

# Participation in three adult learning settings:

A brief comparative  
examination of data  
from 2010.

# Table of contents

Main findings	3
Introduction	5
Background	7
Findings from NALA research	9
Findings from Adult Literacy Returns	11
Findings from An Cosán	12
Presentation of the data	13
Conclusion	20
<b>Charts</b>	
Chart 1 Gender profile	13
Chart 2 Education attainment	14
Chart 3 Employment status	15
Chart 4 Education attainment across the datasets	18
Chart 5 Employment status across the datasets	18
<b>Tables</b>	
Table 1 Age profile	14
Table 2 Overall profile of participants	16



## Main findings

A total of three sets of data from adult learning settings were included in this study. By adult learning we mean people taking part in adult and community education including literacy tuition. These were data from: the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) Distance Learning Service (2010); data from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Adult Literacy Returns (2010) and data from a questionnaire administered with adult learners in An Cosán Adult Learning Centre (2010).

These data sets were compared against each other in order to explore who participates in adult learning in Ireland and to identify any similarities or common trends and solutions to issues arising. They were then compared against data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), in particular statistics from the National Quarterly Household Survey (Q2) for 2010.

The findings fall into the following categories:

- Gender;
- Age;
- Educational attainment; and
- Employment status.

### Gender

There was considerable difference in gender participation across the three education settings. More men 60% than women 40% engaged with the NALA distance learning service in comparison to the other two settings. This contrasts with the fact that more women engaged with the other two services 60% in the adult literacy service and 89% in An Cosán Adult Learning Centre. These findings support national research which shows that men have lower participation rates in all areas of adult education falling from over 70% in the 1980s to 22% in 2010 (AONTAS, 2010; Brún and Du Vivier, 2008; O' Connor, 2007).

### Age

The NALA/DES/An Cosán data tells us that in 2010 younger people (16-24 years) and older people (65+ years) were less likely to be engaged in adult learning than their middle aged counterparts. Due to a lack of research evidence in this area, we have no way of accurately knowing why this is but we suggest it is an area that requires further investigation.

## Educational attainment

The data shows that the majority of adults engaged in literacy and community education were those with low or no formal educational qualifications. Adult literacy learners are almost three times more likely to have no formal education qualifications compared to the national average of 11% (CSO,2010). Seventy-four percent of adults engaged in the VEC adult literacy service left school with less than a Leaving Certificate qualification.

National research suggests that adults with literacy difficulties are more likely to be from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, at risk of unemployment and ill health (ESRI 2012; AONTAS, 2010). Since the 1990s consecutive School Leavers Surveys' suggest that boys are more likely to be at risk of becoming early school leavers than girls.

## Employment status

Adult learners reported high levels of unemployment peaking, at 45% for learners involved in NALA's distance learning service compared to 10% of the general population (CSO 2010). This finding has implications at practice and policy level, particularly in terms of providing targeted and tailored responses to address the education and training needs of adult literacy learners who have recently become or are long term unemployed.

## Final Note

It is important to point out that the insights gained from this study cannot be generalised to all adult learners. Rather, the study highlights that adult learners are not a homogenous group in terms of participation in adult learning. It highlights that different adult learning settings appear to attract different groups of learners. It also captures commonalities across the settings.

The findings in this report are presented acknowledging that they are tentative in nature. None the less we believe that this collation of information, across a number of adult learning settings, provides valuable information on adult learners for policy makers and practitioners. It also points to the need for further research including the specific categories of age and gender.

## Introduction

NALA carries out research with adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties and with practitioners who work in adult literacy and education to inform policy and practice. Our overall aim in doing research is to contribute to an enhanced learning experience for adults with literacy and numeracy needs. We also use the findings and recommendations from our research to provide evidence-based solutions and advice on adult literacy issues to policy makers and relevant organisations.

## About this report

During 2010 a number of different research and data collection projects were carried out with adult learners in a number of adult education settings. These included:

- An evaluation of NALA's Distance Learning Service,
- Data from the 2010 Adult Literacy Returns (ALR),
- A questionnaire administered with adult learners in An Cosán Community Education Centre.

