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ADULT BASIC SKILLS AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: THE ENGLISH CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

- This case study describes adult basic skills in England
- Focus on assessment, formative assessment in particular.



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BACKGROUND: IALS

- Before the publication of the findings from the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), adult basic skills were not a priority of the English government.
- The IALS reported that the average literacy and numeracy skill levels of the population of the United Kingdom was below that of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, The Netherlands, and the United States.



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BACKGROUND: MOSER

- The government formed a commission, led by Claus Moser, to investigate the issue and make recommendations on how to address it.
- The 1999 Moser report led to a three-fold increase in funding for adult basic skills in England, from £137 million in 2000/2001 to £420 million in 2001/2002, and then higher amounts in the following years. Funding for adult basic skills in 2005/2006 was £680 million.



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BACKGROUND: ACCOUNTABILITY

- The increase in funding was accompanied by a call for greater accountability.
- Since the government had employed externally set achievement targets measured by standardized tests in its effort to improve the education of children, it chose the same approach for adult basic skills.



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BACKGROUND: SKILLS FOR LIFE

- In 2001, the government launched a new adult basic skills strategy, *Skills for Life*, to address the learning needs of adults identified by the IALS as having low literacy and numeracy skills.
- Skills for Life is coordinated by the Skills for Life Strategy Unit (SfLSU) within the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS).



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SKILLS FOR LIFE

- Learners fall into two age groups.
- The first comprises 16 to 19 year olds, served by the Key Skills component of programmes aimed at full-time students in Further Education colleges.



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SKILLS FOR LIFE

- Adults aged 19+ are served by Skills for Life provision in Further Education colleges, private sector training providers, adult and community education, learndirect centres (an employment and training programme), workplaces, prisons, and voluntary community groups.
- Where appropriate, some learners under the age of 19 pursue Skills for Life rather than Key Skills programmes.



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FIVE LEVELS OF SKILL

The Skills for Life strategy established five levels of English language, literacy, and numeracy skills:

- Level 2 is equivalent to a GCSE (a qualification usually achieved at age 16) at grades A* to C (higher skill level)
- Level 1 is equivalent to a GCSE at grades D to G (lower skill level)
- Entry Level 3 is equivalent to the skills of school students aged 9 to 11
- Entry Level 2 is equivalent to the skills of school students aged 7 to 9
- Entry Level 1 is equivalent to the skills of school students aged 5 to 7



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PUBLIC SECTOR AGREEMENT TARGET

- Initially, the government's Public Sector Agreement (PSA) target, the most important government target in relation to Skills for Life, focused only on achievement at Levels 1 and 2, because analysis of the IALS data showed that adults needed this level of skill to compete for good wages in the global economy.
- However, the government decided that the PSA target would also include Entry Level 3, in the context of the policy priority of promoting progression to Level 2 and beyond.



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PSA TARGET

- Only the first achievements at the top three levels count towards the PSA target.
- That is **not** to say that learner achievements at Entry Levels 1 and 2 are not important; achievement at this level often represents a vital stage in a learners' development, in its own right and as a step on the way to achievement at a higher level.



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SKILLS FOR LIFE SURVEY

- The IALS identified the issue of low basic skills but could not provide an estimate of how many adults fell into each of the five Skills for Life levels.
- To gain this information, the government undertook the 2003 Skills for Life Survey, which interviewed 8730 randomly selected adults, aged 16 to 65, to build a national profile, based on the five levels of basic skills, of the population in England.
- The survey found that the 31.9 million adults in this age range in England fell into the following categories in terms of literacy and numeracy skill:



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SKILLS FOR LIFE SURVEY

- 3% (1.1 million) had literacy skills at Entry Level 1 or below
- 2% (0.6 million) had literacy skills at Entry Level 2
- 11% (3.5 million) had literacy skills at Entry level 3
- 40% (12.6 million) had literacy skills at Level 1
- 44% (14.1 million) had literacy skills at Level 2 or above



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SKILLS FOR LIFE SURVEY

- 5% (1.7 million) had numeracy skills at Entry Level 1 or below
- 16% (5.1 million) had numeracy skills at Entry Level 2
- 25% (8.1 million) had numeracy skills at Entry Level 3
- 28% (8.8 million) had numeracy skills at Level 1
- 25% (8.1 million) had numeracy skills at Level 2 or above



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SKILLS FOR LIFE: TARGETS

- Nearly half (47%) of all adults aged 16 to 65 were classified as Entry Level 3 or below in either literacy or numeracy. Only one in five (18%) adults achieved Level 2 or above for both literacy and numeracy.
- Based on these findings, the government decided to set ambitious targets for Skills for Life: 750,000 learners achieving qualifications at one of the top three levels by 2004; 1.5 million by 2007; 2.25 million by 2010.



