

COUNTRY BACKGROUND REPORT: ADULT BASIC SKILLS AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN ENGLAND

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report offers an introduction to policy and programmes in adult basic skills in England, concentrating on those pertinent to assessment practices - formative assessment in particular.

1.2 Excepting the first, all sections conform to those required by the protocol:

- Teaching and learning context
- Challenges in adult basic skills
- Programmes and policies for adults with low basic skills
- Gaps in provision and take up
- Assessment policies and structures
- Profiles of instructors
- Formative assessment

1.3 Much of the report comprises a compilation and abridgement of original source material, including national surveys, reports and commentary, together with NRDC research reports and summaries. This represents a small selection of available literature - there is no attempt to be fully comprehensive. Equally, the authors rarely engage in appraisal; the aim is largely confined to presenting a representative sample of materials for readers to assess for themselves. That said, some critical observations are included, from Inspectors and independent experts, to provide the reader with some understanding of points of controversy.

1.4 Some headlines:

- Launched in 2001 *Skills for Life* is the national strategy for improving adult literacy, language and numeracy
- Adult basic skills policy increasingly articulates with related national policies targeting those aged 14 and over
- There is no formal government policy on formative assessment in adult basic skills in England
- There is no history in adult basic education of using the term ‘formative assessment’; formative assessment practices have until recently had a low profile
- Inspectorates are critical of the quality of teaching and learning in adult literacy, language and numeracy, whilst also recognising many areas of good practice, including formative assessment
- Promising and effective formative assessment practices are integral to on-going national initiatives in teaching and learning adult basic skills

2. TEACHING AND LEARNING CONTEXTS: ADULT BASIC SKILLSⁱ

2.1 Adult basic skills are learned and taught in the many contexts that make up the Learning and Skills sector: further education colleges, school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, training organisations, adult and community learning, prisons and young offender institutions, work based learning, on-

line learning (learnirect), and education and training for the unemployed and job-seekers (Jobcentre Plus).

- 2.2 Further education caters for both 16 -19 year olds and adults, and includes Advanced Level and General Vocational Qualifications, vocational training courses in all occupational sectors, foundation degrees and professional training. Adult education encompasses accredited and non-accredited programmes and often takes place in community settings. Workplace training includes all National Vocational Qualifications.
- 2.3 Adult literacy, language and numeracy learning can take the form of discrete programmes or specialist learning support for learners enrolled on 'mainstream' programmes. Alternatively, it may be embedded (or integrated) in vocational or community development programmes.

3. NATURE AND SCALE OF CHALLENGE IN ADULT BASIC SKILLS ⁱⁱ

When possible, the background report should include information regarding the target population (socio-demographic information including age, ethnicity, gender, urban or rural dwelling, and so on), the percentage of individuals identified as having low basic skill needs, and known impact on social and economic development.

Introduction

- 3.1 A primary source of Information about the population in England with basic skills needs is the 2003 *Skills for Life Survey* of literacy and numeracy levels, based on British Market Research Bureau interviews with 8,730 randomly selected adults aged 16-65 in England.
- 3.2 The Survey offers a national profile over five levels of competence, corresponding with the National Standards for adult literacy and numeracy: Entry level 1 or below, Entry level 2, Entry level 3, Level 1 and Level 2 or above, and assessed the impact of different levels of skill on people's lives.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 3.3 The findings, methods and instruments are not free of controversy, but the survey represents the most recent and substantial attempt to identify literacy and numeracy levels in England.
- 3.4 5.2 million adults are identified as having Entry level 3 or lower literacy skills; 15 million adults are identified as having Entry level 3 or lower numeracy skills. NRDC research confirms the intergenerational effects of low levels of literacy and numeracy, and the social and economic penalties attaching to adults with literacy and numeracy levels at Entry level 2 or below. (Compared with evidence from the earlier IALS survey, that 22 percent of the U.K. population scored at the lowest level of three literacy dimensions – prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy.)

