

Providing accredited courses for Literacy Practitioners in Ireland

The Literacy Development Centre

The Literacy Development Centre is part of the School of Education in Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). It is the result of a partnership arrangement between WIT and The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). It is a project, funded directly by the Irish Department of Education and Science (DES). The first students were recruited on accredited courses in 1995. These students were all organizers of the local Literacy Schemes in Ireland and most of them had worked in literacy for many years in a voluntary capacity. They had thus accumulated knowledge and skills which were incorporated into the courses which were designed in consultation with the practitioners. An APEL (Accredited Prior Experiential Learning) scheme was used extensively and very successfully at the beginning for very experienced practitioners. The first group graduated with a Certificate in 1998.

In 1999 it was decided to offer a Diploma which was a further year's study (6 modules). The first group graduated from this in 2000. A certificate for Literacy Tutors was also added in 1999 and the first group graduated in 2002. The establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) led to the review of levels and re-naming of awards.

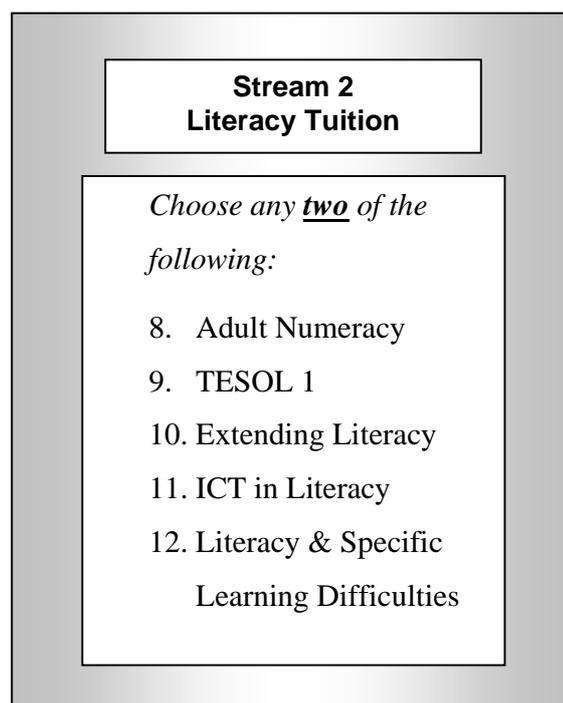
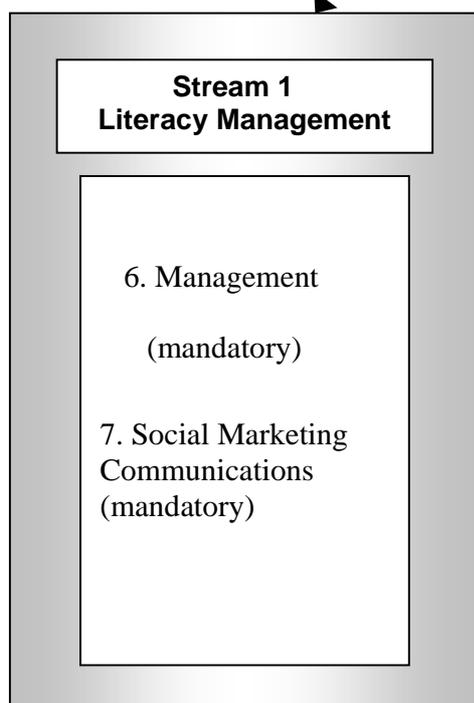
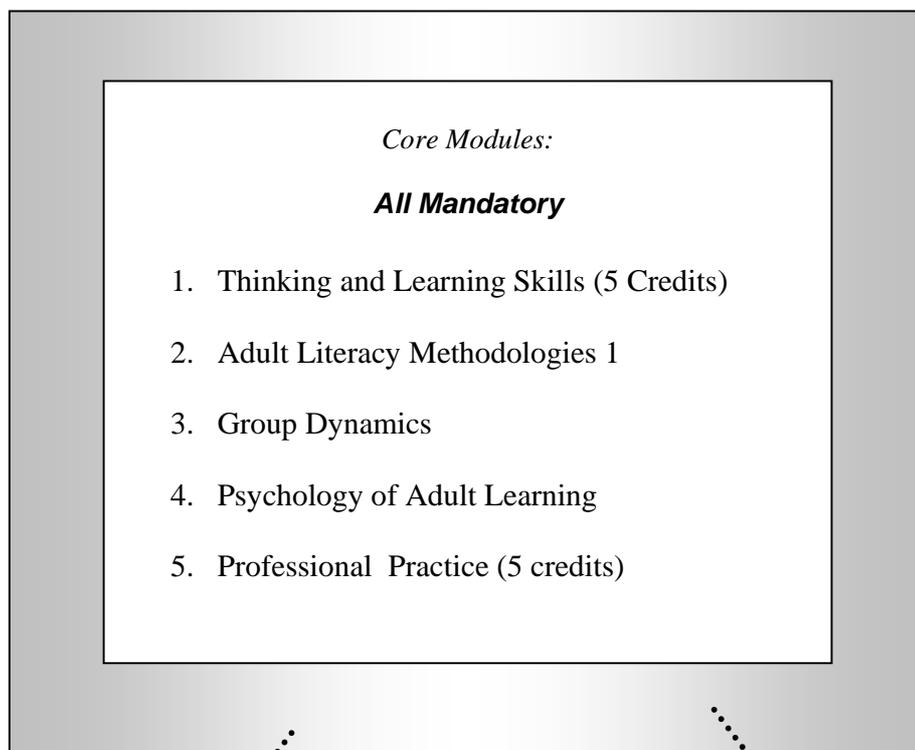
Current Programmes

