade level equivalent, and Comings and Soricone observed that Massachusetts appears to be making good progress in achieving the aim of keeping learners in programmes long enough for them to achieve their learning goals.

### ***Key success factors***

According to Comings and Soricone (2005, page 102), Massachusetts' effective adult education system achieved its effectiveness through a "process of comprehensive reform". The authors cite four components of that reform which they feel have been especially critical to its success:

1. Strong leadership and sustained advocacy effort, they argue, have been "the backbone of the reform effort, fostering growth and pushing for continued improvements" (p. 102)
2. Improved service quality. According to the authors, a key decision was to change the system's goals from trying to serve as many learners as possible with the funds available to serving only the number of learners who could receive high-quality provision with the available funds. For example, in 1991 funding was very low but the system took on 40,000 learners – with many of them receiving no more than 12 hours of provision during the year. Soon after, Massachusetts decided to cut its numbers of learners by two-thirds to enable a focus on delivering quality services. Over time, funding levels have risen and Massachusetts again serves nearly 40,000 learners per year, but with much greater effectiveness than it did in 1991. Quantity has followed quality.
3. Institutionalisation of programme and staff development has been central to Massachusetts' efforts to improve the quality of provision.
4. The provision of a range of resources to support students: Massachusetts has actively sought to involve a wide range of education providers in order to meet a broader range of learner needs. This is in contrast to many other American states, which offer services only through one provider.

### ***Lessons for other systems***

Comings and Soricone argue that governments can learn five primary lessons from Massachusetts' success:

1. Reform requires long-term leadership and advocacy. In Massachusetts, the reform of the adult education system has been ongoing for two decades. Gains have been slow but cumulative, and "were a result of pushing the legislation an organised and well-planned effort" (p. 120).
2. When attempting to strengthen an adult education system, states must focus on quality before quantity. The process of improving quality "should include clear goals, a capacity to monitor progress, and incentives for improved performance" (p. 120).
3. The implementation of standards and improvement of services requires support for front-line practitioners. As the authors argue, service improvement cannot come about from changes in management procedures alone. Before attempting to implement major reform initiatives, Massachusetts devoted time and resources to programme and staff development that would help practitioners to meet the newly required standards. Simply imposing new standards is not enough.
4. States and learners need to draw on multiple resources. As part of its service reform, Massachusetts expanded the range of education providers it utilised, but ensured that all were working to a common set of standards. Furthermore, the state encouraged joined-up working across the range of policy fields relevant to adult learners. As Comings and Soricone write (p. 122): "The complexity of adult learners' lives and goals necessitate an approach that draws on resources outside the adult education community.... Massachusetts requires programmes to develop networks with local services and institutions that their students need. Although supporting learner progress, this effort has the added benefit of building support for adult education among these different institutions and the agencies that fund the other services."
5. Change takes time. Policies and programmes need time to have an impact, and to refine and improve themselves through internal and external evaluation. Policymakers sometimes fall into the trap of implementing too many initiatives in too short a time in pursuit of rapid evidence of success. As the authors observe, this can lengthen the reform process. Indeed, it can even derail it.

### **Analysis and potential messages for Ireland**

As detailed immediately above, Massachusetts' success in improving its adult education system provides a range of valuable lessons.

At national level, the US provides an interesting example of the deployment of an achievement-centred accountability mechanism – i.e. the National Reporting System – within an adult literacy system which gives local governments (in America's case, States) a relatively large amount of autonomy with regard to local policy and provision.

Like many other countries, the US highlights the challenges of workforce development. Despite a long history of interest in professionalisation, the American adult literacy teaching workforce consists primarily of volunteers and poorly paid part-time workers. As highlighted in our focus on Massachusetts, this limits the potential quality of the instruction provided to learners. However, as we have seen in England, professionalised workforces are expensive and time-consuming to develop.

## **Section 4: Thematic analysis of policy developments and key policy issues**

This thematic analysis draws on key themes which arose in our investigations of national and regional adult literacy initiatives. Our choice of themes has been guided by the availability of descriptive and analytic evidence.

### **Engagement, participation and persistence**

In most countries, participation is the primary measure of adult literacy policy success. A focus on participation is concordant with the widely held and evidence-based belief that participation in and of itself is correlated with a range of positive benefits to individuals and societies (see e.g. Carpentieri and Vorhaus, 2010). This is particularly true with regard to participation by disadvantaged groups.

Countries face similar challenges regarding engagement and participation of learners with low literacy skills. As research in several nations has shown, most individuals with poor literacy skills (as objectively measured on standardised tests) do not see themselves as having poor skills and do not feel the need to improve (see e.g. Bynner and Parsons, 2006). Recruitment and engagement strategies are therefore crucial. In some countries, such as Ireland and England, recruitment strategies have focused on mainstream media campaigns designed to encourage individuals to undertake literacy provision, which is offered free of charge. These media campaigns have been highly successful in raising awareness of adult literacy issues and encouraging uptake.

Under the Adult Education Initiative, Sweden pursued another route, focusing its efforts not on national mass media campaigns but on expanding its already large adult education infrastructure so as to further reduce structural and cultural barriers to participation among the disadvantaged. The lack of a major media campaign to support the initiative has been criticized (Veeman, 2004), and it has been suggested that engaging in such campaigning and outreach work may have raised participation rates for some target groups. Swedish policymakers' predictions about participation appear to have been influenced by an assumption that if the supply (including diversity) of learning

opportunities was increased, participation would rise for all target groups. However, participation rates may have risen even more if they had also focused on stimulating demand.