NALA was interested in comparing the findings from the three data collection projects to:

- Explore who participates in adult learning in Ireland;
- Gain new insights from the existing data distinct from its original purpose;
- Identify similarities, differences and/or trends, in the profile of adult literacy learners in different settings; and
- Share the findings with interested stakeholders in order to enhance the learning and teaching experience for both students and practitioners.

## Methodology and Constraints

As the three individual data sets contain information specific to the original research aims, a complete comparison of all of the data was not possible. We encountered some methodological challenges including, different sample sizes, this is particularly relevant to the ALR, which shows that approximately 55,000 adults were engaged in adult literacy in 2010. This is to be expected as the ALRs are the reporting system from individual VECs to the DES.

In comparison the NALA and An Cosán samples are much smaller (n=365 and n=100) respectively. Different methods were used to collect the data and, in some instances, there were reports of missing data. Every effort has been made to present the data in a way that minimizes these challenges.

The methodological issues described above allow for a descriptive examination of the data rather than a full analysis of all of the variables included in the data. Preliminary examination of the data sets highlighted that it was possible to make tentative comparisons in the profiles of adult learners across the different settings.

The following areas became the focus for further examination:

- Gender
- Age
- Educational attainment and
- Employment status.

A final comparison was carried out when we compared the three datasets with figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) National Quarterly Household Survey (Q2) 2010.

The findings are presented acknowledging the constraints and are tentative in nature. None the less we believe that this collation of information, across a number of adult learning settings, provides valuable information on adult learners. It also points to the need for further research.

The data in this report provides much needed comparative data on adult learners across a number of adult learning education settings. Its unique interest lies in its comparative nature, however tentative, and how different types of provision are attractive to different learners especially when it comes to gender. It also elucidates that adult literacy and community education services are targeting and reaching 'hard to reach' groups such as the unemployed and early school leavers.

## Background

### Statistics on adult literacy in Ireland

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1997 highlighted the extent of literacy difficulties among Irish adults. The results for Ireland published in 1997 and, based on data collected in 1995, showed that one in four or 25% of Irish adults had literacy difficulties. They also indicated that over 80% of those who scored at the lowest level, Level 1 had a Junior Certificate qualification or less. The IALS also showed that people with literacy difficulties are more likely to be at risk of social exclusion, are less likely to take part in education and training and more likely to be unemployed (Morgan et al, 1997). To date, this remains the most up-to-date information on adult literacy levels in Ireland. However Ireland is currently participating in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). PIAAC is the most comprehensive international survey of adult literacy skills ever undertaken. When published PIAAC will provide information on skills that people use at work and in their everyday lives. This will include information on how they use literacy, numeracy and technology skills. The results from PIAAC will be published in 2013.

### Profile of adult literacy learners (2000 – 2009)

A report published by NALA in 2011 showed that between 2000 and 2009 there was almost 200% increase in the number of adults taking part in adult literacy and numeracy programmes in Ireland. The research also shows that adult literacy learners are more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour market compared to national rates of labour participation over the same period. In 2010, almost 55,000 people in Ireland participated in adult literacy services, yet despite the expansion of adult literacy opportunities over the past decade, less than 10% of adults with literacy needs are accessing literacy tuition (NALA, 2011).

### National Skills Strategy

The National Skills Strategy (2007) outlines an educational profile of the Irish workforce in 2020. Central to achieving this profile are the generic skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT. It identifies 70,000 people in the workforce whose skills need to be raised from National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels 1 and 2 to NFQ level 3 and 259,000



whose skills need to be raised from NQF level 3 to levels 4 and 5. The National Skills Strategy puts forward the argument that priority should be given in access and resources to those with low literacy levels. Likewise, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2012) suggests that unless there is a change at policy level a significant number of Irish people in the workforce will remain low skilled in 2020.

Research consistently shows that adults with literacy difficulties are more likely to be long-term unemployed than those who do not have a literacy difficulty (Dorgan, 2009; FÁS, 2009). People with literacy difficulties are also likely to have lower earnings and lower career aspirations. They are also less likely to become involved in their community, vote or do voluntary work. The research also shows that those with few or no qualifications have also benefitted least from investment in training. However, recent research commissioned by NALA and carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute shows that when those with literacy and numeracy difficulties do receive training they benefit by much more than average. In addition following training they are 29% more likely to exit the live register compared to 11% for the full unemployment population (NALA/ESRI, 2012).

