

BASIC SKILLS Bulletin

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Evaluating the impact of literacy and numeracy

The fourth and final report of a major piece of research by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research and the British Market Research Bureau has now been published. This has taken the form of an evaluation of the impact of participation in literacy or numeracy courses in colleges.

It is important to note the limitations of this study. It does not assess the full *Skills for Life* strategy since it excludes ESOL courses and courses delivered outside FE colleges. Since the exercise began at an early stage of the Skills for Life programme, it does not take account of some recent curriculum developments and misses much of the workplace based basic skills that has been a feature of the past year or so. As a longitudinal study, following the progress of 2,000 basic skills learners over three years, it inevitably leaves out people who have benefited from the initiative most recently.

The evaluation examines the impact of participation on a range of economic, personal and social outcomes, including employment, health and involvement in children's education. It describes course benefits, as perceived by the participants, qualification gain and continuation in education and training.

Economic outcomes

The main aims of the study were to assess the impact of participation in *Skills for Life* on economic outcomes, both for the individual and the economy. The study found that participation:

- Had a positive impact on individual self-esteem, including belief that their basic skills are improving, and increased life-long learning
- Led to participants gaining qualifications
- May lead to improved health, the ability to conduct a wide range of

everyday activities and increased independence.

But the study found no measurable impact on the chances of an adult who leaves college with a new basic skills qualification getting a job or improving their earnings.

In a rather bleak assessment the Report says: *"As the study was unable to identify any quantifiable economic benefits, the rate of return to the investment in the courses was zero over the three-year period covered by the evaluation."*

The authors hasten to add that this does not necessarily mean that the lifetime rate of return is zero. *Skills for Life* may have provided the foundation for future skill development, which may in turn lead to better employment prospects and higher earnings. *"However, to the extent that this does happen, it is likely to take some years before a positive return is realised."*

Some attributes commonly thought to be linked to employability, such as self-esteem and qualifications, are improved and there was a high rate of progression to subsequent courses which may, in turn, improve future employability. The very high incidence on the courses of people with learning difficulties and other disabilities will also mean that they have other barriers to employment to overcome.

Other worthwhile impacts

The lack of an *economic* impact does not, of course, imply that there were no socially worthwhile impacts.

Graduates from these courses, some of whom had been leading restricted lives, were more able to do things like travel unaccompanied, budget and manage everyday finances and go shopping. Many became more independent and experienced reduced social isolation or even felt more

able to take on caring responsibilities themselves. There may, but the Report's authors do not commit themselves to this, be beneficial effects on mental health.

Nearly three-quarters of *Skills for Life* learners started new courses in the next three years. Roughly half of these were further basic skills courses and half vocational qualifications. In addition, 15 per cent started a new academic course.

But only a minority progressed to a course at a higher level than their highest course in the Sfl programme.

Over the course of years covered by the study, 79 per cent of learners on these courses had gained a qualification, whether from a *Skills for Life* course or other courses. These included: City and Guilds (29 per cent of learners); Literacy qualifications (24 per cent); GCSEs (22 per cent); NVQs (20 per cent); Numeracy qualifications (15 per cent).

More to do

Some disadvantaged groups are less likely to progress to higher level courses, to gain qualifications or to reach a Level 2 Basic Skills qualification:

- Older learners
- People from ethnic minorities
- Parents with pre-school-age children and lone parents
- People without qualifications
- Those with the lowest level of literacy.

However, the Report claims, this does not mean that *Skills for Life* was less effective for these groups only that their outcomes were lower.

Overall, the quality and organisation of Skills for Life were judged good at this early stage though outcomes for individual participants might have been improved by:

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Happy Christmas!

Basic Skills Bulletin wishes all its readers a very Happy Christmas and New Year.

We look forward to publishing our 80th issue in February 2010

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- Greater provision of careers information, advice and guidance before, during and after a *Skills for Life* course
- Lower or no fees for follow-on courses
- Measures to target participation and achievement amongst socially disadvantaged groups.

However, a Government increasingly unable to see any value in learning other than the strictly economically utilitarian must have been a little disappointed.

Evaluation of the Impact of Skills for Life Learning: Longitudinal Survey of Adult Learners on College-based Literacy and Numeracy Courses, Final Report is available at the DCSF part of the BIS website www.dcsf.gov.uk

Spending and Cutting

In the same week that the Bank of England injected another £75 billions into supporting the banking system, the hunt for cuts and savings in the public sector gathered pace.

A paper leaked to *The Observer* shows proposed government cuts of £350 million in the 2010/11 training budget of £4 billion, effectively removing hundreds of thousands of training places. The cuts represent part of the £5bn in immediate spending reductions across all departments proposed in April's budget. Cuts which, we were promised, would not damage 'front-line services.'

While the cuts are described as 'efficiency savings', the documents admit that they would have a significant impact on those front-line services.

Though the figure includes the now commonly accepted notion of saving £100 million by abolishing or amalgamating selected quangos, the paper also envisages cuts in key government adult training programmes, such as Train to Gain, Adult Apprentices and Skills for Life. *The Observer* has estimated that 335,000 of the current 3,700,000 learners would be lost.

The options being considered include:

- Cutting by 10% the amount of money for apprenticeships for over-25s
- Delaying the introduction of skills accounts
- Cutting funding for the Adult Advancement and Careers Service by £25 million
- Halving the number of Career Development Loans.
- Reducing Train to Gain funding
- Freezing salaries and cutting staff at further education colleges.

David Willetts, the shadow universities and skills secretary, commented: "What's particularly shocking about this document is that the bulk of the cuts are in front-line services."

Tough choices

Though it is usually a supporter of investment in training, the CBI has also turned its spotlight on the adult training and education budget, where, it says that "tough choices need to be made."

In a new paper, *Reforming skills funding – delivering productive results*, it sets out how it thinks the Government could do more with the money it spends and get a better result. The CBI suggests that there should be cuts in 'nice to have' but non-essential training courses. It also calls for the redirection of some funds away from basic skills

training, towards higher-level skills – addressing skills shortages in areas as such as science, technology, and engineering.