On a more structural level, however, the Nordic countries' long-term approach to increasing participation has been cited as one of the key reasons for these countries' high adult literacy rates, and for their high levels of participation, particularly among the disadvantaged. Numerous researchers have argued that the "Nordic model" of adult basic skills policy and provision is the source of those countries' consistently higher performance on international comparisons of adult literacy and numeracy skills, and plays a central role in the rapid and successful adaptation of Nordic countries to knowledge society models in the age of post-industrialisation. For example, Veeman (2005) argues that "the [adult literacy and numeracy] results in northern Europe show that an adult education system that is not based on a charity model of volunteer tutoring results in [better outcomes]. The social democratic approach considers adult education as a public investment."

Tuijnman (2003) argues that the comparatively high level of participation in adult education in the Nordic countries is primarily attributable to the high level of public support for adult education in general, and in particular provision targeted at low skilled populations. Such support exists within and draws on more general Nordic public support for disadvantaged groups. According to Rubensen (2006) the key to Nordic participation and achievement figures in adult education is the "very demanding equity standard" set by these countries with regard to social justice (p. 327). What is more, policy emphases on reducing disadvantage are institutionalised – i.e. built into the adult education system – through the existence of structural frameworks that make it easier for disadvantaged adults to participate in adult education. Efforts at increasing participation are thereby focused not primarily on convincing individuals to participate; instead, the emphasis is on creating and furthering a society-wide culture of adult learning which makes it more likely that even disadvantaged individuals will see adult learning as something that is suitable for them. As Rubenson and Desjardins (2009, p. 202) argue: "The Nordic welfare states feature structural conditions under which a larger group of adults, as compared to non-Nordic countries, seem to value participation... Furthermore, Nordic welfare states support a variety of targeted policy measures designed to assist adults in overcoming barriers."

One of the successes of the Nordic model is that it reduces barriers to persistence. Persistence is a learner-centred concept focusing on how and through what mechanisms learners are supported throughout the various stages of their lifelong learning journey (Carpentieri, 2008). One of the key criticisms of adult literacy provision in countries throughout the world is that policymakers and programme developers

readily borrow concepts and mechanisms from the world of children's education (see e.g. Rogers, 2004). One such concept is retention, which is an organisation-centred measure of student participation. However, adult literacy learning is elective, and adult learners generally have a wide range of non-educational responsibilities competing for their time and energy, e.g. employment and family. A focus on persistence acknowledges that adult literacy learners may move in and out of provision; leaving provision temporarily is not necessarily a mark of failure, as it is considered under an organisation-centred, retention-based focus. For example, countries such as England and New Zealand have reported conflicts between the goals of educationalists seeking to improve learners' literacy skills and employment agencies seeking to move those learners into jobs (see e.g. NAO, 2008). In some cases, as cited in our New Zealand overview, successfully finding employment has a negative impact on evaluations of adult literacy programmes, as the learner who finds employment is recorded as a "non-completion". A more persistence-based approach to lifelong learning in general and basic skills provision in particular would encourage the utilisation of policy mechanisms enabling a learner-centred focus – for example, the use of Individual Learner Numbers which learners carry with them throughout their lifetimes, as opposed to using different identification numbers at different learning institutions.

## **Human and social capital**

Many of the key debates over adult literacy policy objectives and assessment revolve around the issue of capital. Traditionally, economists have defined capital as that which is or has been invested, and until the 1960s the concept was generally limited to physical capital (Schuller et al, 2004). Beginning in the 1960s, however, the notion of human capital became central to economic and social analysis, and to policy-making, particularly in the fields of skills and adult literacy. Becker, who popularised the concept in the 1960s, originally conceived of human capital in broad terms, i.e. including but not limited to economic skills and outcomes. Education, he wrote, should aim to influence "future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources in people" (Becker 1993, p. 11). Another broad definition has been advanced by the OECD, which has argued that human capital is "the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being" (CERI/OECD, 2001, p. 18). For policymakers, though, human capital is often conceived of in much more limited terms, with the focus almost exclusively on the development of skills for the economy. For example, writing on human capital and government policy, Husz (1998, page 9) defined the former as "the time, experience, knowledge and abilities ... which can be used in the production process".

Whatever the definition, it is clear that the transition to knowledge society has made knowledge and skills increasingly important to success in modern societies, both economically and in terms of health, personal development, and social and civic engagement. As emphasised in Ireland's Skills Strategy (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007), human capital improvements are essential to improvements in productivity and growth.

Because of the rising importance of skills such as literacy, policy efforts have justifiably focused on improving such skills. However, some policymakers have mistakenly sought to measure and understand the impacts of human capital improvement in the relatively simple and straightforward ways that physical capital investments and improvements can be understood. This can be extremely problematic, as human capital is far less tangible, and far more socially influenced, than physical capital. Falk (2001) argues that policymakers have a tendency to engage in simplistic equations in which investments or improvements in human capital in the form of literacy skills inevitably lead to better outputs and outcomes for the individual in the way that improved physical capital stocks should lead to improved outcomes for manufacturing plants. Such an approach overlooks structural barriers to improved outcomes – for example, improvements in the national stock of literacy skills do not necessarily lead to an increase in jobs demanding better skills. Perhaps more critically, this approach encourages policymakers to overlook and under estimate the complex, interrelated and often difficult to measure gains associated with participation in adult literacy provision – gains which occur across a range of policy fields.