## Findings from NALA's Distance Learning Service Evaluations

Over the past decade NALA has been using television, radio, print, telephone and the internet to provide education opportunities to adult learners. The aim of the DLS<sup>1</sup> is to provide high quality free distance learning opportunities targeted at improving literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. This service is free to all learners and caters for all levels of technical abilities.

NALA has carried out annual evaluations of its DLS in order to:

- Assess the effectiveness of the service in terms of meeting learner need and the impact of engagement for the learner;
- Develop a demographic profile of learners;
- Record learner experiences of using DLS; and
- Provide an analysis of the benefits to learners and to providers of adult education.

The evaluations showed that learning online is attractive to learners across a range of ages, locations and employment sectors. One of these attractions is the flexibility of provision which suits a broad range of learners, for example, those with childcare responsibilities, or geographical barriers such as distance to the nearest learning centre. Learners are also drawn to distance learning which offers the possibility of becoming part of the digital age and to enhance their work lives.

The data from consecutive evaluations also shows that many of the distance learners had made what they described as unsuccessful attempts at learning in more traditional settings. Some had tried private tutoring and others had taken part in group and 1:1 tutoring in their local VEC. However, the social stigma associated with literacy difficulties deterred some and they chose to avoid being in a group learning environment.

The findings from the evaluations of the DLS show that there is substantial evidence to suggest that distance learning provides a bridge to progression for many of the learners. The data also shows a ripple effect whereby friends and family members are positively influenced by their participation in adult literacy learning (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011; 2010; Exodea 2009). The data shows positive outcomes to learners from engaging in the distance learning process with the majority of learners stating that they had increased their skills in line with or indeed beyond their expectations. In particular, those who had completed FETAC accreditation said they were motivated to move on to attain further qualifications. Distance learning has proven to be effective in tackling

<sup>1</sup> Copies of the NALA DLS evaluations are available to download free from the NALA website [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie)

barriers, for example, social stigma, to participation in adult tuition. The data suggests that distance learning provides a viable alternative to adult learners who are reluctant or unable to take part in more traditional forms of learning. Amongst other things it is not restricted by opening hours or by limited resources in terms of tutor hours or the physical space to accommodate learners.

## **Findings from NALA'S Distance Learning Service (2010)<sup>2</sup>**

### **Gender**

In 2010 more men 60% than women 40% participated in the DLS. This has been a consistent finding identified in consecutive evaluations of the DLS (Hegarty & Feeley, 2011, 2010; Exodea, 2009).

### **Age**

The age range of learners was from 16 – 65+. The majority of learners 39% were in the 25-44 age groups and over a third of learners 33% were in the 45 – 64 age group. The youngest cohort 16-24 stood at 7% and the older cohort 65+ was the least represented group at 4%.

### **Educational attainment**

Nearly one third of the distance learners 30% reported that they had no formal education qualifications. One in five 21% had a lower secondary education and 18% had an upper secondary education qualifications.

### **Employment status**

A significant number of the distance learners 45% reported that they were unemployed.

<sup>2</sup> In 2010 365 adults contacted the NALA DLS, however due to gaps in recording there is some missing data. Therefore, percentages on this group will not always add up to 100%.

## Findings from the VEC Adult Literacy Returns 2010

The DES provides funding for a range of further education and training programmes recording almost 250,000 participants in 2011, 170,000 from the further education alone. (SOLAS Consultation, 2012). These participants include adult literacy learners who are served by the VECs Adult Literacy Service. The DES provides NALA with information on adult learner participation rates in the VEC adult literacy service. The information comes from annual Adult Literacy Returns (ALR) provided by the 33 local VECs to the DES. The ALR data is a valuable source of information on current provision of adult literacy services. It is also the most comprehensive information available on participation rates in the adult literacy service and has the potential to inform the future development and planning in the adult literacy sector.

The ALR data shows that in 2010 the total number of learners in the adult literacy service was 54,741. The majority of learners 55% took part in mainstream literacy programmes. Mainstream programmes are either one-to-one tuition or group tuition. These programmes are typically offered for two to four hours each week during the academic year. Most learners 83% take part in group tuition. Just over half of the learners (52%) spend less than one year in the adult literacy service.