The Skills for Life Survey 2003

Overall results: literacy and numeracy

- 3.5 16% of respondents were classified at Entry level 3 or below in the literacy assessment; that is, around 5.2 million adults in England had Entry level 3 or lower literacy skills. Most met Entry level 3 criteria; five per cent performed at Entry level 2 or below. 44 per cent, or 14.1 million adults achieved Level 2 or above in the literacy assessment; that is, around 17.8 million adults had literacy skills at Level 1 or below.

Literacy

	% of 16-65 year olds	Number of 16-65 year olds
Entry level 1 or below	3%	1.1m
Entry level	2%	0.6m
Entry level	11%	3.5m
(All Entry level 3 or below)	(16%)	(5.2m)
Level 1	40%	12.6m
Level 2 or above	44%	14.1m
	100%	31.9m

- 3.6** Respondents tended to perform at a lower level in the numeracy assessment as compared with the literacy assessment. One in ten respondents achieved a higher standard in the numeracy assessment than in the literacy assessment, while 53% achieved a lower standard.
- 3.7** 47 per cent were classified at Entry level 3 or below in the numeracy assessment, including 21 per cent at Entry level 2 or below. This means that 15 million adults in England had Entry 3 or lower level numeracy skills and that 6.8 million of these were classified at Entry level 2 or below.
- 3.8** One in four (25 per cent) respondents achieved Level 2 or above in the numeracy assessment, which means that around 23.8 million adults had numeracy skills at Level 1 or below.

Numeracy

	% of 16-65 year olds	Number of 16-65 year olds
Entry level 1 or below	5%	1.7m
Entry level 2	16%	5.1
Entry level 3	25%	8.1m
(All Entry level 3 or below) (47%)		(15.0m)
Level 1	28%	8.8m
Level 2 or above	25%	8.1m
	100%	31.9m

- 3.9** Overall, nearly half (47 per cent) of all adults aged 16-65 were classified at Entry level 3 or below in at least one of literacy or numeracy. Only one in five (18 per cent) achieved Level 2 or above for both literacy *and* numeracy.

Distributions of literacy and numeracy skills needs

- 3.10** Lower levels of literacy and numeracy were associated with socio-economic deprivation. Adults in more deprived areas such as the North East tended to perform at a lower level in these tests than those in less deprived areas such as the South East.
- 3.11** Adults living in households in social class 1 (professional) were roughly four times as likely as those in social class V (unskilled) to reach Level 2 or above in the literacy test (67 per cent compared to 16 per cent). More than one third of those in class V were classified at Entry level 3 or below, including 12 per cent at Entry level 1 or below. A similar difference in performance was noted in the numeracy test.

- 3.12** Men and women had similar levels of literacy, but men appeared to have higher levels of numeracy, even when controlling for differences in education and employment. Overall, one in three (32 per cent) men achieved Level 2 or above in the numeracy assessment, compared to one in five (19 per cent) women.
- 3.13** Age was not a strong performance discriminator for either literacy or numeracy. However, there was a tendency for the youngest (16-24 year olds) and oldest (55-65 year olds) respondents to perform at a slightly lower level than those in other age groups, especially in the numeracy assessment. Only one in four (26 per cent) men aged 16-24 reached Level 2 or above in the numeracy assessment, compared to 37 per cent of men aged 25-34.
- 3.14** Among those speaking English as their first language, there were only minor differences in skill levels between the various ethnic groups. The low level of performance of the wholly English-speaking Black Caribbean population was the exception to this rule.