The programmes currently offered by the Literacy Development Centre are:

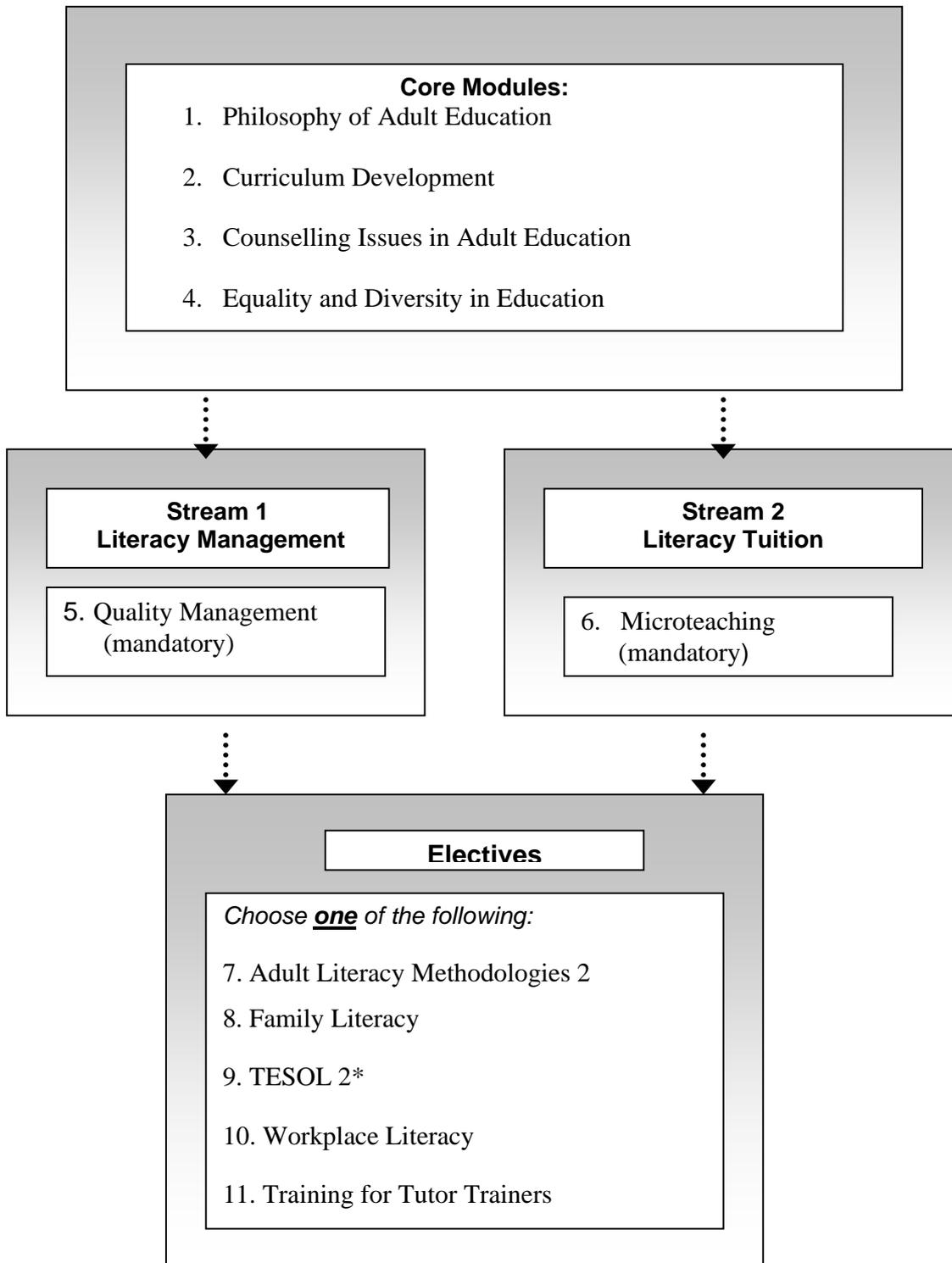
- **Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development**
- **B.A. (Ordinary) in Adult Education**