For Balatti and Falk (2002), a more robust understanding of adult literacy policy and human capital development depends on understanding the interdependence between human capital and social capital. While human capital pertains to individuals, their attributes and characteristics, social capital relates to connections between people and what these connections can potentially offer to enable people to improve their lives through cooperation with others (Field, 2005). Key elements of social capital include shared norms, values and understandings. These norms, values and understandings facilitate co-operation within or among groups (CERI/OECD, 2001). Furthermore, they are based on and serve to further promote a range of positive outcomes and processes, including trust, goodwill and reciprocity (Centre for Literacy of Québec, 2010).

For these and other analysts, the development of human capital in the form of skills and knowledge is essential, but without improved social capital those skills and knowledge can neither be developed nor shared for the benefit of society. Social capital development is seen as the first, necessary function of literacy provision for the disadvantaged because a lack of social capital erects generally insurmountable barriers to participation in learning. That is, human capital development requires social capital

development (Balatti et al, 2006). Looked at this way, adult literacy policy and provision succeeds not just when it improves measurable skills. Indeed, this can be seen as an important but secondary outcome of policy. The primary outcome is seen as improving social capital. By doing so, provision will not only improve skills, it will also influence individuals, families and societies in a range of positive ways, improving health, psychological well-being, and social and civic engagement.

Moving from policy goals to policy implementation, we can see contrasting approaches to human and social capital in England and Scotland. Whereas the Skills for Life strategy is strongly focused on human capital development with a particular emphasis on developing skills for employment, Scotland's adult literacy strategy is centred on a social practices approach, which recognises literacy not only as a skill but also as a process which grows out of social contexts and which must be understood and taught in relation to how it influences and is influenced by social capital.

New Zealand's workplace literacy programmes, while focused on employment-related skills, draw on social capital theory by suggesting that individuals are more likely to improve their literacy skills if literacy instruction is integrated or embedded in contexts those individuals understand, such as their jobs. Particularly strong research evidence supporting this embedded approach is found in Casey et al's (2006) analysis of Skills for Life provision in a range of vocational training contexts.

## **Employability skills**

Several policy evaluations cited in our national overviews highlighted improved employability skills as one of the primary outcomes of initiatives. Because improvement of employability skills is such a regular outcome of literacy provision, we felt that it would be useful to provide a brief overview of international research on skills for employability.

As Gee and Lankshear (1997, p. 84) have observed, in post-Fordist economies workers are no longer "hired from the neck down"; they need to make more decisions and use more skills, including literacy and numeracy. Much of this is due, suggests Holland (1998), to re-organised workplaces with less hierarchical structures, in which staff who were previously sheltered from duties requiring literacy and numeracy skills must now undertake them. This has been described by some as a "new work order" related to a modern, "fast capitalism" (Hastwell, 2009).

According to Wolf (2005), increased demand for report-writing at all levels of the organisational hierarchy is frequently cited by employers as a motivating factor behind the setting up of Skills for Life workplace courses. For example, in one local authority

these researchers found that estate caretakers were increasingly expected to provide written documentation of cases of crime, vandalism and general disrepair, demanding higher literacy skills. A bus company in the Midlands ran a compulsory 'customer service and literacy' course for 400 employees, partly in response to new requirements for drivers to fill in incident report forms, a requirement which was itself partly shaped by company fears over litigation from customers. Just as literacy and numeracy are becoming more important, so are computers. Research looking at workplace needs found that the proportion of workers for whom computers are an essential part of work rose from 31% to 40% between 1997 and 2001, with the number for whom they were not important at all falling from 31% to 21% (Wolf, 2005).

In Australia, O'Neill and Gish (2001) found that many workers experience difficulties carrying out their responsibilities because of poor basic skills. In their research on literacy skills in the workplace, these authors point to a range of workplace issues demanding good literacy, including health and safety, developing employees' confidence and self-esteem, and having good enough skills to engage in and benefit from vocational training. With regard to employee confidence, they point to evidence from employers indicating that when employees are unhappy with their literacy, language or numeracy skills, they lack confidence in performing their work.

A New Zealand study investigating literacy, language and numeracy skill development needs amongst employees looked at job-specific literacy demands placed on employees, querying whether these demands were increasing over time and whether or not employees experienced difficulties performing workplace literacy tasks (Moore and Benseman, 2003). The researchers queried shopfloor employees, supervisors and employee relations managers at 17 companies representing a range of industries in New Zealand. A total of 330 respondents were randomly chosen. Changing work practices and more fluid organisational structures are placing greater demands on workers, including with regard to literacy, language and numeracy, the study reported. Almost all employee relations managers reported feeling that the demands being made on employees' literacy skills were more or much more than only two or three years ago. When asked what was driving the demand for higher literacy skills, almost all cited a drive for higher quality services and/or products. This finding, though only tentative, may have implications for long term national skills plans. Nations who wish to increase their competitiveness in the global marketplace by upskilling their economies may need to invest significant resources into improving workers' basic literacy and numeracy skills so that these workers can meet new workplace demands. Three-quarters of employee relations managers rated literacy skills as very important; the remaining quarter rated them as important.

