The Integration of Language, Literacy and Numeracy in VEC Further Education Courses

Note: *This paper is the work of a NALA-IVEA working group on Integrating Literacy. The working group was established in mid 2009, to explore how VECs might better integrate basic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, into their further education programmes. At the outset, Anne O'Keeffe and David Treacy represented IVEA on the Group and Pat O'Mahony acted as secretary to the Group. More recently, Sean Conlon and Padraig Kirk joined the group. In the course of developing the paper, it was referred to both the Committee for Executive Support (CES) and the Chief Executive and Education Officers' Association (CEEOA).*

Author's Note

To enhance readability, the term 'integration of literacy' is used to refer to the 'integration of language literacy and numeracy'. Similarly, the term 'skill' is used to encompass both 'skill and competence', where 'competence' refers to the capacity to apply skill and knowledge to solve real problems. The term 'language' refers to key words, concepts and types of verbal communication that learners need to develop in order to complete successfully their course/programme.

Background

The purpose of this discussion paper is fourfold.

- To define what is meant by the integration of literacy in further education and training (FET) programmes.
- To document for senior managers in VECs the implications that the integration of literacy would have for learners, providers, tutors/teachers and all involved in the design, promotion and delivery of FET – at levels 4 to 6 on the NFQ.
- To set out the practical steps that VECs would need to take to integrate literacy into their FET programmes
- To facilitate and encourage VECs in the systematic adoption of the integration of literacy approach in the design, promotion and delivery of FET.

Introduction

International research indicates that language, literacy, and numeracy are best developed in the context of real-life activities and practices and that further education and training (FET) programmes that embed language, literacy and numeracy support

and development within the vocational content are more effective than programmes that include the literacy support only as a separate element. This embedding process is known as the integration of language, literacy and numeracy into the design and delivery of FET programmes.

In the USA, Dr Thomas G Sticht's research provides a rich source of evidence that embedding literacy and numeracy in adult education and training delivers improved learning outcomes.[1]

In Australia, the government, in the mid-1990s introduced a policy to integrate literacy into all vocational education and training offered within the national training system[2]. It is a requirement that language, literacy and numeracy are built in, rather than bolted on, to all publicly funded workplace and vocational training programmes and curricula.

In New Zealand, the government's Literacy, Language and Numeracy Action Plan 2008–2012 proposes a significant increase in the amount of explicit literacy and numeracy teaching that is embedded into vocational and workplace training. This is based on a thorough review of research on literacy and on adult learning, which confirmed the effectiveness of integrating or embedding literacy in vocational and workplace training[3].

In the UK, the government's language, literacy and numeracy strategy includes a well-resourced strategy to 'embed' language, literacy and numeracy into education and training programmes. The National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC) research over several years identified the positive effect of 'embedding' language, literacy and numeracy into vocational education and training programmes in a range of settings. Specifically, the research shows that the

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[1] Sticht, T. (2007) *Integrating Literacy Works!* Presentation at NALA-NUI Maynooth Seminar, January 23rd 2007. www.nala.ie

See also: Sticht, T. G. (1983, February). *Literacy and Human Resources Development at Work: Investing in the Education of Adults to Improve the Educability of Children*. Alexandria, VA: Human Resources Research Organization.

[2] Commonwealth of Australia (2000) *Built in not bolted on: Language, literacy numeracy issues in the delivery of training packages*, www.anta.gov.au.

[3] Tertiary Education Commission (2008) *Literacy, Language and Numeracy Action Plan 2008 – 2012*. Wellington: Tertiary Education Commission

Tertiary Education Commission (2009) *Strengthening literacy and numeracy: Theoretical Framework.* Wellington: Tertiary Education Commission

integration of literacy into vocational content delivers the following improvements in learning programme outcomes[4].

- Higher retention rates.
- A higher proportion of learners achieving vocational qualifications.
- A higher proportion of learners achieving language, literacy and numeracy qualifications.
- Students are better prepared for future job roles.