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SKILLS FOR LIFE: TARGETS

- A recent report by the House of Commons' Committee of Public Accounts noted that the first target, 750,000 by 2004, was met, but it cautioned that more than half of the participants who achieved a qualification were 16 to 19 year olds.
- Most of these teenagers were served by the Key Skills component of the programme in full-time Further Education colleges.
- Adults were being served, but they were not the majority of participants. Our case study was focused on that majority – those aged 19+.



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SKILLS FOR LIFE PROVISION

- Provision is structured around the National Core Curriculum that defines the scope and sequence of skills learners need to develop to reach each level.
- When learners enter a course, their skills are assessed to identify their initial level and the skills they need to progress to the next level, and tutors use this assessment to design activities that help learners reach their goals.



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CURRICULUM

- The core curriculum influences initial assessment, teaching, and summative assessment.
- National standards have been developed for each level; these set out the scope and sequence of skills that adults need in order to progress up the levels.



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CURRICULUM

- Four frameworks have been published. One sets out eight milestones for adults with learning difficulties or disabilities not ready to study at Entry Level 1.
- The other three set out curriculum frameworks for adult literacy, numeracy, and ESOL at each of the five levels. The core curricula describe the skills needed to pass a test at each level and suggest ways to teach those skills.



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INITIAL ASSESSMENT

- When learners first arrive, their skills are assessed to estimate which level would be most appropriate.
- Initial assessment has two objectives. The first is to place learners in classes that meet their learning needs, and to help them make progress toward their learning goals.
- The second is to provide tutors with information that will help them link the learning objectives set out in the core curriculum to the individual life and interests of each student.



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TEACHING PRACTICE

- The core curriculum was meant to help tutors develop effective teaching and learning practices.
- The teachers we interviewed said that when the national curriculum and tests were first introduced, they were resistant.
- Teachers believed that learners would not want to take exams to achieve the qualifications, and they worried that learners might be discouraged by the school-like demands of tests.
- Teachers also worried that the curriculum would be too restrictive to allow them to make their courses interesting and enjoyable for adults.



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TEACHING PRACTICE

- However, after a year or two many tutors changed their minds. They found that most learners are motivated to take the tests because they believe the qualifications will benefit them.
- Teachers find that some learners need time to readjust to formal learning and build their self-confidence before exams become a motivating rather than a discouraging factor.



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TEACHING PRACTICE

- Since classes have learners with different learning needs and learners have different participation patterns, there is a need to individualize instruction.
- Teachers achieve this by using a combination of full class, small group, and individual instruction.
- A teacher might begin with an exercise for the whole class. Then the class might be broken down into small groups to work together on a learning task. The class might then move into an activity where each learner is working on their own and the teacher is working one-on-one with all learners or possibly only those that need extra help.



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TEACHING PRACTICE

- The teaching we observed tended to include a set of connected activities focused on learning objectives related to the core curriculum.
- Teachers were adapting their practices to help learners who were having difficulty, which could be one learner or most of the class, and to connect the skills being learned to activities in their lives.
- The learners were not sitting in rows being taught. They were sitting around tables, sometimes listening or responding to the teacher as a whole class, sometimes working with each other in pairs or small groups, and sometimes working intensively with the teacher in a one-on-one activity.



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THE PLACE FOR ASSESSMENT

- The Moser report supported the use of formative assessment as an element of quality improvement. The report argued that the materials used for learning should include assessments that provide useful information to learners and tutors.
- However, the Skills for Life programme has no formal policy on formative assessment.
- Though formative assessment is not a formal mandate, formative assessment is a formal process within courses observed in this case study.



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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

- One of several sources of published advice on formative assessment is 'Recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning' (RARPA).
- The project provided a model for formative assessment and quality assurance in Skills for Life.