A 2009 survey (Martin et al) of more than 1000 employers by the UK's Learning and Skills Network found that the key skills that employers want from the young people entering their first job were: timekeeping; literacy; numeracy; and enthusiasm and commitment. 80% of employers said that young people must be good timekeepers, 79% said they must have good literacy skills, 77% said they must have good numeracy skills and 75% said enthusiasm and commitment. The survey also asked employers what skills, if lacking, were considered "deal breakers" when recruiting young staff. 55% of employers identified a lack of literacy skills as a dealbreaker; 51% said a lack of communication skills; 48% said a lack of enthusiasm and commitment; and 47% said poor numeracy skills would prevent them from hiring a candidate, no matter how good his or her other skills.

A view of literacy as context-dependent suggests a role not just for individuals in the developing of their own literacy skills but for employers as creators and overseers of the workplace contexts in which literacy skills are required. The need for active employer engagement in developing employees' literacy skills is heightened by evidence about the changing nature of work and the demands for new and different literacy skills from employees. This may be particularly true with regard to older employees, who may find themselves required to engage in literacy activities which did not exist when they were last in the education system (Diehl and Mikulecky, 1980).

## **Workplace literacy provision**

Given the robust international evidence on the importance of good literacy skills on the job, it is clear why policymakers are interested in workplace literacy programmes. These programmes offer the opportunity to improve individuals' literacy skills, as well as to deliver benefits to businesses' bottom line.

All of the countries featured in this review have developed workplace literacy initiatives, albeit to varying degrees. New Zealand and Australia have invested particular policy efforts on developing workplace literacy. In New Zealand, such programmes are indicative of a view of adult literacy policy as primarily an economic tool, but also one which can build on and encourage an understanding of literacy as context dependent, with one key context being the workplace. Both here and elsewhere, workplace literacy policies are seen as serving the aims of adult education as well as those of the labour market in general and employers in particular. However, as we have seen in Australia, literacy policy which is very closely aligned with labour market policy runs the risk of being seen as just one other labour market policy, rather than as an end unto itself. In Australia, this contributed to the de-funding of an earlier workplace literacy programme.

In addition, Australia has suffered a general stagnation of adult literacy policy development, except where workplace literacy is concerned.

In England, workplace literacy programmes have been celebrated for the range of positive benefits they have produced. For example, Wolf et al (2008) concluded that workplace courses successfully reach adults who do not participate in other formal learning. They also found that such courses produced very small average gains in work performance, and that performance continued to improve over the next two years. However, workplace literacy programmes have also been criticised for yielding limited or no economic gains (see e.g. IOE, 2009). Such criticisms have tended to focus on the difficulty of producing significant economic gains through short courses.

## **Course length**

Literacy courses differ widely in their duration, ranging from short workplace literacy courses offering 12-20 hours of provision to programmes lasting one or more years and offering several hundred hours of "time on-task". Shorter courses have been lauded as a gateway into learning for adults who would not otherwise participate in education, but have also been criticised for their inability to deliver significant economic or skills-related gains. Comings' research in the US suggest that there may be a threshold of participation in adult literacy courses beneath which most learners cannot make the progression required to move up the equivalent of one grade level – in the US context, Comings estimates this to be approximately 129 hours of coursework (Comings and Soricone, 2005). In the UK, it has been estimated that an average of 150-200 hours of time on-task is required to progress one level (Carpentieri and Vorhaus, 2010). This presents a challenging conundrum for policymakers and programme designers: for the achievement of measurably significant gains, longer– and therefore more expensive – courses may be required for most learners. However, embedded literacy learning has, as noted elsewhere in this report, showed effective results while offering fewer literacy learning hours (Casey et al, 2006). This is an area that requires further investigation and analysis.

## **Embedding**

In England, research by Casey et al (2006) provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of embedding adult literacy within Vocational Education and Training (VET). Casey and colleagues found that learners on fully embedded courses were 86%

more likely to achieve literacy qualifications and 46% more likely to achieve numeracy qualifications, compared to those on non-embedded courses.

In this study, the amount of embedding appeared to matter. Literacy and numeracy courses could either be partly embedded in VET, mostly embedded, or fully embedded. The greater the level of embedding, the greater the literacy and numeracy gains for learners.

The researchers also found that embedding literacy and numeracy instruction within VET improved the rate of achievement for vocational qualifications, suggesting that VET learners were being provided with valuable literacy and numeracy skills which facilitated achievement of their vocational training goals.

Following the publication of these research results, the English government strongly encouraged the embedding of Skills for Life provision. However, it remains unclear to what extent embedding has taken place, and there is little evidence of follow-up research testing the robustness and generalisability of Casey et al's findings, either in the UK or elsewhere. For example, a recent review carried out for the New Zealand Department of Labour (Whatman et al, 2010) found little evidence of meaningful research on the impacts of embedding, beyond that undertaken by Casey and colleagues. However, case studies highlighting examples of practice are available, for example those conducted in the UK by Roberts et al (2005) and in Australia by Millar and Falk (2002).