In saying that public spending "must be focused on the valuable skills that will drive growth and employment prospects" the CBI is hardly breaking new ground. It implies of course that they – or somebody – knows what these 'valuable' skills are and, by implication, which skills have no value.

While acknowledging the continued importance of basic skills learning, they point out that targets have been met early so there should be scope for re-directing some of that budget. Claiming that future employment growth will be mainly for people with intermediate or higher-level skills, they call for greater support for apprenticeships – for school leavers and adults – and for priority to be given to investing in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) skills "which will define the future business and industrial landscape."

On the other hand, the Government should cut back on training courses which do not have direct benefit to the economy, and this should include specifically 'adult safeguarded learning'. The £210 million spent in this way supports a now tiny sector which is, in fact, the final remnant of a once almost universal system of publicly funded adult education which lay outside employer or government directed schemes.

The sums involved in such cuts are trivial by comparison with the tough choices that have been made about banking but there is surely a danger that significant damage will be done without making much of a dent in that debt mountain.

NIACE's Chief Executive, Alan Tuckett commented:

"Despite the achievements of the Skills for Life strategy, there are millions of people – including those most in need – who haven't yet been touched by it. Those adults need more, not less, spending on basic skills.

It is the duty of Government to secure an informed and participatory democracy as well as a healthy and stable economy. There is a risk that, having bailed out the bankers, we'll fail to maintain a broad enough range of opportunities for tomorrow's businesses and society, as well as serving those of today."

NIACE will not be alone in thinking this since the Conservatives have pledged to restore £100 million of the lost funding on adult education. Perhaps David Willetts should have a word with his colleagues at the CBI?

The Skills for Growth strategy

The government has published its new skills strategy entitled *Skills for Growth* (see: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/skills-for-growth>).

It states "the goal of the strategy is a skills system defined not by targets based on qualifications but by 'real world' outcomes. A system that provides a higher level of vocational experience, promotes a greater mix of work and study and encourages skills that are transferable from job to job. Skills must be taught expertly and carry real weight with employers". It seeks to broaden opportunities to progress to further and higher education.

It proposes new priorities in 6 key areas:

- 1 **To promote the skills that matter for economic prosperity.** It cites past successes at opposite ends of the spectrum – addressing basic skills needs and level 2 qualifications at one end, and at the other giving more young people the chance to go to university. But it says that Britain lacks sufficient skills at the intermediate technician, associate professional and skilled occupation levels. The government will set a new ambition that three-quarters of people should participate in higher education or complete an advanced apprenticeship or equivalent technician course by age 30.
- 2 **To dramatically expand the advanced apprenticeship system for young adults,** almost doubling the numbers of places.
- 3 **To ensure the system responds to demand from businesses,** while ensuring that key sectors of growth and employment are better supported through the skills system. It will give businesses more power to shape the provision of training through their choices and priorities, building on Train to Gain, while focusing on areas of the economy that can do most to drive growth and jobs. It gives a strategic role to RDAs.
- 4 **To ensure that all adults are empowered to equip themselves for future jobs.** It restates the importance of providing for basic skills and level 2 qualifications for those who have missed out but wants to encourage all adults to continue training throughout life. It will give learners consumer choice through skills accounts supported by high quality information and guidance.
- 5 **To raise recognition among businesses of the value of investing in workforce skills.** Where businesses

benefit from higher skilled staff they should make a greater contribution to funding training.

- 6 **To further improve the quality of provision at FE Colleges and other training institutions, through a simpler skills system** that empowers learners with greater choice between courses. It aims to achieve the largest simplification of the skills landscape for many years, with the goal of removing over 30 publicly funded skills bodies over 3 years.

Comment

The UKCES has proved most influential, particularly its call to radically simplify the skills system infrastructure by cutting over 30 quangos and redirecting the savings (over £100 million) to front line colleges and training institutions. It suggested that the unwieldy quality improvement infrastructure be replaced by a system where customer choice (informed by a 'traffic light'

consumer information system) decided the priorities of course provision and funding.

The ALP welcomed the new strategy saying "politicians must hold their nerve on open and demand led training". It approved of the move away from a "narrow system driven by counting qualifications as the basis for PSA targets, to a more sophisticated analysis of skills development and its impact on productivity and personal development and effectiveness".

The CBI urged that the government must target the £4 billion it spends on adult skills more effectively. The government should "cut back on training courses which do not have a direct benefit to the economy", including training known as 'adult safeguarded learning'.

NIACE defended 'safeguarded adult learning' as providing quantifiable returns in terms of better health, lower crime and higher civic participation, and helping to build the UK's social capital.

DEVELOPMENTS

ESOL and Functional Skills

The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills has announced that ESOL will not now be replaced by Functional Skills from 2012. It said:

"The current ESOL Skills for Life qualifications, like Functional Skills qualifications, are based on the National Standards for Literacy and Numeracy and have been extended in their current form until 2012. ESOL qualifications and assessment methods can be improved. However, after consultation with stakeholders, we believe that it would be inappropriate, without more research and testing, to replace ESOL Skills for Life qualifications with Functional English qualifications from 2012.

This research will take place in early 2010 and involve consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. The research will look at the needs of ESOL learners, the fitness for purpose of ESOL qualifications in relation to Functional Skills and enable us to take a view on the best way forward."

Online Basics

Following Dame Estelle Morris's report on ICT in the summer, the government will be piloting 'Online Basics' from January – April 2010. Essentially this is the very basic ICT provision that Estelle Morris recommended in her report – focusing on the use of the mouse, keyboards, emails and basic online experience. Although described as a pilot, its resources will be free for all to use on the internet.