### DES Adult Literacy Returns (2010)

#### Gender

Almost 60% of learners in the adult literacy service were women. The trend has remained constant over the past decade (NALA, 2011).

#### Age

The data shows that almost 50% of learners were aged between 25-44 years. The youngest age group 16-24 years was almost 11% and the oldest age group 65+ years stood at 7%.

#### Educational attainment

Almost 35% of learners in the adult literacy service in 2010 had no formal qualifications or a primary education. A further 40% reported that they had a lower secondary education while 21% reported that they had an upper secondary education.

#### Employment status

In 2010 41% of adult literacy learners reported themselves as unemployed.

## Findings from the An Cosán data

An Cosán is an adult education centre in West Tallaght County Dublin. An Cosán houses the Shanty Education Project, an adult education centre, Rainbow House, an early childhood education and care facility and Fledglings, a social enterprise centre. Central to the work of An Cosán is their commitment to supporting individuals and communities to actively engage in the process of social change through transformative education.

In 2010, An Cosán carried out a survey among its adult learners with a total of 100 completing a pre-coded questionnaire. Since enrolling in An Cosán learners have noticed an improvement in their self-confidence and reported that they have a more positive view of their personal development. Learners said that they are more inclined to become involved in community activities and to vote in general and local elections. They also reported greater confidence in their literacy skills; however one in four said that they need help to improve in this area.

### An Cosán data (2010)

#### Gender

That data shows that in An Cosán women 89% are more likely to be engaged in adult education than men 11% by a ratio of 9:1.

#### Age

The majority of learners 55% in An Cosán fall into the 25-44 age group with 30% in the 45-64 age group. The young age group 16-24 was 12% and the older age group 65+ was 3%.

#### Educational attainment

The data shows that in 2010 22% of learners in An Cosán had no formal qualifications /primary education. While 32% and 28% respectively reported that they had lower secondary and upper secondary education.

#### Employment status

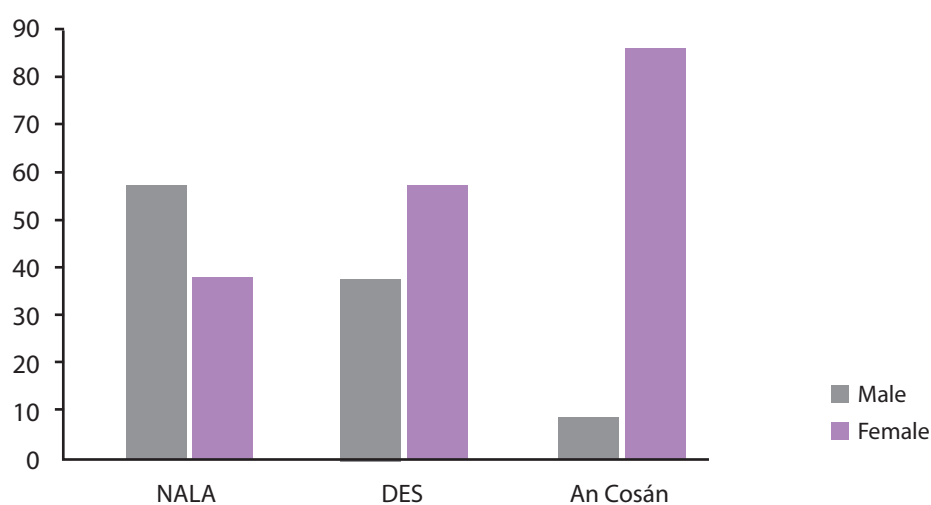
In total 24% of adult learners reported that their employment status as unemployed.

## Presentation of the data

Table 1 below presents the data from the NALA distance learning service, the Department of Education and Skills Adult Literacy Returns and An Cosán. The data is presented below under the following headings;

- Gender profile,
- Age profile,
- Education attainment,
- Employments status,
- Participation profile, and
- Comparison with CSO data.