Until relatively recently, literacy was generally understood to refer to the ability to read and write competently, in fairly predictable contexts. Similarly, numeracy was understood to refer to the capacity to undertake quite basic computational tasks. Today, however, this view of literacy and numeracy cannot embrace the complex and changing set of competences that adults now need to enable them live productive and fulfilling lives – in the family, in the community or in the work place. Now, it is more appropriate to think of 'multiple literacies', recognising that different contexts pose different literacy challenges, that technology is oftentimes a critical factor underlying these challenges and that these literacies now often involve the application of information technology skills. In addition, the traditional processes of learning that shaped our schools are changing so quickly that we are all learning how to learn again. Such change demands that we reconsider not only the teaching and learning of language, literacy and numeracy but the place of such skills and competences in the wider educational process[5].

Central to the integrating literacy approach is a recognition that the particular language, literacy and numeracy demands of different subjects and courses, at different levels, will vary, and in each case will require explicit analysis and a tailored approach.

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[4] Casey, H. *et al* (2007) '*You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering*....': *Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes – the impact on learning and achievement.* London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.
Hegarty, A., & Feeley, M. (2009) *Literacy-friendly further education and training.* Dublin: NALA
McSkeane, E., (2009). *Living Literacy: a whole-organisation approach to integrating literacy in a vocational training setting*. Dublin: NALA.

[5] This definition of integrating literacy is adapted from the one used by Michael King, Chair of the CDVEC Working Group on Integrating Literacy, in his foreword to the CDVEC, Report for the Board of Studies, February 2011: *Integrating Literacy in CDVEC FE and Adult Education Centres.*

Given the commitment of VECs to implementing best practice in all matters relevant to enhancing learner outcomes, VECs are committed to putting in place feasible plans to integrate literacy into their FET programmes.

National Policy

- The national policy to integrate literacy into all publicly funded education and training programmes, in so far as possible, was first adopted on foot of the publication of the National Skills Strategy (Forfás, 2007). The Skills Strategy recognised literacy, numeracy and ICT as fundamental skills that should be deliberately embedded in publicly funded education and training[6] and the Strategy placed responsibility on the relevant government departments for ensuring that these skills are both acquired and explicitly assessed at all levels of the education and training system[7].
- *The Programme for Government 2011*[8] committed the government to addressing 'the widespread and persistent problem of adult literacy through the integration of literacy in vocational training and through community education."
- The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020, *Literacy And Numeracy For Learning And Life (DES, July 2011),* includes a commitment to integrating literacy and numeracy into all teaching in early childhood education, first and second level education and education in Youthreach centres.
- The National Strategy to Improve literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2012 (Literacy and Numeracy for learning and Life)9 commits to building the capacity of all teachers to support the literacy and numeracy competences of their students.

What Does the Integration of Literacy Entail for FET Providers?

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[6] "Basic skills (in particular, literacy), people related and conceptual skills should be prioritised and embedded into all publicly funded education and training provision in so far as possible." Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) *National Skills Strategy*. Dublin: Forfás (p.93).

[7] In reference to generic, including basic skills, "DES and DETE should act to ensure that these skills are being acquired and explicitly assessed at all levels of the education and training system." Ibid (p101).

[8] Department of the Taoiseach (2011) *Programme for Government 2011.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

[9] http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/lit_num_strategy_full.pdf

For the purposes of this paper, the integration of literacy into FET programmes is understood to include the following elements.

- FET programmes are delivered in a way that allows language, literacy and numeracy to be developed as part of and at the same time as the learner is acquiring vocational skills, knowledge and competences.
- The integration of literacy involves FET tutors/teachers adopting particular teaching and learning methodologies and working in partnership with literacy support/development staff.
- It requires a whole-organisation approach, on the part of a provider, to ensure that:
  - ✓ course tutors/teachers can deliver their course/s in a literacy-aware manner;
  - ✓ tutors/teachers are aware of the literacy skills essential to their learners completing successfully the courses they are tutoring/teaching and also aware of the literacy skills essential to their learners filling the roles for which specific courses are preparing them;
  - ✓ literacy support/development staff are aware of the specific literacy skills and practices that are embedded in the vocational courses they are supporting so they can assist individual students to develop the skills relevant to the courses they are undertaking.
- It involves provider management systems that enable a working partnership between vocational and literacy staff.
- Literacy support and development is integrated into all phases of the FET programme – from recruitment and induction through to progression.