Skills Investment Strategy 2010–11

The Government has published its investment strategy for 2010-11, on how it will support further education and skills training for post 19 learners through the new Skills Funding Agency. It plans for an overall 5% fall in expenditure on Skills for Life – from £630k in 2009/10 to £599k in 2010/11. There will be a 6% reduction in the funding rates for Train to Gain.

www.dius.gov.uk/further_education/funding_and_investment/~/_media/publications/S/Skills-Investment-Strategy

Highlights of the Skills for Life Conference 2009

The first of three Skills for Life national conferences was held in London on 3 November, to be followed by conferences in Leeds and Birmingham. Highlights included:

Andy McNab on Quick Reads

The conference was treated to a surprise appearance by Quick Reads author, Andy McNab. He told how he was recruited into the army from Borstal with the reading age of an eleven year old and how this had led to a world of constant learning, training and improvement. Promotion required qualifications and more learning, which finally took him to university for 6 months. Education became infectious for him. He is now a well known author, with sales of 30 million copies, and has written film scripts and a play which has been adapted for Quick Reads under the title *'Last night another soldier...'* He commented, "If I can do it, anyone can!"

The next ten books in the Quick Reads series including McNab's will be published on World Book Day on 4 March 2010.

LSIS

David Collins outlined the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) remit to improve the learning and skills sector, by harnessing the sector's own expertise for self-improvement. It offers support in leadership and governance, management, teaching and learning, teaching and learning support, continuous improvement and resource utilisation.

LSIS works in partnership, for example setting up a one-stop-shop in colleges with NIACE. It is developing management qualifications with the Association of Colleges and the Association of Learning Providers; and it is improving teaching with the Institute for Learning. It launched the new Skills for Life Support Programme in September, focusing particularly on Numeracy and Employability, and delivered through a virtual learning environment. It is introducing innovative resources such as 'Brain Games'.

LSIS's budget has been cut by £50 million next year, but it retains a spending budget of £70 million for the year.

Digital inclusion

Seetha Kumar, controller of BBC Online made a passionate plea for widening digital inclusion to all. 13.8 million adults in the UK don't have an internet connection at home (and 10.6 million of these don't use the internet at all). The BBC is using its online news services, popular programmes such as East Enders and the BBC 'I' player to get people interested in participating online. The 6000

UK Online centres are also important entry points for learners. The BBC website was a pioneer 12 years ago, and many services for adults are now offered on it – for example RAW (Reading and Writing), My Story which is supported in 40 languages, SkillsWise with 74,000 users, and G for Guidance – a parental safety programme. She said working to alleviate digital exclusion was core to the BBC's public sector ethos.

Ministerial view

Kevin Brennan, the Minister of State for Apprenticeships, Further Education and Consumer Affairs, reviewed the progress of Skills for Life in the ten years since the Moser report. It has revolutionised adult learning and access to education, has broken barriers, and 6 million adults have gone on courses and 2.8 million have gained achievements. It has built up standards, curriculum and an infrastructure to support adult learning. Families and children have benefited, lives have been transformed and people have been made more employable.

The government is still committed to achieving the Leitch target of 95% of adults gaining functional skills by 2020.

Key focuses include: integrating employment and skills services to help the unemployed get the skills they need; focusing on numeracy and challenging the culture that considers lack of numeracy skills acceptable; union learning; innovation and the use of ICT; functional Skills and the new approach to ESOL.

Key Challenges

Asked to highlight key challenges, a panel of experts selected the following:

- The abolition of the LSC and the shift to the new Skills Funding Agency and the Young People's Learning Agency
- The development of functional skills (and particularly how to cater for learners below Entry level 1)
- The new approach to ESOL and ESOL at work
- Digital literacy and digital inclusion

Ambition 2020

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills published its latest advice to Government *Towards Ambition 2020: skills, jobs, growth* in October.

It contained nine strategic proposals grouped under the three priorities in its 2009–14 Strategic Plan:

- 1 Increasing individual commitment to learning and development
- 2 Raising employer ambition and investment in skills
- 3 Improving the responsiveness of the employment and skills system.

Maximising individual commitment will be achieved by:

- Raising individual aspiration, confidence and commitment to lifelong learning and skills through promotion, evidence, high quality provision and progression
- Transforming the quality and availability of information, advice and guidance through high quality labour market intelligence and modern consumer technologies
- Empowering learners with real customer choice and support to access skills and learning through full Personal Learning Accounts.

Employer ambition and investment in skills will be improved by:

- Enabling more UK firms to be high growth, high skill, high value added businesses through the stimulation of new industries, greater innovation and better leadership and management
- Developing high quality labour market intelligence to inform investment priorities, better match the supply of skills to emerging demand, and enhance economic competitiveness
- Stimulating greater employer networking, collaboration and collective action on skills to create more high skill, high performance workplaces and increase UK competitive advantage.

A more strategic, agile and labour-market led employment and skills system will be encouraged by:

- Increasing the trust placed in learning providers through the use of a public quality and performance framework of course labelling and institutional scorecards, which empower customers to drive provider responsiveness, quality and continuous improvement
- Increasing employer and individual co-investment and improving value for money
- Creating a modular and flexible qualification system in which only employer-

recognised and accredited learning and qualifications that meet industry requirements receive significant public funding. In addition, the UK Commission proposes a **comprehensive set of proposals to simplify the skills system in England**. These recommendations are designed to achieve:

- Lighter touch regulation, simpler funding, and single account and contract management arrangements to

providers, in exchange for using a public quality and performance framework of course labelling and institutional scorecards

- Simplified public funding and increased flexibility for providers to meet local labour market requirements
- Monitoring and audit requirements reduced to the minimum necessary to maintain public confidence

- Improved relevance, and responsiveness of industry and occupational qualifications, and reduced timeframes for qualification development
- A radical simplification of the skills system, reducing by up to 30 the number of publicly funded organisations involved in employer engagement, planning, funding, performance management and quality improvement.

Ten years after Moser

October marked the tenth anniversary of the launching of the report into adult literacy by Lord Moser – *A Fresh Start* – which led to the establishment of the Skills for Life Strategy. It identified that 7 million adults suffered from poor literacy and numeracy skills (not reaching the level expected of an 11 year old). This was later revised by the National Skills for Life Survey 2003 to 3.5 million adults affected by poor literacy (at Entry Level 3 or below) and 8 million suffering from poor numeracy (at Entry Level 3 or below).