It is intended to add a **B.A. (Honours) in Adult Education** for January 2006.

Year 1/Stage 1 Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development



Year 2/AWARD Stage Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development



B.A. (Ορδυναρψ) ιν Αδυλτ Εδυχατιον

Core Modules: All mandatory

1. Nature of Enquiry in Adult Education
2. Psychology of Adult Learning
3. Education Policy*
4. Curriculum Planning and Quality Assurance



Electives

Choose two of the following:

5. Management of Adult Education
6. Adult Numeracy
7. Family Literacy
8. Literacies in Context: Language and Power
9. TESOL 3**

All modules carry 10 credits unless otherwise stated and are offered subject to sufficient numbers and resources.

*Students must have taken Education Policy before Curriculum Planning.

**Students must take TESOL 1 and 2 before TESOL 3

International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) – Results for Ireland was published in 1997 and revealed that 25% of the adult population were functioning at the lowest level of literacy, level 1. A further 30% were functioning at level 2. While there are difficulties with the way these levels were measured, the figures were nevertheless startling, revealing that more than half of the adult population had significantly low levels of literacy. This was the background against which funding for the Adult Literacy Service was increased. In 1997 there were approximately 5,000 people attending adult literacy classes. Now more than 34,000 people attend. There are approximately 5,500 adult literacy tutors in the country, 80% of whom are trained volunteers. The service still depends largely on these volunteers who provide 1 to 1 tuition for people with literacy difficulties. The Literacy Service has been subsumed within the structure of the VECs in Ireland (which I will explain in the next section). There are now group classes as well as 1 to 1 tuition and tutors who teach groups are paid. Our students have, up to now, been these group tutors and the organizers/managers of the Literacy schemes. Last year we began to extend our courses to teachers and tutors who work with early school leavers and the Traveller community. These services also come under the structure of the VECs.

Our Students – Who they are - The structure they work within

Until last year our students were all working within the Literacy Service in Ireland. This service is now within the structure of the Vocational Education Committees, which are organized on a county basis. These were set up in the 1930s to organize an alternative to academic secondary schooling in Ireland and their schools focused on practical subjects. The committees consist mainly of politicians involved in local government. Their main business is to run the Vocational Schools which now offer virtually the same programme of secondary education as other second level schools, although there has always been a focus on subjects oriented towards the work place, e.g. Woodwork, Metalwork, Building Construction, Technical Drawing. They also have a remit to offer Adult Education but this has largely consisted of hobby type courses and more recently, computer courses. In recent years when places were scarce in third level courses in Ireland, (and because of the operation of a points system for entry to third level) the VEC schools have offered Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC)

courses which are often an introduction to third level and they often have arrangements with local third level colleges so that graduates of the PLCs can get extra points for entry to the third level course of their choice. During the 1980s and early '90s, when Ireland's economy was weak and there were high levels of unemployment, the VECs acquired the function of providing education for unemployed adults and early school leavers. This function still continues, however, as I have already stated, the main business of the VECs is to run the second level schools under their care.