The integration of literacy into course design is understood to mean that, in designing an FET programme, those involved in the design process:

- ✓ identify the literacy and numeracy skills that are essential both to completing the course successfully and to succeeding in the job or roles for which learners are being prepared, so that in completing the course the learners may acquire the skills relevant to succeeding in those roles;
- ✓ eliminate any unnecessary literacy demands that may be a barrier to learning and to fair assessment;
- ✓ recommend teaching methods that help learners develop literacy skills as part of and alongside the core content of the FET programme; and

- ✓ recommend a flexible working partnership between FET tutors/teachers and literacy staff in planning appropriate responses to learners' course-related literacy needs.

In practical terms, for the FET tutor/teacher, integrating literacy involves using a range of methods that take account of the different learning styles and life experiences present in the teaching group – methods that enable each learner to use his/her existing literacy strengths to engage with the course content. These tutors/teachers also use the course content as a medium for teaching and learning the new language, literacy and numeracy skills essential to mastering the vocational content of a course.

This does not mean that the vocational tutor/teacher has to take sole or principal responsibility for student literacy development. Where required, literacy support staff should be available to provide expert tuition to learners and guidance to tutors/teachers in addressing course-course related and job-related literacy development needs.

Implications of Integrating Literacy

Integrating literacy into FET programmes will make the core content of the course more accessible to more students and lead to more successful learning outcomes for all who have the ability to engage with the course content, concepts and skills, as well as the interest, motivation and aptitude for the role (in the family, in the community or in the workplace) for which the course is preparing them.

Integrating literacy into both the design and delivery of FET programmes maximizes the potential for learners to participate, persist and succeed on the core vocational programme and it increases their skills and confidence in literacy. The integration of literacy:

- ✓ reduces unnecessary literacy barriers to learners acquiring subject specific skills,
- ✓ enables learners to improve their course and role specific literacy and numeracy skills in a meaningful and applicable context, and
- ✓ gives learners the skills and confidence necessary to complete courses, gain qualifications and progress to further education and employment.

The integration of Literacy into FET programmes does not entail assuming that everyone who applies for a course at a particular level will, automatically, be able to deal with the literacy and numeracy requirements of the course nor does it mean that a learner's literacy needs can be ignored. Rather, it means that the course designers and

teachers/tutors work together to identify the literacy skills that their course involves and adjust the methods and materials used in tutoring/teaching the course accordingly.

Benefits for FET Teachers / Tutors and Literacy Support Staff

The integration of literacy into FET programmes also delivers benefits for tutors/teachers in a number of ways.

- Because the language literacy and numeracy component of courses is carefully analysed in advance and the course programmes specifically address these issues in a proactive manner, the teaching more appropriately matches the learners' needs. Consequently, the teaching is more effective and rewarding.
- Where vocational tutors/teachers are more acutely aware of the literacy challenges facing their learners, they are able to tailor their teaching accordingly, thus avoiding unnecessary misunderstandings with students. The tutors/teachers can also use some of the technical course content to help their learners to improve their literacy skills. Again this should result in improved teaching and learning outcomes and, by implication, more rewarding professional experiences for tutors/teachers.
- Where literacy support is provided to learners, this support is highly relevant to both the needs of the learners and the needs of the tutors/teachers, as those providing the support know exactly what literacy skills are relevant to a particular course. This should also make the work of both tutors/teachers and literacy support staff more productive and rewarding.
- From the perspective of those providing literacy supports, there should also be improved professional outcomes as these tutors/teachers will now be more centrally involved in the delivery of the FET service. They will be working as part of a professional team in the delivery of a holistic FET programme tailored to meet the unique needs of individual learners – a development that sits well with the ethos of VEC literacy services.

Who is Responsible for Integrating Literacy?

In summary, the integration of literacy is a whole system/provider/school/centre responsibility. Those who design the FET programmes must incorporate literacy integration into the programme development process in a manner that those charged

with delivering the programmes can both understand and implement. The tutors/teachers have responsibility for integrating literacy into their teaching as well as liaising with literacy support staff to maximise the integration process.