Ten years later, and eight years after the beginning of the Skills for Life Strategy, a very great deal has been achieved. The government can claim that nearly 6 million individuals have been involved in learning, with 2.8 million achieving Skills for Life qualifications. The picture of a poorly qualified, partly voluntary, teaching force has been transformed

with the setting up of professional qualifications intended to set the Skills for Life teaching workforce on a par with the professional status of school teachers. £5 billion has been expended in 8 years to make it all happen. Along the way, ESOL and basic ICT have been brought into the Skills for Life Strategy.

Could do better?

Where then may it have fallen short?

Certainly **numeracy** has been a disappointment with it proving difficult, despite all the efforts of government and providers, to attract adult learners and to find enough teachers of numeracy. It remains a key focus.

ESOL has arguably been the most successful strand – at one stage the ESOL budget had to be tripled as huge numbers of learners and employers took advantage of free English language teaching. Now

however it has been reined back, with asylum seekers losing the right to tuition and with ESOL linked to the management immigration and the promotion of integration and community cohesion.

ICT has effectively always been left on the sidelines, without the extra funding enjoyed by literacy, numeracy and ESOL, and without learner or teacher qualifications.

Finally, **literacy** has also had mixed success. There is no doubt that achieving skills for life qualification can be a matter of great pride to learners who have been marginalised before, giving self-esteem and helping address generational family failures in literacy. But a recent LSN survey has shown that in the field of employment Skills for Life has had no net benefit at all in helping learners to progress in their jobs. This is a serious embarrassment for a government which has increasingly made employability the touchstone of the Skills for Life programme.

NIACE has produced a handy 'report card' on 10 years of Skills for Life (see www.niace.org.uk).

The future

The further education sector has taken on huge challenges in successfully delivering Skills for Life, adapting to frequent organisational changes, and demonstrating an unflinching commitment to learners.

In the coming year that resilience and commitment will be tested further, with broad expected cuts in public expenditure. The Governments' Skills Investment Strategy has announced a 6% cut in Train to Gain, and a 3% reduction in FE course rates generally. An imminent election also raises uncertainties and the next year will see whether the current adult literacy and numeracy qualifications will continue or be merged into functional skills.

But the new national skills strategy published in November states "we remain committed to basic skills for all. There will be no return to a system that lets people fall through the cracks because they lack the ability to read, write or add up."

A testing time

Mainly as a result of the recession and the pressure now being exerted on public funding, the Skills for Life sector is beginning to feel the pinch.

In *BSB 76* we reported that the Learning and Skills Improvement Service faces a cut of 50% in its budget this year. Earlier this year, the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC) – set up to provide research and development for Skills for Life – lost its core budget of £2.5 million along with a further £0.5 million from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. This was apparently expected – NRDCs' original term of core funding had already been extended once – but it has left NRDC much weakened in its primary role as NRDC has published no research itself this year, barring some papers on the web, and is instead involved in providing research for a wider portfolio of clients such as CfBT, LSIS and LLUK.

Another organisation which has faced an extremely tough year is NIACE itself. This was partly because £1.9 million funds were frozen in the collapse of an Icelandic bank, and partly due to the incorporation of the BSA, with the loss of some income for basic skills work between 2007/08 and 2008/09, which dropped from £4,224,000 to £333,000 for basic skills work in England, and the loss of £9,274,000 for basic skills work in Wales (where former BSA staff transferred to the Welsh Assembly Government). As a result NIACE sustained an overall loss of £6,285,000 in 2008-09, and over 50 staff left in a major restructure. On the positive side, NIACE has secured the big new contract to manage the new £20 million Transformation Fund for informal adult learning, and has been able to sustain the expenditure of over £1 million on the Inquiry into the Future of Adult Learning.

The Skills Funding Agency

→ An update from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

From April 2010, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) will take responsibility for funding post-19 learning in England (with the exception of Higher Education). This is an update from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on recent progress.

The Skills Funding Agency will be an agency of BIS, its staff will be civil servants, and the Chief Executive of Skills Funding will be a statutory post holder. This model places the Skills Funding Agency at a 'shorter arm's length' from BIS, enabling a faster and more effective response to policy, while reinforcing the autonomy of the FE sector.

The Skills Funding Agency will route around £3.5 billion of funding to colleges and learning providers, including the Third Sector, primarily in response to customer (employer and learner) choice on programmes such as Train to Gain, Apprenticeships and through Skills Accounts.

Over recent weeks, we have seen some major developments:-

Interim Chief Executive takes Skills Funding Agency into Shadow Running

Kevin Brennan MP, Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs, formally appointed David Cragg as interim Chief Executive of Skills Funding on 09/10/09. David has many years' experience of developing and implementing skills policy and a great enthusiasm for bringing together the public and private sector. His sterling work so far to establish the Skills Funding Agency, and the role he will play in its inception over the next few months, is a fitting climax to his career, and an opportunity for the sector to benefit from his many years' experience, intelligence and insight. David will lead this period as staff begin shadow working in advance of the formal creation of the new Skills Funding Agency on 1 April 2010.

Royal Assent for the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act

The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act received Royal Assent on 12 November 2009. It provides the necessary legislation to transform the skills system including:

- provision to dissolve the Learning and Skills Council and transfer responsibility

- for 14–18 funding to local authorities;
- establishes a new Young People's Learning Agency to support local authorities in their new role;
- creating the post of Chief Executive of Skills Funding, who will lead the Skills Funding Agency which will fund post 19 education and training.

The Act is wide ranging. It covers new provisions about apprenticeships, including the issuing of frameworks and certificates and introduces a right for people to apply for time to train.

The Single Account Management System

The Skills Funding Agency will manage relationships with colleges and providers through a new single account management system, which will operate nationally. This will ensure the same processes are used across the country; removing the current regional variations used in the LSC, which add to bureaucracy.

This approach will establish a single point of contact for each college and provider and enable a single contract with the Skills Funding Agency covering all the activity being funded, including Apprenticeships. It will encompass the negotiation and allocation of funding, performance management, monitoring and review.