Literacy and numeracy skills and work

- 3.15** The influence of employment is closely linked to the influence of education. A certain level of education is normally needed for those sorts of occupation which keep literacy and, especially, numeracy skills fresh. Managers and professionals tended to perform at a much higher level in the literacy and numeracy assessments than anyone else.
- 3.16** There were significant gaps in numeracy assessment performance between the different 'upper' occupation categories. The majority (57 per cent) of those in 'higher' managerial and professional occupations reached Level 2 or above, but only a little over one third (38 per cent) of those in 'lower' managerial and professional occupations reached the same level. Gaps in literacy assessment performance were not of the same magnitude.
- 3.17** More than six in ten of those employed in routine or semi-routine work had Entry 3 or lower level numeracy skills.
- 3.18** Good literacy and numeracy skills tended to be associated with good wages. Nearly seven in ten full-time workers with Level 2 or above numeracy earned more than £20,000 a year before tax. Those with Entry 3 or lower level numeracy were less than half as likely to earn this amount. On average, they earned c.£8,000 less than those with Level 2 numeracy or above.
- 3.19** The connection between earnings and literacy was slightly less strong but still significant.
- 3.20** Very few people regarded their reading, writing or maths skills as below average, even among those with the lowest levels of ability:
- over half (54 per cent) of those with Entry 1 or lower level literacy said their everyday reading ability was very or fairly good; and
 - two thirds (67 per cent) of those with Entry 1 or lower level numeracy felt that they were very or fairly good at number work.
 - two per cent felt their weak skills had hindered their job prospects or led to mistakes at work.

Literacy and numeracy skills in everyday life

- 3.21 The majority of respondents at each level of literacy claimed to read every day with the exception of those with Entry 1 or lower level literacy. One in four of these respondents said they never read, but, even among this group, four in ten read every day.
- 3.22 The frequency of writing in English was more closely correlated with literacy level. Only one in five of those with Entry 1 or lower level literacy, and only one in three of those with Entry level 2 literacy wrote every day.
- 3.23 Respondents with low levels of literacy or numeracy tended to watch more TV than average but follow the news less than average. They also tended to have fewer books, although those with Entry 1 or lower level literacy were still more likely than not to have twenty five or more books in the house.
- 3.24 Nearly all parents of children aged 5-16 said that they helped their children with reading (95 per cent), writing (89 per cent) or maths (87 per cent).
- 3.25 Those with lower levels of literacy and/or numeracy were less likely to help their child(ren) – and were less confident about it when they did – but even here the majority still tried to help (63 per cent of those with Entry 2 or lower level literacy helped their children with reading; 55 per cent of those with Entry 1 or lower level numeracy helped their children with maths).

NRDC research

Intergenerational effects of literacy and numeracy^{iv}

- 3.26 Intergenerational research on the 1970 Birth Cohort Study (BCS70) uses reading and mathematics attainment data collected from half the cohort members' children. There are moderate correlations between parents' literacy and numeracy skills and those of their children. For younger children there was a striking gap in children's performance if their parents had Entry level 2 or 3 literacy compared with those above this level.
- 3.27 The correlation was also stronger for the children's grasp of 'literacy' rather than 'numeracy', especially for the older children's performance in the spelling assessment. This points to a high degree of fluidity in children's basic skills acquisition, in the early years, together with a strengthening component that can be attributed to parents' skills.

NRDC: Does numeracy matter more?^v

- 3.28 Research using data collected in the National Child Development Study - based on a cohort of people born in Britain in 1958 - identified the importance of poor numeracy as an obstacle in modern life, with particular penalties associated with poor numeracy for women. Present analysis takes this work further using literacy and numeracy assessment data collected at the earlier age of 21, in the BCS70 born 12 years later.
- 3.29 Labour market experience over the 17 years since leaving school revealed a greater diversity of statuses between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts, with far more women in the more recent 1970 cohort engaged in part-time or full-time employment and far fewer engaged in full-time home care.
- 3.30 Men and women with poor numeracy tended more than those with poor

literacy to be in manual occupations, to receive low pay, have low promotion prospects and to have relatively poor conditions at work. They were also more likely to live in non-working households. Numeracy also had a stronger relationship than literacy with a range of social and personal attributes including not voting, lack of political interest and not being a member of a voluntary or community organisation. Male cohort members with poor numeracy were also more likely to have been in trouble with authority at school and with the police. Both sexes were also more likely to report poor physical health, to show symptoms of depression and to feel that they lacked control over their lives.