Integrating literacy and vocational courses presents a number of challenges, as emphasised in the research highlighting its benefits (Casey et al, 2006). Literacy tutors and vocational tutors must work closely together to develop and deliver courses, a task which can be challenging both at the individual level and at the level of further education colleges. Developing cooperative, collaborative teaching models can take time that policymakers and programme developers may not feel they have. For example, an Australian evaluation of the National Training Programme found that the initiative had been rolled out too quickly, causing literacy provision to be marginalised.

Furthermore, the evidence indicates that when literacy provision is delivered by vocational tutors lacking experience and knowledge of literacy teaching, learner achievement suffers. In their research, Casey and colleagues (2006) compared two types of embedded instruction: 1) courses in which vocational tutors were required to deliver literacy training; and 2) courses in which vocational tutors delivered vocational training but specialist literacy tutors delivered literacy instruction. Learners on the "single tutor" courses were much less likely to achieve literacy qualifications than learners taught by two tutors.

## **Economic benefits of improving adult literacy skills**

For most policy initiatives and policymakers, the primary rationale for development of adult literacy policy and provision is an economic one. Therefore, in this section we briefly summarise research on the economic returns to adult literacy, highlighting in particular the distinction between having good literacy skills as an adult and improving one's skills as an adult.

In the UK, a number of researchers have assessed the economic value of literacy skills. For example, De Coulon et al (2007), looking at 34 year olds born in 1970, found that literacy and numeracy had a strong positive association with individuals' earnings, even when controlling for a wide range of factors such as individual ability, qualifications and family background. Bynner and Parsons (2006) have drawn similar conclusions, as have other researchers (see for example Grinyer 2006, McIntosh and Vignoles 2001). Having better literacy and/or numeracy skills has also been shown to have positive impacts on employment and employability (De Coulon et al 2007, Bynner and Parsons 2006, Grinyer 2006, McIntosh and Vignoles 2001). However, most of the focus of research in this field has been on the impact of *having* a particular level of literacy and numeracy skills. Very little research has been done on the impact of *improving one's skills as an adult*. This is an important distinction.

One exception is Bynner and Parsons (2006), who found that for individuals born in 1970, improving literacy and numeracy skills between the ages of 21 and 34 was associated with numerous positive economic outcomes. These included a higher likelihood of being in full-time employment, being more likely to own one's own home, and being less likely to be on state benefits.

## **Other individual benefits of participation in adult literacy provision: well-being, health and personal development**

As discussed earlier, human capital is not limited to economic skills and development. It also includes health and psychological well-being – Becker's "psychic resources". Both health and well-being are key priority areas for modern governments. Therefore, in this section we will briefly summarise research on the impact of adult education on well-being, health and personal development. Here the focus will be on adult education in general rather than adult literacy provision in particular. This is because, with the exception of a very small amount of research – for example Metcalfe et al's 2009 evaluation of Skills for Life and Tett et al's evaluation of the Scottish Adult Literacy and

Numeracy strategy (2007) – there has been very little analysis of the impacts of adult literacy provision on these areas.

Much of the English-language evidence in this field was produced by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL), where researchers utilised birth cohort studies to track large numbers of individuals over time. In one study, Hammond (2004) found that for adults who left school with few qualifications, taking FE courses contributed to positive well-being and health. Hammond found that it was particularly important that there be provision available that matched disadvantaged learners' interests, strengths and needs, rather than attempting to route them into a limited range of learning options. Flexible provision was associated with positive outcomes.

In a follow-up study, Hammond and Feinstein (2006) found that participation in adult learning was associated with increased well-being. Specifically, they found that it was correlated with increased optimism, increased self-efficacy and better self-rated health. Adult learners were between 20 and 30 per cent more likely to experience positive outcomes than non-learners. Importantly, Hammond and Feinstein found that participation in adult learning benefited those who had struggled in compulsory education just as much as it did those who had done well at compulsory level. Furthermore, optimism and self-efficacy increased the most among adults who had struggled in school suggesting that adult education targeted at the disadvantaged can help reduce the "well-being gap".

Participation in adult education was also correlated with improved health behaviours and outcomes. In the same study, Hammond and Feinstein found that participation in adult learning was associated with better rates of giving up smoking, taking up exercise and, for those who already exercised at age 33, continuing to do so at age 42. The researchers found both transformative and sustaining effects of adult learning: participants were more likely than non-learners to develop new, healthy habits (transformation), and were also more likely than non-learners to sustain healthy habits such as exercise.

Such individual gains are likely to have cascading impacts on family and community as well. However, measuring gains beyond the sphere of the individual is methodologically very challenging and thus far the research evidence is focused almost exclusively on individuals (Field 2009).

## **Improved civic engagement and social cohesion**

Many researchers argue that because human capital and social capital are so interdependent, adult literacy policy should be assessed as much on its impacts on social capital and civic engagement as on its capacity to improve transferable knowledge and skills. In this section, we summarise further research from the UK's Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL). As in the previous section, most of this research focuses on participation in any form of adult education, not just literacy.

In a study of British adults born in 1958, Feinstein and Hammond (2004) found that participation in any of four types of adult education contributed to positive changes in social attitudes. The researchers also found increases in civic and political participation, two hallmarks of a healthy democracy. As has been argued by many, for example Martin (2003), one of the primary goals of adult literacy provision should be to give disadvantaged adults the skills and understandings required to be active, engaged citizens. Importantly, many of these are the skills cited in the above discussion of well-being, such as self confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

There is evidence that adult education improves social cohesion. For example, Feinstein et al (2003) found improved racial tolerance amongst adult education participants.