Single account management will be supported by an automated, on line system, which will facilitate the allocation, contracting and payment processes and in time support near real time flows of data. The on-line system will also be available directly to colleges and providers ensuring they and their Account Manager can both see the same information at the same time, significantly improving how they work together and cutting down on back office activity because information is shared easily and quickly.

Regional Development Agencies and the Skills Funding Agency

Within a national framework set by BIS and informed by the work of UKCES and Sector Skills Councils, the Regional Development Agencies, working in partnership with local authority leaders, sub regional bodies and other partners such as Sector Skills Councils, will be tasked to produce Regional Skills Strategies which are a core part of the Single Integrated Regional Strategies. The skills strategies will articulate employer demand and set out specific skills investment priorities for their region. The skills priorities in the regional strategies will inform Ministers'

Annual Skills Investment Strategy, which in turn will inform how the Skills Funding Agency will fund colleges and learning providers to ensure an appropriate supply of skills to meet the national, sectoral, regional and sub-regional priorities.

Skills for Growth – the National Skills Strategy and Skills Investment Strategy

The White Paper Skills for Growth: The National Skills Strategy for Economic Growth and Individual Prosperity was published on November 11th. The strategy takes the formidable achievements to date forward in a new direction. Skills for Growth emphasises the key role skills play in our future economic growth and continued competitiveness in the context of increasing globalisation, but also highlights the importance of skills to individual growth, to opportunities and fulfilment and to social mobility. The paper identifies particular areas for skills development for a high tech, low carbon economy and proposes the development of a modern class of technicians. Closer links between the workplace and learning providers will also be encouraged, and quality will be driven ever higher. At the same time as supporting higher level skills, the White Paper undertakes to maintain the drive to increase basic literacy, language and numeracy skills. The commitment is confirmed to the ambition of 95% functional literacy and numeracy by 2020.

The Skills Investment Strategy 2010–11, published on 16th November 2009, sets out how the £3.5 billion of investment routed through the Skills Funding Agency will support the delivery of Skills for Growth. It articulates the need to focus our investment on high quality outcomes for both learners and employers at the same time as delivering greater value for money. Funding will be realigned in accordance with current strategic objectives, endorsing the right skills, encouraging employers to invest more in skills and ensuring a more productive use of skills across the UK economy.

Following the publication of the Skills Investment Strategy, the Skills Funding Agency will be holding briefing events for colleges and providers around the country during December.

For more information see: www.dius.gov.uk/further_education/fe_reform/skills-funding-agency-transition

The Future of ESOL? A speculative commentary a decade after *Skills for Life*

→ **Melanie Cooke and James Simpson** consider key issues for the future of ESOL

The history of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) under New Labour is characterised by financial, political and pedagogic ups and downs. It started with a bang – an injection of funding under the Skills for Life policy ten years ago – but like the New Labour government itself is ending with something of a whimper, as college ESOL places and jobs come under threat, and as provision is shifted into the workplace or organised by local councils in the 'New Approach'. This article casts its gaze into the future of ESOL, asking how current trends and policies are likely to affect adult migrants, their teachers, and the broader communities in which they live, the towns and cities of the UK¹. We consider a quartet of issues: ESOL and immigration policy; ESOL and the funding crisis; ESOL and community cohesion; and ESOL and employability. In each section we describe the current state of play and allow ourselves predictions about what the future might hold.

ESOL and immigration policy

A succession of policies on immigration and the treatment of citizens born overseas has brought the ESOL sector into close contact with the Home Office/UK Border Agency. The first of these policies was the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, which instigated language and citizenship testing for people applying for British nationality. Under this legislation, those unable to take the citizenship test at the required level (Entry 3) may bypass it but must show evidence that their English is improving by attending ESOL classes with a citizenship element. Thus has ESOL teaching been brought firmly into a larger government agenda of migration control and nationality, which arguably discriminates against the most marginalised members of society (Cooke 2009).

Since the 2002 Act the legislation controlling immigration, citizenship and English language competence has become tougher, gradually introducing regulations which were unthinkable ten years ago. Citizenship testing was extended to those wishing to apply for settlement in the UK ('Leave to Remain'), while at the same time immigration control became tighter, with the introduction of a points system which favours immigrants with a good level of English language. A further proposed piece of legislation is the testing of the English level of spouses intending to come to the UK from overseas, even before they are given entry visas (Home Office/UKBA 2008a). This is a scheme which, apart from being unworkable in practice, discriminates *prima facie* on grounds of language.

Other forthcoming legislation will introduce different levels of citizenship, beginning with a probationary stage and a new model of 'earned' citizenship (Home Office/UKBA 2008b). Proposals under consultation require that applicants will have to show not only their knowledge of English and of UK society but also that they make extra financial contributions to public services and participate in the wider community. Prospective citizens will gain points for activities such as voluntary work or 'canvassing for a political party' (Home Office/UKBA 2009) – though it is not made explicit which party that might be! The current proposals include changes to citizenship testing which will introduce two levels of testing: one at the

'probationary citizenship' stage in which people will be tested on their knowledge of English and basic facts about life in the UK (in the same way they are at present), and one in which they will be tested on the 'historical and political context' of UK citizenship when they apply for full citizenship. Provision for people who take the alternative 'ESOL classes' route to citizenship will be toughened up, and applicants will be expected to show greater improvement in their English when they apply for full citizenship. Alarming, but predictably, this proposal has been made with no direct consultation with the ESOL sector and with no additional proposals for funding or training should ESOL teachers be the ones to implement this change. Thus policy continues on a trajectory of progressively strengthening the links between immigration control and the teaching and learning of English, a direction that was unforeseen by ESOL teachers ten years ago.