- 3.31** A notable finding was that women with poor numeracy appeared to be exceptionally disadvantaged. Such women tended: to be out of the labour market in full-time home caring roles; to live in a non-working household; not to vote and not have any political interest; to have poor physical health; to be depressed; and to they lack control over their lives.

4. NATIONAL/REGIONAL PROGRAMMES OR POLICIES DEVELOPED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ADULTS WITH LOW BASIC SKILLS

The report should include information on underlying principles and goals shaping adult basic skills education and any ongoing debates, specific programme or policy goals and priorities, and their scope and scale. When possible, the report should include information regarding the extent to which programmes or policies focus on literacy and/or numeracy for adults with basic skill needs.

Introduction

- 4.1** *Skills for Life* is the national strategy for improving adult literacy, language and numeracy, launched in 2001, following the 1999 report of Sir Claus Moser, *A Fresh Start*. Details of the strategy, and its relationship to the Moser report are provided, together with a view from the Inspectorate, and early findings from an NRDC study of how the *Skills for Life* strategy is affecting learners.
- 4.2** Adult basic skills policy increasingly articulates with related national policies targeting those aged 14 and over, and these policies are briefly documented. Details are also given of the recent Leitch Review and Foster Report; both have implications for the context and direction of adult basic skills education and training.

A Fresh Start

- 4.3** In 1998 the Government asked Moser, chairman of the Basic Skills Agency, to produce a report on how 'to tackle the vast basic skills problem in this country'. *A Fresh Start – improving literacy and numeracy* (DfES, 1999), also known as the Moser Report, stated that 'up to 7 million adults in England have difficulties with literacy and numeracy – a larger proportion than in any other Western country with the exception of Poland and Ireland. One in five adults were considered to be functionally illiterate.
- 4.4** A long-term strategy was required, taking account of both supply and demand, in order to encourage an improvement in the quality of provision and an increase in the number of adults it attracts. Moser suggested that Government spending should be of the order of £680 million a year by 2005 if it was to achieve the recommended target of halving the number of people considered to be functionally illiterate by 2010.

The *Skills for Life* strategy

4.5 The Moser report led to the Skills for Life strategy, *Skills for Life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills* (DfEE, 2001), with a mission to ‘reduce the number of adults in England with literacy and numeracy difficulties to the levels of our main international competitors – that is from one in five adults to one in ten or better.’ (DfEE, 2001: 9).

4.6 Many Moser recommendations have been implemented:

- Development of a national strategy, led by a new unit within the Department for Education and Employment (renamed Education and Skills).
- The development of attainment targets, along the lines of the national targets for literacy and numeracy at Key Stage 2 (age 11) in schools.
- The development of a national curriculum for adult literacy, language and numeracy, based on an existing school model.
- Significant increases in the volume and quality of provision
- A common inspection framework ‘based on clear and transparent standards and consistent with the proposed national quality framework’.
- New standards and qualifications for basic skills teachers.
- A national promotion campaign to attract new learners into basic skills learning.

4.7 *Skills for Life* includes a strategy for engaging learners, by means of: an entitlement to free training for all adults who want to improve their literacy and numeracy skills; qualifications to help teachers and learners understand what they have to do to make progress; and national promotional strategy. *Skills for Life* also set out to create a high quality infrastructure to raise standards, by means of: robust national standards; screening and diagnostic assessment; a national core curriculum and new national tests for literacy and numeracy along with materials to support them; new professional qualifications for teachers; a rigorous and robust quality framework and improved national inspections.