**Chart 1** Gender Profile



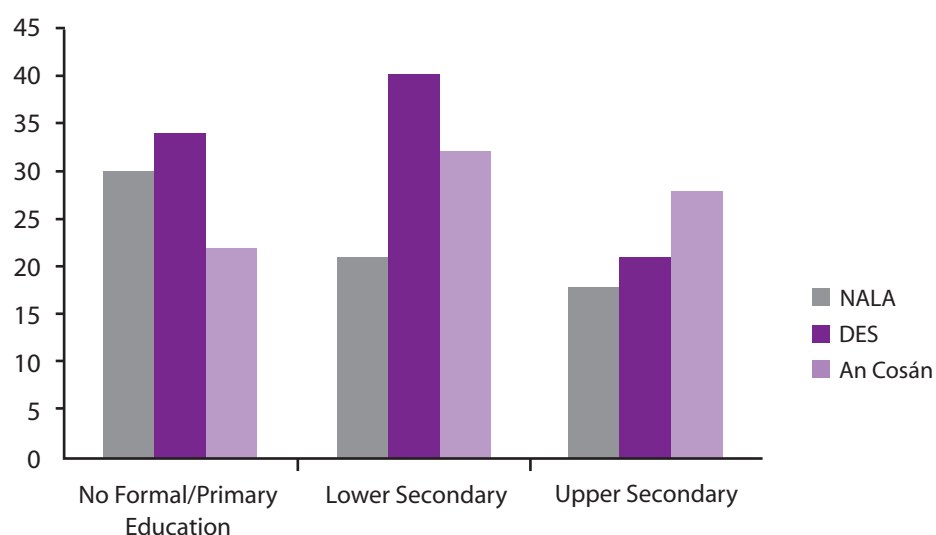
When it comes to gender participation rates in adult learning the data shows that NALA's Distance Learning Service attracts more men 60% than women 40%. This finding goes against the trends reflected in the VEC adult literacy service that show women learners preferring to attend literacy tuition in-person 60%. The An Cosán data is most striking as it shows women involved in adult learning in this centre outnumber men by almost 9 to 1.

It is interesting to note that research published by AONTAS shows that over 55,000 adults participated in community education in 2009, with women participants at 78% in comparison with their male counterparts at 22% (AONTAS, 2010).

**Table 1: Age Profile**

	NALA distance learning service %	DES adult literacy returns %	An Cosán adult education centre %
16-24 years	7	11	12
25-44 years	39	49	55
45-64 years	33	33	30
65+ years	4	7	3

There are similarities in the age profile of the adult learners across the three sets of data with the majority of learners falling in the 25-44 age group. In comparison each of the datasets shows that young people (16-24) and older people (65+) are underrepresented in the adult learner population. As referenced earlier, missing data from the DLS distorts the pattern to some extent, particularly in the 25-44 years category. However, based on patterns across the two other data sets it is probable that this does not affect the overall age related pattern.

**Chart 2 Educational attainment**

The data from three settings show that the majority of adults engaged in adult literacy and community education left school with less than a Leaving Certificate qualification. NALA's distance learners stood at 51%, whilst adults in the VEC adult literacy sector stood at 74% and An Cosán learners at 54%.

### Chart 3 Employment status

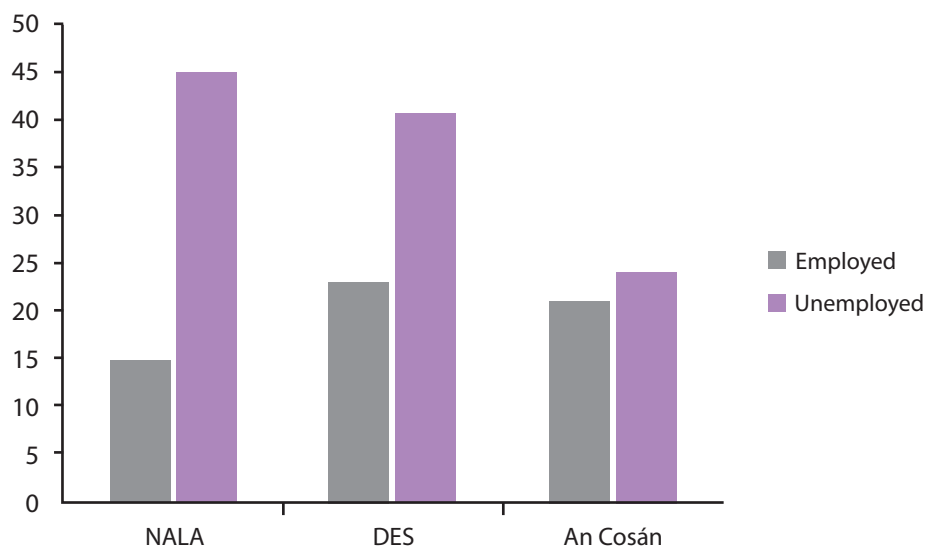


Table 3 above provides a breakdown of the employed and unemployed status of the learners across the three settings<sup>3</sup>. It shows that adult literacy learners reported high levels of unemployment 45% for NALA distance learners, 41% learners in the VEC adult literacy service. The percentage of unemployed people among An Cosán learners was significantly lower at 24%.

