

# "I have to know. I have to understand how to do this!"

Personal and professional experiences of ESOL practitioners in Ireland during and since the COVID-19 pandemic

In September 2022 I enrolled on a full-time MEd in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University in Co. Kildare. This is my thesis topic.

As an experienced education professional who had worked within the arena of adults' literacy and language education for more than two decades, I was curious to understand more about the experiences of ESOL practitioners as they navigated the extraordinary challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My previous work with ESOL practitioners had largely taken place within England and Wales, although as an immigrant to the island of Ireland I was keen to focus this study on those working within Ireland's publicly funded English language programmes for migrants.



## Eight conversations with eight practitioners

Julia	Co-ordinator - suburban
Geraldine	Tutor - rural
Alicia	Tutor - rural
Ciara	Tutor - suburban
Zabel	Co-ordinator - suburban
Marie	Tutor - suburban
Lauren	Tutor - rural
Edel	Tutor - FE college in NI

## Four themes...

Equity and learner engagement	Practicalities of lockdown and using technology	Collaboration and communication	Enduring changes
<b>Changed plans</b> "I seemed to spend a lot of time putting stuff on screens." <b>Learners' use of tech</b> "Families might have one computer but they had kids that needed it for school work." "People talking over each other ... or one confident person would answer every question." <b>Lost learners</b> "We sent them links in text messages to apps, but we knew a lot wouldn't even be able to do that." "I became very frustrated ... trying to undo social problems."	<b>Preparedness</b> "We assumed at the beginning it would just be a few weeks." <b>Making it work</b> "We wanted to keep our tutors getting paid, so needed to figure out a way they could teach." "I drove myself to drink almost, worrying about not getting it right." <b>Platform issues</b> Conflict between what learners could easily use (e.g. WhatsApp and Zoom), and those supported by ETB (e.g. Teams). <b>Management</b> "I would have even more respect for how they pulled and pushed [to get] resources."	<b>Wellbeing</b> "Those [tutors] who weren't used to working on the computer ... for them it was a lot of stress." "We went for a walk most days ... and that kept us sane too!" <b>Team collaboration</b> "ESOL teachers are a very specific type of teacher ... they like to have their own little chest of treasures." "I wanted a camaraderie between colleagues but there's just nobody there." <b>Wider collaboration</b> "We had loads of CPD ... A lot were optional, but I had lots of time." Neither could recall coming into contact with any outside their immediate teams.	<b>Continuing tech use</b> "We acquired a lot of new skills that there wasn't the incentive or motivation to do prior to [lockdown]." "The expectation is much higher because all communication is done on [MS] 365." "If the internet is down there's uproar because the class wasn't prepared for that." <b>Human interaction</b> "They're talking to someone while walking to the class, in the class, during the break, while walking out." "The thoughts of getting out there again, putting on makeup and heels ... you almost get out of practice!"

## Key takeaways

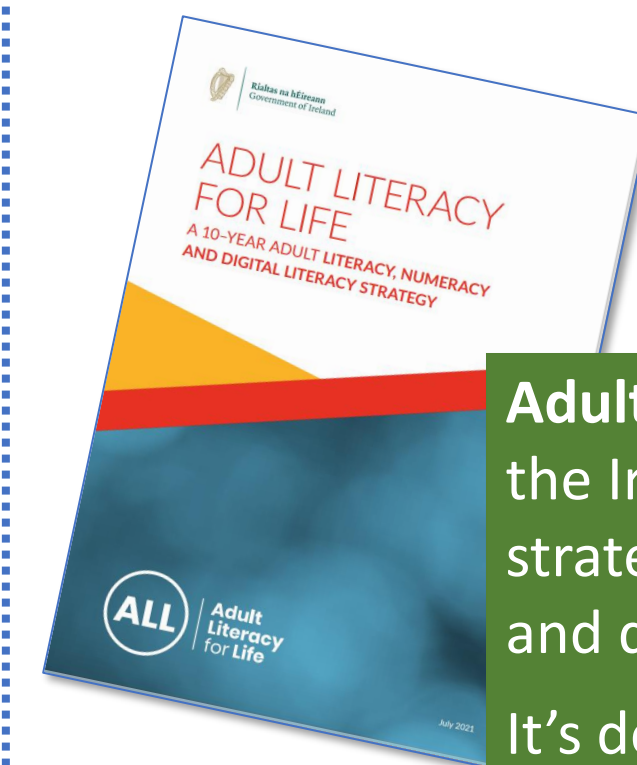
- **Urban vs rural disparities** not just scale of provision, but organisationally; rural tutors frequently working alone.
- **Uncertainty about ESOL's place within wider FET landscape** especially alongside Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy.
- **ETBs moved impressively to provide resources** e.g. laptops, books.
- **Pandemic encouraged some to share resources** one participant forced her team to plan/deliver lessons in groups!