Adult education has also been shown to enhance social capital by improving social skills, extending social networks and promoting shared norms (Schuller et al 2002). Analysing the Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy strategy, Tett and Maclachlan (2007) found increases in the proportion of female and older learners going out regularly and an increased likelihood of being able to identify someone who could be turned to for help. This suggests that adult literacy provision has the potential to reduce the apparently growing class divide with regard to civic participation in some countries. For example, in the UK, there is evidence that middle-class civic participation has remained relatively stable over the last several decades, but that participation and social capital among the working class have declined, especially among women (Li and Pickles 2005).

## **Measurement**

When assessing initiatives, policymakers tend to prefer to focus on either on participation rates or on achievement. Measures of achievement tend to be based on

qualifications, as these are more readily measured than improvements in skill levels. Both England and the US focus primarily on measures of achievement; however, the latter offers a broader range of positive outcomes.

Most countries focus on participation levels, an approach supported by the research evidence summarised earlier in this report, which finds a wide range of individual benefits associated with taking part in adult education. A focus on participation also suggests a policy emphasis on adult literacy as a means for improving social capital and civic engagement, as the primary measure is not one – qualifications – generally conceived of in terms of its employment and wage returns.

## **Teaching workforce**

One of the particularly revolutionary aspects of England's Skills for Life has been the strong and central emphasis it has placed on qualifications for adult literacy tutors. As noted previously, the literacy teaching workforce in England is the most qualified in the world. New Zealand appears to be adapting a similar focus. However, a major expansion of teacher qualification levels is an expensive undertaking, and it remains to be seen whether or not the current economic crisis will encourage New Zealand to reduce its ambitions in this area. Most other countries have opted for less professionalisation of the workforce – however, it should be noted that adult literacy teachers do tend to be fairly well qualified, albeit not necessarily in adult literacy. For example, in Massachusetts most teachers were found to have Bachelors or Masters degrees (Comings and Soricone, 2005). Despite such qualifications, most teaching workforces tend to be largely volunteer, or part time and poorly paid.

## **The lengthy process of building an effective adult literacy sector**

As Comings and Soricone (2005) emphasise in their analysis of Massachusetts' development of a more effective adult education system, developing such a system takes time. Quality cannot simply be decreed from the top down; it must also be built from the bottom up, e.g. through teacher training and the development of accountability systems which support rather than detract from effective teaching and learning. Earlier in this report we highlighted a Nordic approach to adult education in general and adult literacy in particular based on developing and sustaining structures and systems which reduce barriers to participation and persistence among the most disadvantaged adults.

Because such systems are structurally robust, they can respond to changing policy demands, and are able to support differing conceptions of adult literacy's purposes. For example, in Sweden adult literacy provision is seen both as a tool for improving economic opportunities and as a means of improving social capital and enabling democratic participation in society (Veeman, 2005). In contrast to the Nordic approach, Veeman points to Canada which, despite being extremely concerned about adult literacy issues, has not invested the time and effort, either at national or provincial/territorial level, to craft coherent, long-term adult literacy policies. This has left adult literacy provision in Canada impoverished. In Australia, the experience has been one of stagnation, with only workplace literacy receiving extensive policy attention.

## **Family literacy initiatives**

In a comparative analysis of family literacy policies and programmes throughout Europe, Carpentieri et al (forthcoming 2011) argue that family literacy should be a primary focus of government intervention, both because of strong reported returns on investment and because intergenerational programmes address a range of key policy issues. Currently, most Member States offer some types of interventions aimed at improving child literacy skills through enhancing parents' skills, but few countries have developed coherent national family literacy policies. However, the same study (Carpentieri et al, forthcoming 2011) found that in countries such as Ireland, Turkey, the Netherlands and the UK, family literacy policy development has benefited from the presence of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) serving as policy champions.

In Turkey, the Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP) has expanded over the course of two decades from being a small university-led research programme to being an integral part of Turkish national education policy (Carpentieri et al, forthcoming 2011). MOCEP aims to improve children's cognitive and socio-emotional development through the improvement of disadvantaged mothers' parenting skills, self-confidence and self-efficacy. The programme was developed in 1982 and offers a free alternative to over-subscribed pre-school education for children aged 5 and 6. Since 1982, MOCEP and an earlier intervention, the Turkish Early Enrichment Project, have been repeatedly and extensively evaluated by quantitative researchers, with the evidence showing a range of clear and positive long-term effects, including higher primary school grades and vocabulary scores, more favourable attitudes towards school, and better family and social adjustment (see e.g. Kağıtçıbaşı et al, 2001, 2005; Bekman 2003, 2004).

In England, government-funded family literacy interventions are more similar to family literacy programmes in Ireland, in that they actively seek to improve parents' literacy

skills. In the mid-1990s, evaluations of Family Literacy Demonstration Programmes found positive gains in literacy achievement for children and parents (Brooks et al, 1996). A follow-up study two years later found that these benefits and many others had been sustained (Brooks et al, 1997). These programmes and the studies which assessed them gave impetus to the growth of family literacy policy and programmes, both in the UK and elsewhere.