<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that there is a wider range of categories than employed and unemployed, including home duties and lone parents. However, employed and unemployed were the two categories consistently used in all three datasets.



**Table 2:** Participation profile of adult learners during 2010

	NALA distance learning service %	DES adult literacy returns %	An Cosán adult education centre %
Female	40	60	89
Male	60	40	11
16-24 years	7	11	12
25-44 years	39	49	55
45-64 years	33	33	30
65+ years	4	7	3
No formal/ primary education	30	34	22
Lower secondary education	21	40	32
Upper secondary education	18	21	28
Employed	15	23	21
Unemployed	45	41	24

## Comparison with CSO National Quarterly Household Survey (Q2) Data (2010)

**Table 3: CSO National Quarterly Household Survey (Q2) 2010**

<b>Highest level of education completed (15-64 years)</b>	<b>2010 %</b>
No formal/primary education	11
Lower secondary	17
Upper secondary	26
<b>Unemployed by highest level completed (15-64 years)</b>	<b>2010 %</b>
No formal/primary education	9
Lower secondary	21
Upper secondary	26

Table 3 outlines data from the CSO National Quarterly Household Survey Data (Q2). When we compare this with the data from Table 2 we find that almost 30% of the population surveyed by the CSO left school with less than a Leaving Certificate qualification compared to 74% of adults attending adult literacy and community education and 51% of learners engaged in the NALA distance learning service.

**Chart 4** Educational Attainment across the Datasets

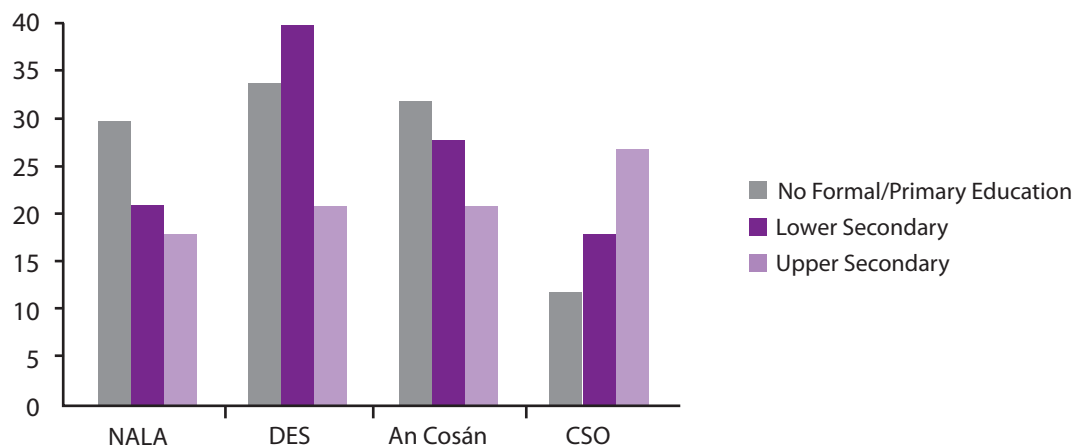
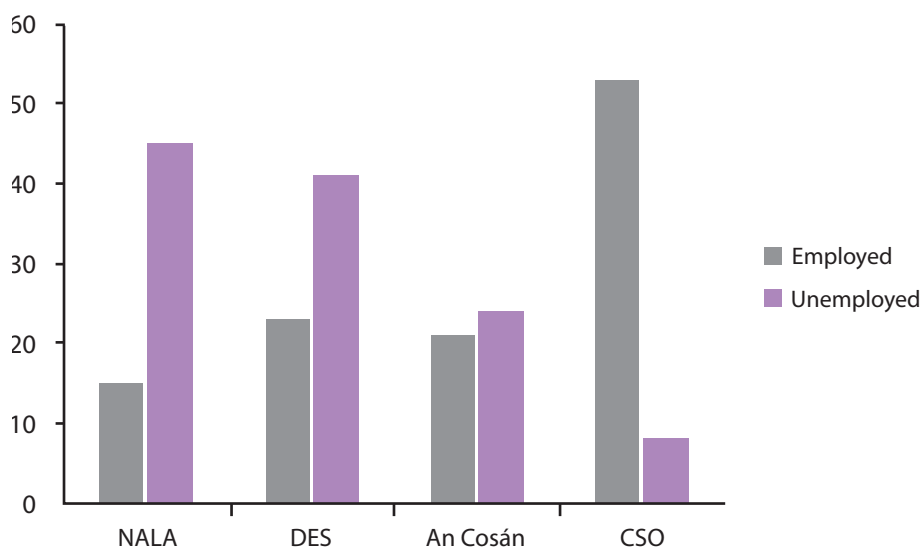