4.8 As part of the Skills for Life Strategy the DfES set up The Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABBSU) in 2001. The priority was:

[T]o improve the skills of those groups where literacy and numeracy needs are greatest and where we can make most impact, particularly: unemployed people and benefit claimants; prisoners and those supervised in the community; public sector employees; low-skilled people in employment; other groups at risk of exclusion.

Our initial aim is that 750,000 adults will improve their literacy and numeracy by 2004, but in the longer term we want to make sure that England has one of the best adult literacy and numeracy rates in the world. And ultimately we want to eliminate the problem altogether. We are spending significant sums in support of our plans: £1.5 billion over the next three years.

4.9 Current Skills for Life targets are to increase the number of adults who achieve qualifications to 2.25 million by 2010, with an interim target of 1.5 million by 2007.

4.10 Section 7 provides further details of *A Fresh Start* and *Skills for Life*, in relation to assessment policies.

Annual Report of Chief Inspector: Adult Learning Inspectorate 2004-5^{vi}

- 4.11** A longitudinal study involving 10,000 people born in 1970 conducted for the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC) has shown that real disadvantage is concentrated among those whose capabilities are at or below entry level 2. This is well below the working definition of literacy and numeracy officially used by *Skills for Life*, of level 2, and below the level at which most of those who have benefited from the programme so far, are working. There appears to be a case for concentrating future efforts on this relatively small group of acutely disadvantaged people, offering the potential for a more precisely targeted approach. Evidence suggests, further, that Entry Level 2, and thereabouts, is one of the points at which investment in adult literacy and numeracy brings a significant socio-economic return.
- 4.12** While an ALI survey report on *Skills for Life* among adults at work pointed to some real successes in raising self-esteem, mutual respect among work colleagues and more fulfilling parenting, as well as in improving career prospects, this essential outreach to the people with the most pressing needs is in its early days. There is much more awareness of national shortcomings in literacy and numeracy but, particularly so far as the latter is concerned, not yet the scale of practical improvement which is needed if the situation is to improve dramatically.

NRDC evaluation of *Skills for Life*: interim findings from learner interviews^{vii}

- 4.13** An ongoing study to examine how the *Skills for Life* learning infrastructure is affecting the experience and achievement of learners. To date NRDC has interviewed approximately 200 learners.
- 4.14** Very strong feedback from learners praising the quality of their teaching, tutors and surroundings.
- 4.15** Most learners in the sample are in favour of tests - even those not looking for work such as older learners on numeracy/literacy courses and women taking ESOL classes whose most immediate concern is supporting their children at school and communicating with teachers.
- 4.16** Favourable comparisons made between current learning and previous experience of school learning; mainly due to small groups and individual attention, learning at one's own pace, support and atmosphere, absence of distractions such as bullying.
- 4.17** Broad range of gains mentioned – for example, supporting children, increased confidence in communicating with people. Improved job chances are important, but not identified as the main gain apart from those studying in a setting where there is a direct link between learning and promotion prospects (eg the army). Social gains such as meeting others and making friends are also important.
- 4.18** Positive experiences from returning to learning: provides confidence and a boost to seek out learning opportunities in a wide range of areas not necessarily obviously linked to earlier classes. Negative experiences mainly gathered from those who felt pressurised into returning to learning, and especially from those who could not see how this would help them e.g. “at my age”.

Related National Policies

Success for All^{viii}

- 4.19** Success for All is a long-term reform strategy for the English Learning and Skills sector, to develop high-quality, demand-led, responsive colleges and providers. The strategy covers the full

range of post-16 providers, including colleges, work-based learning providers, adult and community learning, prisons, probation and school sixth forms. There are five themes:

- Meeting needs and improving choice
- Putting teaching, training and learning at the heart of what we do
- Developing leaders, teachers, trainers and support staff
- Developing a framework for quality and success
- Accelerating quality improvement

4.20 Theme 2 – ‘Putting teaching, training and learning at the heart of what we do’. Aims include: Identify those teaching and training methods which have proved effective in the learning and skill sector; disseminate information about these, encourage their use, and provide appropriate training for teachers and trainers. Develop new teaching and learning frameworks to support teachers, lecturers and trainers, including delivery methods, assessment methods, programme content and teaching and training techniques. Provide a large-scale programme of training for teachers, lecturers and trainers, workplace supervisors and support staff with ongoing supporting learning materials. Develop a coherent national e-learning strategy.