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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

RARPA developed a staged process:

- Aims appropriate to an individual learner or group of learners
- Initial assessment to establish the learner's starting point
- Identification of appropriately challenging learning objectives (initial, renegotiated, and revised)
- Recognition and recording of progress and achievement during the programme (tutor feedback to learners, learner reflection, and progress reviews)
- End of programme learner self-assessment, tutor summative assessment, and review of overall progress and achievement



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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

- Formative assessment activities are indispensable to good teaching and learning practice.
- However, in the three programmes observed a good deal of paperwork was required, and the time spent on that paperwork, and the interactions between tutors and learners needed to fill out the paperwork, is time taken away from instruction.
- Over the course of their first term, learners became familiar with the formative assessment process. By the end of the term, they expected these activities to take place at the end of class and twice during the year.



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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

- Most learners interviewed during the study said they had a good idea of how they were progressing and did not complain about the paperwork.
- However, one teacher reported a learner saying, “I like it better when you teach us.”
- So some learners are probably finding the formative assessment activities to be a distraction from the limited time they have for learning, while others find it useful or at least interesting.



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THE LEARNING JOURNEY

- The Skills for Life Strategy Unit has been updating the framework whereby new learners are engaged, their goals and needs are assessed, and their progress is monitored.
- This model is referred to as The Learning Journey.



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THE LEARNING JOURNEY: 7 STAGES

- **Signposting and referral:** individuals are given information on where they can find further information, advice, guidance, or learning provision.
- **Skills check** is a quick (ten minute) screening process used to check the literacy, language, or numeracy skills of an individual. This process identifies learners who might benefit from more in-depth assessment.



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THE LEARNING JOURNEY

- **Initial assessment:** in-depth process that measures the individual's writing, reading, numeracy, and language skills against the levels in the national standards. This process helps place learners in classes at the right level.
- **Diagnostic assessment:** identifies a learner's strengths and weaknesses and highlights any skill gaps. This process helps structure a learner's individual learning plan.



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THE LEARNING JOURNEY

- **Individual learning plans:** the outcome of the initial and diagnostic assessments. They set out each individual learner's plan to learn, a timetable for learning, ways of learning, and resources required.
- **Formative assessment:** helps both learners and tutors to review progress and is a central part of the learning process.



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SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

- Learners demonstrate that they have achieved one of the five Levels by taking tests from one of several providers.
- The tests are administered and scored by the institutions that developed them.
- Reading is assessed by either paper or computer-based tests.
- Writing is assessed by tests but also through portfolios of learner work produced by tutors and judged by evaluators from one of the testing organizations.
- English language learners demonstrate their listening and speaking ability through structured dialogues assessed by a trained evaluator, either in-person or by audio tape.



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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: STRENGTHS

- A focus on small increments of learning – something that is manageable for learners who may otherwise be overwhelmed by the demands of a course.
- Learners and teachers are encouraged to reflect and modify learning goals and aspirations.
- Formative assessment encourages teachers to support learners, and to assist learners in learning how to learn.



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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: STRENGTHS

- Teachers are able to bring their own experience and training to the learning process.
- Formative assessment encourages dialogue between teacher and learner, and amongst learners.
- Teachers are encouraged to understand how learners learn best, and at what rate.



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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: WEAKNESSES

- One weakness of the formative assessment activities observed is the amount of time taken up in recording the process, time taken away from instruction.
- Whilst formative assessment procedures are supportive of learning, if a class meets two hours per week for 12 weeks, and a learner has missed two classes, the total time-on-task is only 20 hours. Even an hour taken out of this time could affect learning.



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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: WEAKNESSES

- Each formative assessment task, therefore, should be justified by evidence that it is supportive to learning. The time required of tutors by the writing up of formative assessment activities takes away from their preparation for instruction. This time should be justified by its impact on learning.



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‘IMPROVING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT’

- A major national research project on formative assessment is nearing completion: the Improving Formative Assessment (IFA) project, undertaken by NRDC, the Universities of Oxford Brookes, Exeter and Brighton, NIACE, and the Learning and Skills Network.
- The project is evaluating whether and how the principles of formative assessment developed in the school system can be adapted to suit the post-compulsory education system, including Skills for Life.