Chart 4 shows the educational attainment level of adults across all of the datasets. It reveals that, in general, adult literacy learners are almost three times more likely to have no formal education averaging at 30%, compared to the national average of 11% (CSO). The Table also shows that adult learners are less likely to have an upper second level education averaging just below 22% for NALA, DES and An Cosán learners combined, compared to a national average of 26% (CSO, 2010).

**Chart 5** Employment Status across the Datasets



The CSO data shows that in 2010 a little over 10% of the population surveyed reported themselves as unemployed. This is in stark contrast to the numbers of unemployed people engaging in adult education. People who engaged with the NALA distance learning service and the DES funded adult literacy service were almost 4 times as likely to be unemployed than the general population. The An Cosán data shows unemployment among adult learners averaging slightly above 24%.

## Findings

When we compared the three datasets we found:

### Gender

There was considerable difference in gender participation across the three education settings. More men 60% than women 40% engaged with the NALA distance learning service in comparison to the other two settings. This contrasts with the fact that more women engaged with the other two services 60% in the adult literacy service and 89% in An Cosán Adult Learning Centre. These findings support national research which shows that men have lower participation rates in all areas of adult education falling from over 70% in the 1980s to 22% in 2010 (AONTAS, 2010; Brún and Du Vivier, 2008; O' Connor, 2002).

### Age

The NALA/DES/An Cosán data tells us that in 2010 younger people (16-24 years) and older people (65+ years) were less likely to be engaged in adult learning than their middle aged counterparts. Due to a lack of research evidence in this area, we have no way of accurately knowing why this is but we suggest it is an area that requires further investigation.

### Educational attainment

The data shows that the majority of adults engaged in literacy and community education were those with low or no formal educational qualifications. Adult learners are almost three times more likely to have no formal education qualifications compared to the national average of 11% (CSO,2010). Seventy-four percent of adults engaged in the VEC adult literacy service left school with less than a Leaving Certificate qualification.

National research suggests that adults with literacy difficulties are more likely to be from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, at risk of unemployment and ill health (ESRI 2012; AONTAS, 2010; Morgan et al, 1997). Since the 1990s consecutive School Leavers Surveys' suggest that boys are more likely to be at risk of becoming early school leavers than girls.

## Employment status

Adult learners reported high levels of unemployment peaking, at 45% for learners involved in NALA's distance learning service compared to the national average of 10% in 2010. This finding has implications at practice and policy level, particularly in terms of providing targeted and tailored responses to address the education and training needs of adult literacy learners who have recently become or are long term unemployed.

## Conclusion

The data in this report provides much needed collated data on adult learners across a number of education settings. The constraints in the data and study are acknowledged. Within this, the findings highlight that gender and age appear to be significant factors in levels, sites and type of participation and that some age cohorts appear to be significantly under represented. The findings also confirm data from other studies in terms of educational attainment and employment status of adults who have returned to education.

We believe that the study highlights the need for the adequate recording and reporting of data and statistics on adult learners at a national level, to ensure that useful findings and conclusions can be used with confidence by planners and policy-makers.

It also identifies the need for further research into specific areas, particularly:

- What would attract more men to literacy learning and the role of distance learning in this?
- What would attract the age groups under-represented in current provision?

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