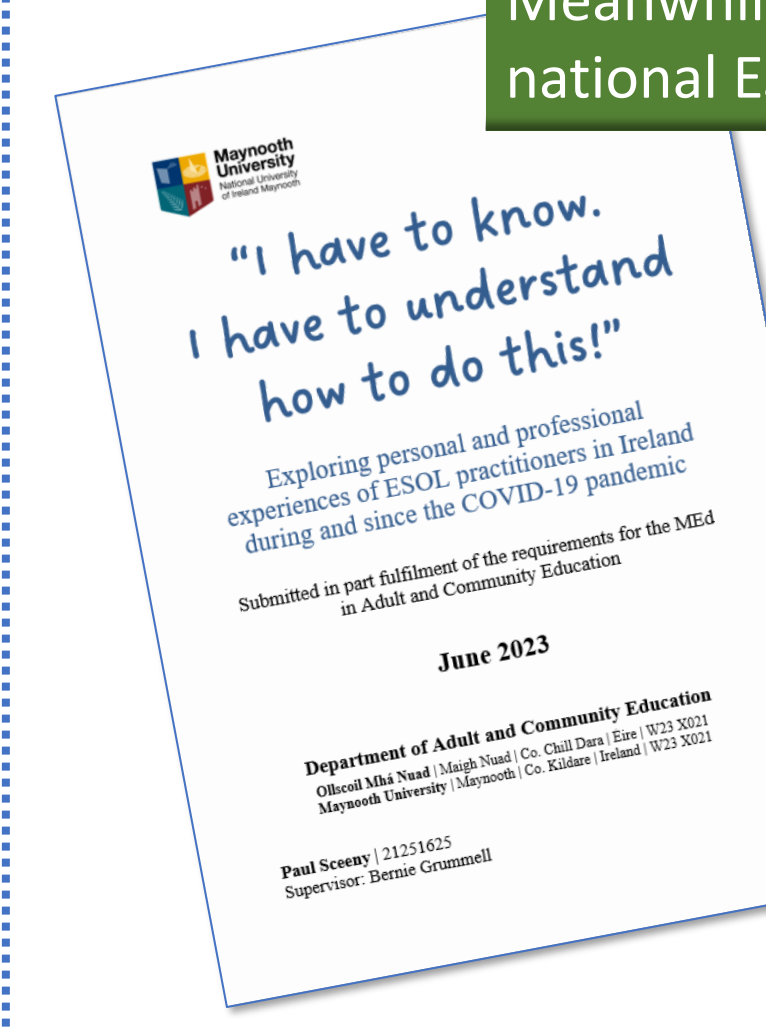
I was able to draw on my time managing, supporting and advising on City & Guilds' language, literacy and numeracy products; adapting and applying what I knew and understood to the landscape in Ireland. ☺



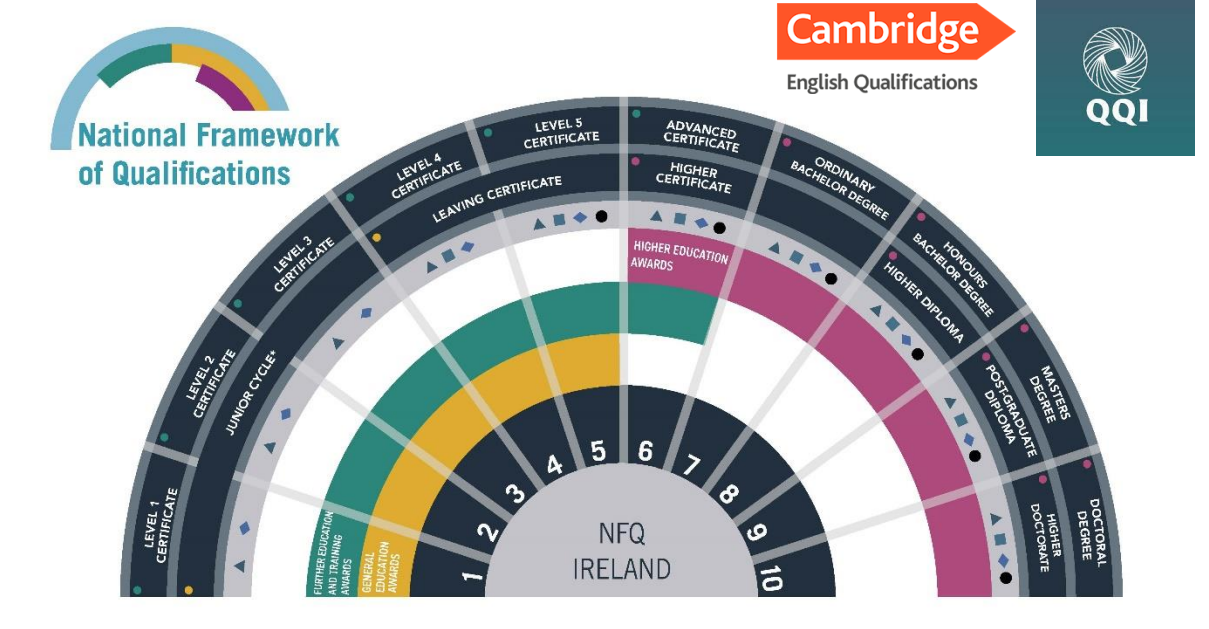
Most publicly funded ESOL in Ireland is delivered by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Provision has grown massively in recent years, yet ESOL remains a relatively small part of what ETBs do. 🚀



**Adult Literacy for Life (ALL)** is the Irish government's ten-year strategy for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. It's described as 'cross-government, cross-society and cross-economy'. Meanwhile, there's no distinct national ESOL strategy! 😞



I relocated to Derry a decade ago. In March 2020, less than two weeks before lockdown, I naturalised as an Irish Citizen. 🍀



IRISH REGISTER OF QUALIFICATIONS (QQI) and Cambridge English Qualifications

Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is organised around ten levels. There is no prescribed ESOL curriculum or national standards, although many learners complete Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) awards. Some ETBs also offer Cambridge English Qualifications, perceiving these to have more currency with employers and portability (especially since they align with the CEFR, rather than the NFQ). 📖



I'm hoping these ESOL practitioners' stories about the pandemic, especially their insights about how and where they collaborated, will provide food for thought for NATECLA's Island of Ireland Branch (and for others too!). 🗣️