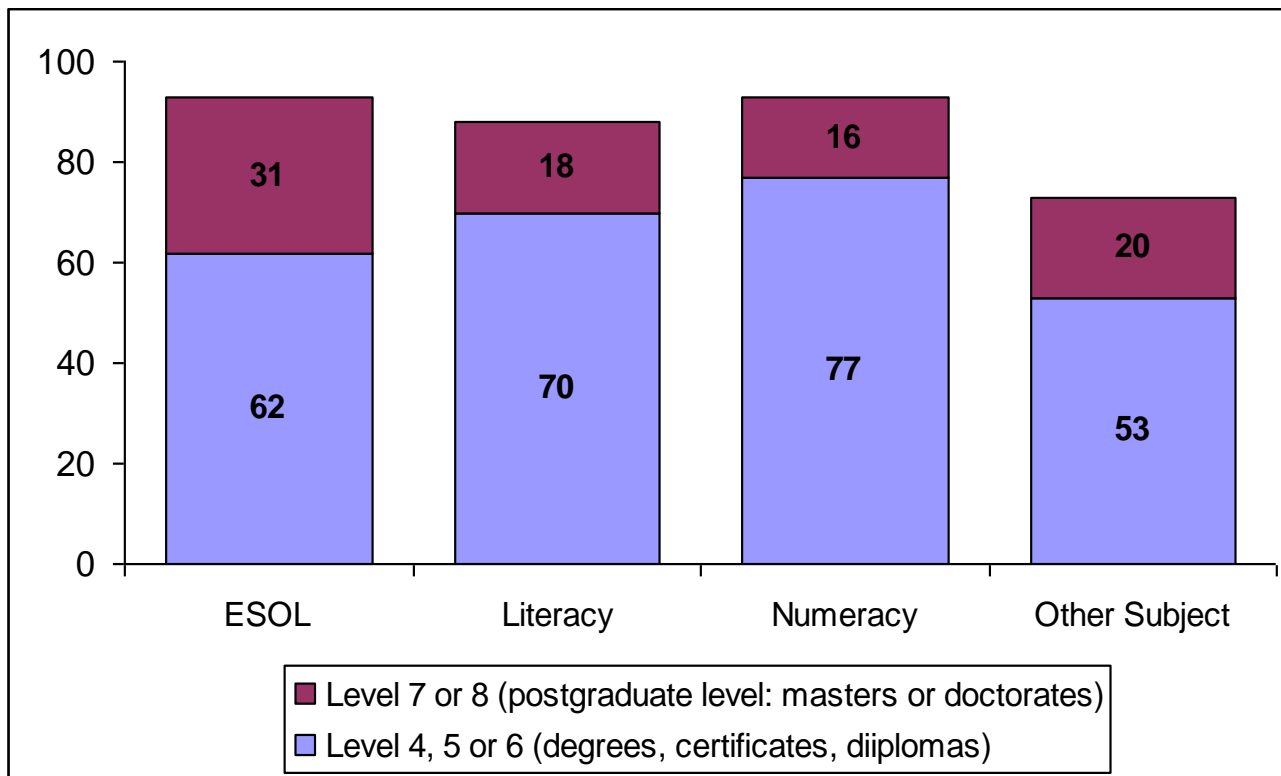


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‘IMPROVING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT’

- The project will examine how changes to tutors’ formative assessment practices affect learner motivation, autonomy, and achievement in programmes for basic skills, citizenship, personal education, and vocational education.
- The project is also identifying successful formative assessment practices in different contexts, the factors that help and hinder changes in tutor assessment practices, ways to amend assessment systems and qualifications in order to promote formative assessment, and guidance for staff development and initial tutor education programmes.

Highest level of any qualification, by main teaching subject area (N=1009)



Teaching qualifications

- Around one-quarter of teachers in the SfL sector were fully-qualified in this sense: they held both a generic teaching qualification such as a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or Certificate in Education (CertEd) *and* a Level 4 subject specialist certificate

Teaching qualifications

- 19% of Literacy, 4% of Numeracy and 9% of ESOL teachers hold **only a subject specific qualification** in a relevant subject
- 30% of Literacy, 28% of Numeracy and 31% of ESOL teachers hold **only a generic teaching qualification**



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