The literacy support staff has responsibility for supporting the literacy integration process and, in doing so, for liaising with the vocational tutors/teachers and those managing the FET programmes. Ultimately, providers have responsibility for managing the FET programmes in a way that facilitates the integration of literacy into all such programmes. In particular, providers need to build the integration of literacy into their FET policies and plans, to monitor regularly the extent to which these policies and plans are implemented as intended and to ensure that all staff involved with the design, promotion, support and delivery of FET programmes are provided with training appropriate to their role in integrating literacy into the programmes they deliver.

How Literacy Might be integrated into FET Programmes in a VEC Context[10]?

Attempts to integrate literacy must take a tripartite whole-centre approach directed equally at learners, staff and management. Such an approach should be underpinned by the following principles.

- The teaching and learning of literacy is intrinsic to all subjects/courses/programmes.
- The teaching and learning of literacy is contextualised to each subject area.
- The teaching and learning of literacy is grounded in a whole-centre, collaborative and explicit approach.
- The teaching and learning of literacy is grounded in initial, diagnostic assessment that identifies learners' skills and needs and is supported by on-going assessment and evaluation.
- The teaching and learning of literacy is for all learners, not just those identified as having a literacy deficit.
- The teaching and learning of literacy is driven by a differentiated view of learning that takes into account learning styles and emphasises a Plain English/language awareness approach.

[10] City of Dublin VEC, in February 2011, adopted a report from its Board of Studies regarding the integration of literacy into CDVEC FE and adult Education centres and this section draws principally on how CDVEC sees the integration of literacy being implemented in its centres - see CDVEC, Report for the Board of Studies, February 2011: *Integrating Literacy in CDVEC FE and Adult Education Centres.*

- The teaching and learning of literacy is a dynamic process that draws on and feeds into current educational research and practice.

The following policies and practices can assist in implementing the integration of literacy into FET programmes.

- Develop a whole-centre/provider literacy awareness programme.
- Identify and assess individual learners' literacy needs.
- Identify the literacy demands of each course/subject area.
- Develop student induction courses that facilitate each of the above.
- Embed literacy in course planning and delivery.
- Provide effective evaluation and summative assessment.
- Implement effective literacy teaching and learning practices.
- Develop appropriate teaching materials and resources.
- Provide appropriate continuous professional development for all relevant staff around the whole matter of integrating literacy into FET programmes.

To implement the objectives set out above, VECs may undertake the following actions.

- Develop an Integrated Literacy Policy to be referenced in their five (5) year Education Plans.
- Design and develop a literacy awareness pack that promotes and supports whole-centre literacy integration and provides a checklist of good practice. The pack to focus on the following areas.
  (a) The literacy-proofing of websites, administration forms, posters, student notices, timetables, maps, etc.
  (b) The need for administration, reception, and other 'frontline' staff to recognise literacy difficulties signals and to provide appropriate responses to these signals.
  (c) The exploration of learners' literacy skills and needs during induction and ongoing assessment processes.
  (d) The development of course literacy skills' audits.
  (e) The identification of the range of literacy skills that learners require to succeed in further education and training.

- Design, develop and deliver a tutor/teacher-training programme to equip tutors/teachers with the practical skills and theoretical knowledge required to integrate literacy into their specialist subject areas. Such training would enable teachers to:

    a. identify the literacy demands of the subjects/courses they teach;
    b. identify their learners' literacy strengths and weaknesses; and
    c. develop teaching and learning strategies, practices, materials that take account of both (a) and (b).

- Investigate and document how each of the following can help in matching learners' literacy skills with course requirements and so further integrate literacy provision: recruitment, application, interview, enrolment, initial assessment, induction, study skills and progression routes.

- Develop and deliver a continuous professional development programme for principals and managers of FET colleges and centres to support them in leading a whole centre approach to integrating language, literacy and numeracy across their education and training programmes.

The integration of literacy into FET programmes will require a review and revision of continuous professional development programmes for all staff involved in designing, delivering and supporting FET programmes in order to incorporate modules on the integration of literacy into those continuous professional development programmes.

Concluding Remarks

The integration of literacy into FET programmes can improve outcomes for learners, tutors/teachers and coordinators alike – provided the whole process is managed correctly. Doing this, in a VEC context, will involve the adoption of a whole provider approach to the literacy integration process and it will, also, require a significant upskilling of FET tutors/teachers, those delivering literacy and other supports to learners and those managing/coordinating these programmes.