ESOL and the funding crisis

Incorporation into *Skills for Life* in 2001 brought with it recognition and funding for ESOL. Yet after a few short years, the Government changed its tune: too much of the *Skills for Life* budget was being spent on ESOL and the level of funding it received was not deemed sustainable. The introduction of the LSC rule which insisted that 80% of all courses be qualifications-bearing meant that in some colleges cuts have been made to ESOL provision at lower levels, especially in what is termed 'community provision'; this has inevitably hit students who did not receive much schooling as children, and those with literacy needs, as well as disproportionately affecting women and older members of migrant communities. On top of this, 2006 saw wholesale backtracking on the *Skills for Life* guarantee of free classes for all who needed them and the re-introduction of fees for certain groups of people, most notably those who were not in receipt of means-tested benefits.

ESOL is marginalised and devalued at institutional level as well as in policy. Looking into our crystal ball, we predict further disputes such as the recent one at Tower Hamlets College, sparked off when management attempts to cut ESOL and other courses and jobs was met with resistance by ESOL students, practitioners and trades unions.

ESOL and community cohesion

Changes in the way ESOL is organised and funded has a direct effect on teachers and their jobs. It seems likely that the latest policy and funding development, 'The New Approach', will be another change for the worse for ESOL teachers and migrant communities. While this policy is driven by an economic imperative, it is presented by the Government as a way to promote 'community cohesion' in migrant communities. The rationale for the New Approach goes something like this: Despite the funding received by ESOL since 2001, some groups still remain 'hard to reach', failing to access ESOL provision. The best way to reach these people is at a local level, through local councils who know their communities well and are able to pinpoint those who are not accessing provision. From September 2009, councils have been expected to work with local

communities and providers to produce lists of priority groups for their areas and to create strategies for addressing their needs.

While on one hand it is logical to suppose that local needs can be best understood at local levels, on the other there are numerous pitfalls with the New Approach. Not least of these is that the foundations upon which the New Approach rests are themselves contentious. The category 'hard to reach' is an invention which provides a rationale for this shift in policy; it is in fact not people who are hard to reach but provision. Some colleges have an exemplary record in community ESOL which has now been compromised, leaving the lowest levels in particular without ESOL classes. Classes at these levels typically comprise spouses who are recent arrivals to the UK, women with childcare needs, and beginner ESOL literacy students. These people are likely to be the groups identified by the council as priorities – but how did they become priorities in the first place? Because they are feckless and will not access ESOL? Or because existing provision has been cut?

The concept of 'cohesion' is also a slippery one whose definition varies across government departments and policy documents. In much Government discourse, 'cohesion' is a by-word for 'good behaviour', and in political rhetoric migrants are blamed for its supposed breakdown. A well-rehearsed notion has it that there are those who raise 'particular issues for community cohesion.' Who are these people who refuse to cohere? Muslim extremists, perhaps? Is 'cohesion' being used as a proxy for 'religion' and 'ethnicity'? The real problems that exist in some communities are more to do with housing, high levels of mobility, the economic downturn, poverty, and alienation of disaffected youth. None of these is *caused* by lack of English, although for some individuals a lack of English might exacerbate them.

ESOL and Employability

The suggested list of priority groups for the New Approach seems to include all but asylum seekers and the low paid. Yet everyone who is in the UK, even temporarily, needs access to good quality language provision, especially if they are cleaning our toilets, picking our marrows and serving our cappuccinos. If they are contributing in a vital way to our economy and to the functioning of our towns and cities, they have the right to communicate and have a voice. Government-sponsored research into effective practice in ESOL (Baynham, Roberts et al, 2007) shows that long-term residents in the UK who do not speak English well failed to acquire it when they first arrived because of their jobs. Long hours in factories with others speaking your mother tongue are not conducive conditions for learning the English needed for promotion or social mobility, yet these low paid workers are the very people who are excluded from the New Approach. To imagine that their employers will be prepared to pay is unrealistic.

What is available for low-paid workers? The continued use of the *Leitch Review of Skills* as a reference point has left the language needs of many low paid workers unaddressed: they are unlikely to be met by the courses that have sprung up as part of the 'Skills for Employability' agenda. What many low paid workers need is intensive beginner ESOL literacy courses, the very courses that are being cut as a consequence of current funding policy. What they might gain access to are short, modular, employability-focused courses,

provided through *Train to Gain* and the like, and often unsuitable for ESOL students.

Conclusion

Students and practitioners alike well know that the field of ESOL is not a neutral, value-free area of adult education, for it also serves as a receptacle for policy on skills education, employability and citizenship and is regularly invoked in public and political discourses of ethnicity, religion, immigration and national security. ESOL teachers can look forward to continued uncertainty, with temporary, part-time contracts increasingly the norm. The growing emphasis on voluntary sector involvement is in line with a general trend: the New Approach repeats the Government's appeal to the 'third sector': volunteers will provide cheaply or free the services which were previously provided centrally as part of the welfare settlement. Use of the voluntary sector in teaching compromises quality and undermines the right of qualified ESOL teachers to equity of pay and conditions with teachers in other areas of education.

For students, the queues on enrolment day get longer, and it becomes ever more difficult to gain access to an appropriate, convenient ESOL class. No amount of prioritising and new approaches will help unless persistent issues such as lack of childcare and the inaccessibility of high quality beginner ESOL classes are addressed.

Both the Government and the opposition are wearing the hair shirt of austerity, and public sector funding for ESOL is likely to become yet more scarce and insecure. How is ESOL provision to survive, even at today's levels? As a safeguard, we support a guarantee in law of English language education for new arrivals to the UK. The Australian system, which one leading commentator describes as 'privileged on a world scale' (Burns 2006), provides up to 1000 hours of free tuition to adult immigrants and refugees. At a time when a knowledge of the English language is assumed in political and public discourse to be central to 'cohesion', what better way to promote the linguistic dimension of integration?

1 In this paper we use the term UK when talking generally about ESOL because many of the issues we raise – especially those related to immigration policy – are the same in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. When discussing *Skills for Life* and questions of funding we recognise that this applies to England only.

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Preventing Elder Financial Abuse through Learning (PEFAL)

→ Leonora Miles on a really practical application of basic skills

It doesn't matter how rich you are you can still be subject to financial abuse by someone you thought you could trust. The story of Brooke Astor, the multi-millionaire philanthropist whose son has just been convicted of stealing tens of millions of dollars from his sick mother has had New York in thrall for the last year. Some interesting work developed by NIACE over the past few months is focusing on the skills that trusted intermediaries and older people need to ensure that their rights are not abused.