Like many Irish family literacy programmes, English initiatives often have three strands –sessions for parents, sessions for children, and joint sessions – and three core objectives: improving parents' literacy skills, improving children's literacy skills and development, and improving parents' ability to help their children's literacy development. In England, policy makers have encouraged parents participating in such programmes to seek to gain literacy and/or numeracy qualifications, and have discouraged programme leaders from recruiting parents who already possess target qualifications. One of the primary policy objectives of these “parallel track” family literacy programmes is to provide poorly educated and/or low literacy adults with a low-pressure, first step back into formal adult learning, taking advantage of parents' strong desire to improve their ability to help their children succeed. However, while later research has continued to show positive impacts for child literacy, evidence regarding adult literacy improvements has been mixed. Some research has found gains for parents, while other studies have found otherwise (Brooks et al, 2008). The evidence is clearer regarding successful parental development of a range of other competencies which better enable them to support their children's literacy development. These include: improved confidence regarding books and stories; greater understanding of the importance of shared parent-child reading; and improved self-efficacy.

Two other European countries – the Netherlands and Malta – have strong track records in family literacy (Carpentieri et al, forthcoming 2011). In the Netherlands, the “Step Up” (Opstap) programmes targeted primarily at migrant families. Like programmes in Turkey, the emphasis in the Netherlands is on improving parents' ability to support their children's literacy development.

This is also the case in Malta, which has a particularly coherent policy strategy regarding the role of family literacy, based around the Foundation for Educational Services (FES), a government department which provides a range of educational initiatives focused on literacy support, parental empowerment and lifelong learning (Spiteri and Camilleri, 2003; UIL, 2008). Maltese policymakers have emphasised the importance of family literacy initiatives as a means for empowering disadvantaged mothers, helping them to build their self-esteem and self-efficacy, both as parents and individuals (Carpentieri et al, forthcoming 2011). Similar findings have been reported elsewhere. In England, for example, poorly qualified parents participating in family

literacy programmes reported feeling empowered by the additional knowledge and understanding they had of their child's schoolwork (Swain et al, 2009).

In many cases, such parents lack not only economic resources, but also the social and cultural capital required to best support their children's literacy development. In addition, poorly educated parents often lack what could be called "literacy about literacy". By this we mean that they lack a good understanding of how important early literacy development is in determining children's life chances. Such understandings tend to be strongly influenced by class and educational background, and as have been reported by a number of researchers in a range of countries – see e.g. Reay (1999) and Lareau (2003). And while disadvantage is not determinative of such attitudes and understandings, it has been shown to be predictive with regard to the field of literacy (Parsons and Bynner, 2008).

Good family literacy initiatives can support the development of the human, social and cultural capital parents need to better support their child's literacy development (Carpentieri et al, forthcoming 2011). For example, analysis of England's Family Literacy programme (Swain et al, 2009; Carpentieri et al, forthcoming 2011) suggests that while the programme was making only a limited contribution to the development of parental literacy skills and parents' achievement of qualifications, it was providing disadvantaged parents with a mechanism through which they could develop a range of supportive competencies and capabilities. Among these was improved self-confidence, both with regard to helping their children with their reading and writing, and with regard to speaking with teachers and other school staff about problems their children were having. Furthermore, through these school-based programmes, parents were able to get to know teachers and other school staff, making them more confident in their dealings with them, and greatly reducing the sense of fear and alienation many poorly educated parents said they had traditionally felt towards schools. In these programmes, parents' human capital – in terms of literacy skills – may or may not have grown, but their cultural and social capital did increase meaningfully, and it was these latter forms of capital which most help them support their children's literacy development.

## Section 5: Key messages for Ireland

1. The importance of good adult literacy to economic, social and personal well-being continues to grow in Ireland as well as in its competitors, as emphasised in policy documents and skills strategies at both national and European level.
2. The absence of policy is itself a policy. Countries which have not actively strived to maintain policy momentum in the development and improvement of their adult literacy sectors have experienced significant stagnation. In particular, Canada, despite producing an impressive and in many ways world-leading body of research on adult literacy, has not invested significant time, energy, money and other resources into developing coherent, forward-looking adult literacy policies, either at federal or provincial levels. This has led to a policy and programme landscape characterised by a series of isolated, often short-term projects – as opposed to a coherent menu of programmes and initiatives strategically informed, coordinated and supported by policymakers' visions and ambitions for the future. To a lesser but still significant degree, Australia has also suffered from policy drift since the 1990s, when it was recognised as a world leader in adult literacy policy development. Again, this drift has been the product of a lack of coherent, long-term policy vision and strategy, with the notable exception of the field of workplace literacy.
3. One possible reason for Canada's failure to successfully develop the field of adult literacy is the apparent assumption that successful programmes will somehow manage to attract enough non-governmental funding to maintain and further their success. However, a clear lesson from countries around the world is that even in neoliberal economies, the field of adult literacy is an area of market failure (Jarvis, 1993), which must be supported by government if provision is to succeed. This market failure is driven by a range of factors, including the inability of most adults with poor literacy to afford the real costs of provision, and the lack of incentives for workplaces and other organisations to bear the full cost of such provision. Without a strategic vision of adult literacy provision as a state-funded public service, it is difficult to envision the existence of sufficiently large initiatives to meet the needs of modern knowledge societies.