Progress in integrating literacy and numeracy into VEC FET programmes will be contingent on all involved with this work having a clear understanding of what the

integration process entails and having the necessary knowledge, skills and competences to implement the process.

As acknowledged above, the integration of literacy into FET programmes does not assume that all applying to participate in a particular course should be admitted automatically – irrespective of the level of their language, literacy or numeracy skills. Providers clearly retain the right to make their course admission decisions on the basis of the capacity of individual applicants to complete courses successfully and core skills, including language, literacy and numeracy, are inevitably relevant to determining that capacity. On the other hand, the core skills threshold established for entry to any particular course should relate realistically to the core skills that will be required in the role for which the course is setting out to prepare learners.

As well as improving access, persistence and achievement for learners, integrating literacy into FET programmes is both timely and relevant in the current context of further education and training development. It can reinforce the interdependencies and collegiality of staff working to shared organisational goals and processes. In this way, the whole organisation approach to literacy can be a concrete example of the connectivity of different services within a VEC to support educational outcomes.

Finally, it is important to recognise that the integration of literacy into FET programmes is not something that can be achieved in a short period of time. Rather it involves a process that will take time to evolve and each VEC will need to manage the process to suit its own particular circumstances.

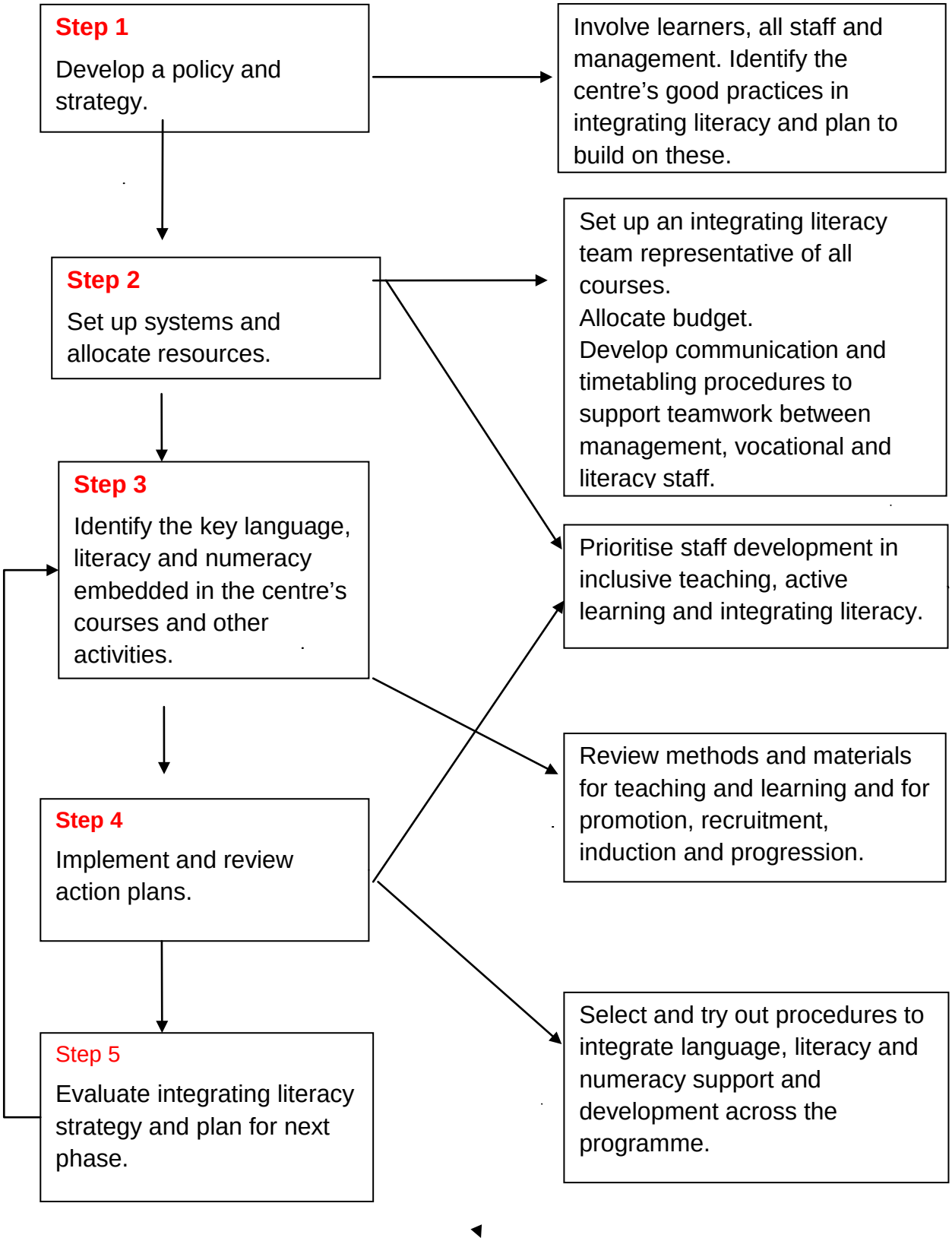
Support for the integration of language, literacy and numeracy into FET programmes, in terms of continuous professional development, is available from VEC Adult Literacy services and NALA.