Vocational Education Committees employ a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), and Education Officer (EO), a Principal Officer (PO), an Adult Education Organiser (AEO), an Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) and a Community Education Facilitator (CEF), as well as the principals and teachers in the second level schools and the adult literacy tutors. This paper will concern itself with those employed in the Adult Literacy Service.

Adult Literacy Organisers (ALO)

The post of ALO is recognized as a permanent position within the VEC structure, i.e. they have recognized conditions of employment, one of which is that they must acquire one of our qualifications within 5 years of employment. However, for permanency, they must also have a degree and in many cases this has to be in a subject or subjects taught in second level schools. For many of our graduates this is not a problem; about one third of our students come to us with a degree. For others, however, it is a problem, firstly because the modules on our courses are not subjects taught in second level schools and secondly because up to last year (2004), the qualifications we offered were a Certificate and a Diploma. As mentioned earlier, the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) led to the review of levels and re-naming of awards. From September 2004, the National Certificate in Literacy Development became known as the **Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development** and is awarded at level 6 on the NQAI Framework and the National Diploma in Literacy Development became **the B.A. (Ordinary) in Literacy Development** and is awarded at level 7. Consequently those who graduated before 2004 from the Diploma course, and who do not have another degree, do not qualify for permanent employment.

Adult Literacy Tutors

The position of Adult Literacy Tutor does not have any recognition yet. People are employed on a temporary basis and allocated hours. Some VECs offer contracts to their AL Tutors but each VEC is independent and operates under the legislation and circular letters from the DES, which specify the rules for the employment of teachers. These rules are complex and are changed and updated from time to time. However, the current position illustrates the view of adult education which exists as an 'add-on' or 'bolted-on', temporary arrangement, rather than a 'built-in', integral part of the education structure. The policy document on Adult Education, *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education (2000)*, sets out various aspirations for the development of adult education, including Adult Literacy Education but until the conditions for employment within the adult education sector are differentiated from those of initial education, these aspirations remain within the realm of rhetoric. Most of our students are now tutors rather than organizers because of the simple fact that there are more of them and many of the already appointed organizers have now gained the qualification.

As I mentioned above, each VEC is independent and consequently the conditions under which tutors are employed and supported to gain a qualification differ from county to county. Some VECs pay the tuition fees, travel expenses and pay the students for classes missed while they are studying. Some VECs will pay for the initial or minimum qualification, i.e. the Certificate. Others do not pay tutors for classes missed and actually require the tutors to prepare classes for others to deliver. Under these conditions it is extremely difficult for some of our students to acquire a qualification.

The Structure within which We Work

Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) is one of a number of Institutes of Technology (formerly known as Regional Technical Colleges [RTCs]) set up in the 1970s to promote technological education in the regions, with a view to providing an educated workforce which would attract new industry. The strategy was successful. Originally the RTCs came under the VECs but became independent in the 1990s. However they did not have the power to make their own awards and the awarding body for all of them was known as the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA), now known as the Higher Education and Training

Awards Council (HETAC) since the reorganization of awards under the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). Some of the colleges have recently acquired their own awarding powers and WIT is one of them.

Since the original focus of the ITs was on education for jobs, there were four schools in each; Engineering, Business, Science and Applied Humanities. The Adult Education Department in WIT came under the School of Business and supplied night classes for the four schools, as well as various other, mostly hobby type courses. In 2004 a School of Education and Continuing Professional Development was founded in WIT.