While the majority of cases are unlikely to attract this level of coverage, elder financial abuse is a real and devastating problem costing older people in the UK millions of pounds each year. The UK Study of Abuse and Neglect of Older People found that financial abuse was the second most prevalent form of abuse reported by people aged over 66 who had experienced abuse in domestic settings in the preceding year. It takes many forms, ranging from the theft of a few pounds from a pension to targeted scams to defraud older people of their property and life savings. Although a national survey found that older people were more financially savvy than the rest of the population in a range of specific areas, notably budgeting, savings and investments, it is clear that the rapid pace of change and increasing complexity of financial matters present challenges and increased risks for older people.

Links with other basic skills

Low levels of basic skills also present difficulties for many older people and there are strong links with low levels of financial literacy. This is particularly relevant to the literacy and speaking and listening skills needed to carry out financial transactions and engage with written financial information such as bank statements. As part of the 'Older and Bolder' programme, NIACE carried out work on financial capability with people aged over 50 which showed that they had specific skills needs, leading to the development of a tailored financial education curriculum for older people. NIACE's approach to financial education builds on the work of the Basic Skills Agency's Financial Literacy project which comprised a series of action research projects aimed at supporting practitioners to develop innovative ways of delivering LLN using a financial context.

Bringing together these two areas of work and building on the lessons learned, NIACE's financial learning team is currently undertaking a programme focused on preventing elder financial abuse through learning. Help the Aged's review of literature relating to financial abuse confirmed that "the financial literacy of older people needs to be improved through education" and the principal aim of the programme is to develop learning materials that will both increase awareness of the issue and reduce the risk that older people will experience financial abuse.

Keeping it in the family

Although abuse by friends, carers and staff is reported, in the majority of cases, the perpetrators are adult children who often have drug or alcohol dependencies as well as social and financial problems that can be exacerbated by underlying basic skills needs. Abuse in

this context can also involve neglect or withholding of care and access to benefits as well as physical and psychological abuse. As a result, the project is focusing on addressing the skills needs of both older people who may be at risk of abuse and of potential perpetrators.

This includes thinking about how best to build on work around the subject of money within the family such as the resource 'A Load of Dosh', a DVD featuring parents and children talking about their attitudes to money and savings. As a typically sensitive subject, it is often raised too late for older people to make informed choices about their financial affairs and have their wishes recognised or formally recorded.

Role of technology

Digital literacy also has a key role in this project owing to its increasing prominence in financial matters and the complex technology involved including recent developments such as home chip and pin readers. Digital exclusion and lower levels of digital literacy in the older population have a range of implications in relation to financial abuse. Keeping large amounts of cash at home either through a tendency to prefer cash-based money management or sometimes through necessity – as the only option to pay for services provided at home – places older people at greater risk of theft and fraud. However, use of the internet and email without awareness of the risks involved and knowledge of internet security measures may also expose older people to scams.

A toolkit

NIACE is in the process of developing a toolkit aimed at supporting older people to take action to help safeguard their finances through simple steps and planning ahead. Much of this involves presenting key financial topics in an accessible way, particularly recognising the underpinning basic skills that support the development of the personal financial skills involved. The toolkit will cover a range of general tips on money management and keeping money safe; suggestions or prompts for how to talk to banks and other intermediaries about any concerns in this area, as well as more specific topics about scams, frauds and legal matters related to the issue, such as making a will.

Recognising the important role in financial learning played by trusted intermediaries, the toolkit for older people will have a companion intermediary guide, outlining how to identify the key indicators and risk factors relating to financial abuse and signposting to further information and support. While this can be used by health and social care professionals, it is also aimed at a broad range of people, for example front-line bank staff and other potential intermediaries who may be in a position to identify financial abuse and support older people in taking positive steps to safeguard their finances and improve their personal financial skills.

For more information about the project please contact
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Maintaining Skills for Life in the recession

→ **Lynne Cutts, Jenny Hunt and Beverley Morris** on the importance of workplace LLN

How do we convince employers that the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills of their workforce are **more** important when our economy is battling against a global downturn?

Small employers battle for survival, but those who invest in the skills of their staff can benefit their bottom line. Investing in LLN skills makes sense for employers, industries and the whole UK economy.

The Leitch Report (2006) highlighted problems for the UK and warned that, without huge investment in skills, we would fall behind internationally. This is supported by a TUC call to ensure that more people have the opportunity to acquire the skills they need to retain their existing job or to find another if made unemployed (*Skills in the Recession, 2009*).

The lack of appropriate LLN skills is not just a problem for employers, it affects everyone through increased unemployment, greater drain on public services or increase in crime. We are all affected when the workforce does not have the skills to gain and keep jobs.

A recent letter to colleges from Peter Mandelson (DBIS) and Ed Balls (DCSF) reinforces the importance of developing skills employers need to compete. Train to Gain, Apprenticeships, Backing Young Britain and the Young People's Guarantee are examples of government commitments to achieving this. It is important that LLN is included.

Benefits of LLN in the workplace

With government and businesses preparing for a long period of cost-cutting, it will be difficult for education and training providers to convince employers to develop LLN skills in their staff. The cost to employers of poor literacy and numeracy is estimated to be £4.8 billion per year in the UK (£86,000 for firms of 51 to 100 employees; £500,000 for firms of over 1,000). Employers should understand the benefits of LLN in the workplace and be given positive messages about the impact upskilling. For example:

- **Bottom-line** improvements through fewer errors, increased productivity and a more **flexible workforce**
- Long-term **competitiveness**
- "Grow your own" staff with **useful skills**
- Improved **retention of staff** who appreciate job security and training in difficult times
- Increased workforce **diversity** and access to untapped talent
- Increased **motivation** for staff who wish to improve their skills
- Enhanced **development** opportunities for managers or potential managers
- Improved **perception** by staff, community and customers of the stability and ethics of the company.