The attached appendices are intended to provide practical guidance regarding the following.

- Planning for a whole-centre approach to integrating language, literacy and numeracy in the design and delivery of FET programmes.
- Integrating language, literacy and numeracy into teaching and learning.

ENDS

Appendix 1: Planning for a whole-college or centre approach to integrating language, literacy and numeracy in programme design and delivery



Note:

In what follows, we mean '**literacy**' to include language, reading, writing, numeracy and communication technology (ICT). *The term '**language'** refers to key words, concepts and types of verbal communication that learners need to develop in order to successfully complete their* course or programme.

Suggestions for college / centre planning to integrate literacy support and development across the service / curriculum

- ✓ Adopt a **policy** to integrate literacy support and development with programme design and delivery. Develop a **strategy** to implement the policy. Allocate **resources**, if necessary by prioritising within existing resources.

- ✓ Designate a **coordinator** from among senior staff. Form a **cross-curricular team** of teachers who volunteer to work together to develop, lead and evaluate an action plan to integrate literacy development with programme design and delivery.

- ✓ **Prioritise Continuing Professional Development** (CPD) for management and staff on how to integrate literacy support and development with the teaching of each subject and with other centre activities, such as promotion, recruitment, induction and progression.

- ✓ Ensure that the integrating literacy team includes **literacy staff** who have a particular interest in integrating literacy support and development with each subject.

- ✓ Design staff **timetables** that enable **communication and teamwork** between subject teachers and literacy staff, focused on the literacy involved in the main courses and in the jobs or roles to which they relate (where relevant).

- ✓ Plan to provide learners with access, if required, to **additional course-related literacy tuition** and to resources for self-directed literacy learning.

- ✓ Ensure that learners with specific learning difficulties have access to appropriate supports, such as **assistive technologies** for learning.

- ✓ Review and revise if necessary the **centre materials and publications** such as those used in promotion, registration and induction. See www.simplyput.ie.

- ✓ Produce **centre templates** for **course delivery plans** to help teachers identify the most important literacy **objectives** embedded in their subject and to plan the main **teaching and learning strategies** for these as part of content learning.

- ✓ Integrate literacy and numeracy development with the teaching and learning of **induction** topics. This will help achieve the goals of induction and will also give learners and teachers some early indicators of literacy and numeracy strengths and needs.

- ✓ Build links with employers to identify the specific literacy and numeracy demands of **work placements** and plan how to help learners with these.

- ✓ Support teachers and learners to identify and overcome any literacy barriers to fair **assessment for certification** in each subject area. **For example,** enable teachers to:
  - draw on the full **range of assessment methods** and media permitted by the awarding body;

- **teach the particular reading strategies** learners will need to fully understand the assessment briefs and examination questions;
- produce **templates for assessment briefs** to help learners experience a consistent user-friendly format across the curriculum.

✓ Explicitly **evaluate t**he integrated literacy strategy as part of your overall programme evaluation.

✓ In planning the programme for the following year or cycle, consider the kinds of literacy support that your centre can now offer learners within each course. This will help you to know the particular kinds of literacy that learners may need on **entry** to the particular courses at that time.

✓ Consider **transition** or **preparatory programmes** for your main courses, to help learners develop and sustain the course-related literacy and numeracy skills.