Development of Accredited Courses in the Community/ Adult Literacy Sector

In the early 1990s when unemployment was still very high and poverty was widespread, a number of women's groups in the South East got together under the umbrella name of Access 2000 and negotiated a partnership arrangement with the Adult Education Department in WIT to apply for EU money to set up a community education course, to provide a qualification for community activists. At around the same time, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) went into partnership with WIT (also the Adult Education Department) to provide a qualification for Adult Literacy Practitioners. However the main business of WIT is still the provision of full-time courses to school leavers, in the original four schools. Adult Education in Ireland is self-financing and all part-time students must pay fees, whereas full-time students in the mainstream college do not pay fees. The Literacy Development Centre is funded directly by an annual grant from the Department of Education but it still remains at the level of a project. It is not permanent and when funding is no longer available, the courses will have to be paid for by participants, at the market rate.

Marginal Status

The point I have been leading up to here is that Adult Education, including Adult Literacy Education, is marginalized in the educational structures in Ireland. Why is this when the discourse of 'Lifelong Learning' is so popular in all 'western' countries, including Ireland?

Individualisation

The concept of ‘Lifelong Learning’ is very often taken to refer to ‘enhancing the quality of the labour supply and upgrading the skills of those in the workforce...’ (DES, 2000). In other words, it usually has an economic focus, to do with employability of the individual and competitiveness of the national economy within the globalised market. Indeed there is an assumption that the interests of the individual and of the economy are one and the same thing. Of course, the health of the economy is very important to the individual. However, it is not the only thing that is important to individuals and the economy needs to serve the interests of society. But what is society? Who is society? Margaret Thatcher famously said that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and families. Our Prime Minister (Taoiseach) in Ireland has recently expressed concern about the down side of our economic boom in Ireland – an increase in isolation and loneliness, an astronomical increase in house prices, long commuting times, both parents working – and invited the American social analyst, Robert Putnam, to speak at a meeting of his party, about ways of halting the decline of ‘social capital’. However, it is not encouraging to note that our Taoiseach does not seem to see the connection between social policy and a decline in social capital. He is quoted as saying ‘This isn’t a political question, it’s about making society better’ (Irish Times, Sept 3, 2005). The leader of his partner party in government, Mary Harney, has also expressed the opinion that Ireland is ‘closer to Boston than Berlin’ in the sense of our economic and social framework.

‘Adult Education’ or ‘Lifelong Learning’?

In the light of this mindset, I think that the move from the term ‘adult education’ to the term ‘Lifelong Learning’ is significant. The use of the word ‘education’ implies a structure set up by the state to provide opportunities for people to gain just that, an education. The aforementioned White Paper (2000) has a chapter on the structures needed for Adult Education to achieve ‘a higher level of priority in mainstream provision’ (p.184). It explicitly states that ‘The Government ... proposes to proceed with the establishment by the Minister for Education and Science, of a National Adult Learning Council as an Executive Agency of the Department under the statutory framework of the Education Act 1998’ (DES, 2000, p.185). However, five years later very little progress has been made towards putting effective

structures in place and there is still no National Adult Learning Council. It is true to say that Adult Literacy has probably achieved more than other sections of Adult Education. The existence of NALA as a policy making body and its partnership with WIT to provide education for practitioners in the field of Adult Literacy, has led to a clearly defined stream of funding for the courses we offer, as well as forward looking policy documents produced by NALA. Adult Literacy Organisers have formed an association (ALOA) and our courses (which have been residential for the most part) have probably been instrumental in giving them the opportunity to network. However, much remains to be done. The tutors in Adult Literacy have not yet been offered a suitable structure in which to work and as I explained at the beginning, their positions remain very part-time and temporary. As I also explained earlier, acquiring a qualification is often very difficult for them. So, in effect, for these adults their education has become a matter of personal responsibility, it has become individualized. The structures are not there for them.

In Conclusion

The Adult Literacy sector has fared better than other areas of Adult Education in Ireland. However there would seem to be an assumption that the need for an adult literacy service will soon 'go away', that it deals with a temporary problem and thus people who work within that service need to be capable of being redeployed within the second level school system.

The place of Adult Education within the education structures is still very uncertain and insecure. Five years after the government's commitment to set up structures for Adult Education there is still no National Adult Learning Council.

References

Dept of Education and Science (1997), *International Adult Literacy survey: Results for Ireland*, Dublin, Stationary Office.

Dept of Education and Science (2000), *White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life*, Dublin, Stationary Office.