A Go Skills report about passenger transport found a gap between the perceptions of managers and staff with these impacts:

- Difficulties in communicating with customers affects service
- Delays in reports, or inaccuracies, affect insurance claims
- Challenges between staff and management can result in inefficiencies and ineffective use of resources
- Numeracy problems lead to errors in invoicing and record keeping that impact on company finances.

Industry specific examples help providers 'make their case' to employers for investment in LLN. This helps describe the reality of

the workplace and, combined with improvements to the bottom-line, gives credibility to external training providers.

Employers may think LLN investment will result in staff turnover as skilled personnel move into better jobs. There is little evidence to support this, particularly during an economic downturn. Staff who feel that the company has invested in them will expect support to continue.

Presenting a realistic picture to employers will hopefully engage them in LLN, but this is only part of the challenge. Providers need to ensure that learning opportunities are firmly grounded in the needs of the business. This means using embedded approaches with materials and examples from the workplace. There is no point using the same worksheets and expecting them to 'fit' every employer. The provider must tailor delivery and not expect employers to accept existing offers.

We are fortunate in having lots of materials developed over many years and the Internet gives us access to many more. Tailoring materials and delivery is time consuming, but without this employees will become disengaged and employers will not see the value on their bottom line.

We should focus on what is important in our work – the learners. If we make the learning relevant, in terms of content and delivery, they will remain engaged. If we focus on a target-driven culture we risk losing learners, the trust of employers and ultimately our contracts (Seddon, 2003; Wind-Cowie and Olliff-Cooper, 2009).

Development of Skills for Life (SfL) requires support for families. SfL within family learning must be reinforced to meet future challenges by spanning the generations and including everyone.

Courses to meet the needs of learners in accessible community venues at times that fit in with the learners' other commitments are essential. 'Flexibility' and 'adaptability' are key. Embedding SfL in vocational courses and interest areas makes it relevant and transferable. Partnership working with community and voluntary agencies and schools must continue to offer of courses that reflect the interests and needs of local communities and develop skills parents need to support their children's literacy, language and numeracy.

Learners need to gain skills for employment or to get a better job. If adult learners do not have GCSE English or Mathematics, they can gain a nationally recognised qualification aimed exclusively at adults as a vital first step back to employment.

The worst of the recession may have passed with positive economic indicators, but we must continue to assert the place of literacy in rebuilding the economy and to stay alert to the longer term impact of the recession on literacy support.

Lynne Cutts, Jenny Hunt and Beverley Morris are Skills for Life Consultants and Trainers.

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Skills Funding Agency Transition

→ http://www.dius.gov.uk/further_education/fe_reform/skills-funding-agency-transition

The official BIS website providing information on the transition to the Skills Funding Agency, which, from April 2010, will be the single funding provider for adult skills in England outside of higher education.

It includes sections on:

- **Information about the reforms**
Covering updates on 1) FE and Skills system reforms, and 2) Skills Funding Agency transition
- **Organisation structure**
With an indicative organisation chart for the Skills Funding Agency

- **Regional Development Agencies**
Questions and answers on the proposals to make Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) the bodies responsible for producing the regional skills strategy.
- **Information for employers**
Question and answer booklet for employers and information about the Employer Reference Group.
- **Regional events/information for stakeholders**
16–18 and Post-19 transfer bulletins
See the archive Machinery of Government update bulletins.

Brain Games

www.braingames.org.uk

'Brain Games' is a new software engine developed by LSIS which gives learners a quick and easy way to practise their literacy and numeracy skills.

It aims to engage and motivate learners to succeed by building their skills and confidence as they progress through the game, and tackle incrementally harder challenges. The resource is built round the backdrop of a competitive sporting event.

In the 'Words' section, learners can choose from: Getting it? – Understanding; Spell it – Spelling; Scribe – Writing; What's the use? – Grammar; Full stop – Punctuation; and Word! – Vocabulary.

In 'Numbers' they can choose between: Work it out – Numbers; Bits and pieces – Fractions; How big? – Measures; and More than Likely – Statistics. All categories are available at three levels – easy, medium and hard.

In the Stats Centre, learners can view their performance charts and high scores and can issue challenges to their buddies. As they practise core technical skills of literacy and numeracy through the game learners are signposted to more context rich challenges at www.move-on.org.uk, as well as to mini tests supporting the National Literacy and Numeracy tests.

LSIS is currently developing further functionality in Brain Games which can enable practitioners to set up and manage learner groups and track learner progress by subject, category and level. This will be available in the early summer 2010.

Brain games is currently available free of charge to play online and, as Brain Games Lite, it can be installed on a range of mobile phones. In early 2010 a downloadable version of brain games will be available to run from a hard disc or memory stick.

Formative Assessment in adult literacy, language and numeracy

By Jay Derrick, Kathryn Ecclestone and Judith Gawn

This book provides practical ideas for teachers of adult literacy, language and numeracy in their work of lesson preparation, teaching and assessment. Relevant for all levels and contexts, it focuses on basic principles of student-centred

learning, teaching and assessment that put the goal of student autonomy at the heart of the process. This book supports teachers to implement this student-centred approach, often called 'formative assessment'.

ISBN 978-1-86201-438-1. Published November 2009.
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Updated Skilled to Go

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has updated its *Skilled to Go* toolkit to give individuals consumer skills. To access the materials go to: www.oft.gov.uk/skilledtogo

Lifelong Learning UK Conference 2009

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8 December : Kings Place , London N1

For more information visit <http://www.livegroup.co.uk/llukconference2009/>

Keeping abreast of research in the Learning and Skills Sector

Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN) annual conference

11 December 2009, London

For information contact Gurjit Kaur, NIACE Events Team on

Email: gurjit.kaur@niace.org.uk; Tel: 0116 204 2833

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Wednesday 27 January 2010, London

Beyond the Worksheet:

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Thursday 11 February 2010, Leicester

Making the Most of The Spelling Pack as a CPD resource:

A one day workshop for Adult Literacy practitioners

Tuesday 9 March 2010, London

See: www.niace.org.uk/



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