4. In contrast to Canada and Australia, Sweden and other Nordic countries have been particularly successful at creating a culture of adult learning which encourages high levels of participation and views adult literacy provision as an institutional – rather than residual – component of the lifelong education system.
5. In all countries for which we have evidence, media campaigns appear to be associated with increased uptake of literacy provision. There is evidence to suggest that media campaigns are particularly important for attracting more disadvantaged participants.
6. There is also evidence indicating that workplace literacy initiatives reach adults who would not otherwise choose to participate in learning.
7. However, evidence suggests that while short workplace literacy courses do lead to improved self-confidence and social engagement for learners, such courses are not long enough to yield quantifiable literacy gains for most participants. Research in the US suggests that the most successful courses in terms of producing such gains are those which involve more than 100 hours of coursework.
8. Some nations, including England and Australia, have primarily emphasised the potential for adult literacy provision to improve human capital, with particular emphasis on the potential economic gains associated with such human capital improvements. In contrast, Scotland has maintained a strong policy focus on adult literacy as a social practice, and on the social, health and citizenship benefits associated with provision. Scotland's social practices approach is both reflected in and influenced by adult literacy's close relationship with policies related to communities.
9. The Nordic countries in particular – and, to a lesser degree, New Zealand – appear to have placed particular emphasis on using adult literacy policy to encourage the mutually reinforcing development of human and social capital. Many adult literacy researchers (e.g. Balatti et al, 2006; Falk, 2001) argue that, particularly for disadvantaged learners, initiatives must strive to improve the latter if they want to improve the former.
10. There is limited evidence either for or against the capacity of adult literacy initiatives to produce meaningful short-term employment or earnings gains for learners. However, there is clear evidence that such initiatives do lead to improved employability skills, improved health, increased social capital and

greater civic engagement.

11. Our review found evidence of very strong impacts produced by the embedding of adult literacy provision within Vocational Education and Training. In the UK, Casey et al (2006) found that learners on fully embedded courses were 86% more likely to achieve literacy qualifications and 46% more likely to achieve numeracy qualifications, compared to those on non-embedded courses. Embedding literacy and numeracy also helped to improve vocational qualification rates.
12. However, our review found that embedding needs to be well planned and managed if it is to fulfil its potential. At the level of provision, Casey et al (2006) compared two types of embedded instruction: 1) courses in which vocational tutors were required to deliver literacy training; and 2) courses in which vocational tutors delivered vocational training but specialist literacy tutors delivered literacy instruction. Learners on the "single tutor" courses were much less likely to achieve literacy qualifications than learners taught by two tutors. At policy level, adult literacy in Australia suffered a loss of identity – and long-term funding – when it became largely subsumed into VET policy.
13. In England, Skills for Life has used a top-down, centralised model of policy development to increase rates of adult literacy participation, achievement and qualification. There is evidence that Skills for Life is correlated with improved social, personal and health outcomes for participants, as well as improved employability skills; however, there is as yet too little evidence to determine whether or not the initiative has led to improved economic outcomes for participants.
14. In Finland, a similar story can be told about Noste, which had a significant impact on participation among low skilled employees. It also enabled the achievement of a large number of qualifications, and has been shown to have provided a range of employability-related benefits. In Sweden, the Adult Education Initiative did manage to produce employment gains for young men.
15. New Zealand tends to be a borrower of both research and policy, a sensible and efficient strategy for a small country seeking to use its resources wisely. As yet no significant analysis of New Zealand's current adult literacy policy strategy, which launched in 2008, appears to be available. However, we would expect research and evaluation of New Zealand initiatives, including workplace literacy programmes, to be available in the next few years, and to provide potentially

valuable lessons for other countries.

16. Massachusetts has been particularly successful in developing its adult basic skills sector through a process of comprehensive reform. Researchers have attributed this success to:
  - a. Strong leadership and sustained advocacy effort
  - b. Policy measures aimed at improving the quality of adult literacy provision
  - c. A focus on teacher quality
  - d. The involvement of a wide range of education providers in order to meet a broader range of learner needs.
  
17. Researchers argue that five primary lessons can be learned from Massachusetts' success:
  - a. Reform requires long-term leadership and advocacy
  - b. Policymakers must focus on programme quality before quantity
  - c. Programme improvement depends on staff development
  - d. An expanded range of education providers should be utilised, so long as they are all working to a common set of standards
  - e. Change takes time. Policies and programmes need time to have an impact, and to refine and improve themselves through internal and external evaluation.
  
18. Pan-European comparative research on family literacy initiatives suggests that countries benefit from having Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) which can serve as family literacy policy champions.
  
19. Research has found that children experience long-term academic benefits when their parents participate in family literacy programmes which improve parents' ability to support their children's cognitive and non-cognitive development. Such initiatives support the development of the human, social and cultural capital parents need to better support their children, while also providing parents with motivation to engage in learning.

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## Appendix 1: Search methodology

The search methodology for this literature review consisted of two complementary components: an electronic database search and manual searching of reference lists.

Our database search utilised ERIC, the educational database, and covered the years 1990-2010. The syntax for this search was as follows: Query: (DE="adult literacy") and (DE=("policy" or "policy analysis")).

This search yielded 505 potential resources, of which the vast majority were excluded. Articles were excluded for a range of reasons. For example, many did not focus on relevant policies. Numerous others did address key adult literacy policy initiatives, but did not offer analysis of effectiveness.

In addition to the database search, the research team has collated relevant research already familiar to it, and has, in many cases, performed manual scans of academic articles' reference sections in order to expand this list.