4.21 Target groups include: workplace employees, Level 2 at age 19 and for adults, *Skills for Life*, offender learning and skills.

4.22 Success for All contributes to Public Service Agreement targets: increasing Level 2 achievement at age 19; reducing the number of adults without a Level 2 qualification; improving adult basic skills.

The Skills Strategy^{ix}

4.23 The 2003 Skills Strategy (*21st Century Skills*) is designed to:

- Enable employers to find the skills to support their businesses
- Enable individuals to acquire skills for employment and personal fulfilment.
- Tackle weaknesses in supply and demand for training
- Raise the skills of young people and adults

4.24 *Features of the Skills Strategy:*

- *Employers’ needs: to be met through a National Employer Training Programme (NETP). Free training in the workplace in basic skills and Level 2, designed for employers and delivered to suit their operational needs.*
- *Gaining skills and qualifications: skills for adult learners to be promoted by a clear ladder of progression.*
- National entitlement: from 2006/7 there will be a national entitlement to free tuition for a first full Level 2 qualification and new extensive support for learning at Level 3.
- Advice and guidance: adults will be helped to make decisions about their careers and training needs by a new one-stop telephone and on-line advice service.

14-19 Education and Skills^x

4.25 Context: numbers staying on post 16 have improved but remain far down the international league table. Many employers not satisfied with the basic skills of school leavers going directly into jobs. 200,000 16-19 year olds outside education, employment or training.

4.26 Aims:

- At Key Stage 3, strengthen the emphasis on English and maths, in particular by expecting schools to focus systematically on those who arrive from primary school without having reached the expected standard in the Key Stage 2 literacy and numeracy tests
- Achieving functional skills in English and maths: no one to get a C or better in English and maths without mastering the functional elements; more opportunities and incentives for teenagers who have not achieved level 2 by 16 to do so post-16 and support them in achieving level 1 or entry level qualifications on the way.
- Participation at age 17 to increase from 75% to 90% over the next 10 years
- Every young person to have a sound grounding in the basics of English and maths and the skills they need for employment
- Better vocational routes which equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need for further learning and employment

Every Child Matters^{xi}

4.27 ‘Our aim is to ensure that every child has the chance to fulfil their potential by reducing levels of educational failure, ill health, substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, abuse and neglect, crime and anti-social behaviour among children and young people’^{xii}

4.28 The Green Paper sets out plans for:

- Sure Start Children’s Centres in each of the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods, combining nursery education, family support, employment advice, childcare and health services
- Full service extended schools which are open beyond school hours to provide breakfast clubs and after-school clubs and childcare, and have health and social care support service on site.
- Focus on activities for children out of school through the creation of a Young People’s Fund (initial budget of £200 million)
- Increasing investment in child and adolescent mental health services; improving speech and language therapy; tackling homelessness; reforms to the youth justice system

National Reports

Leitch Review of Skills: Skills in the UK – The Long Term Challenge. Interim Report (December 2005)

4.29 UK productivity trails many key comparator nations; poor skills are a key contributor to this problem as well as having wider impacts on social welfare. At the same time, over the last decade, the skills profile of the working age population in the UK has improved (the proportion of adults with a degree has increased from a fifth to over a quarter of the population).

4.30 Despite these improvements, the UK still does not have a world-class skills base:

- over a third of adults in the UK do not have a basic school-leaving qualification – double the proportion of Canada and Germany;

- five million people have no qualifications at all;
- one in six adults do not have the literacy skills expected of an 11 year old and half do not have these levels of functional numeracy.

4.31 New analysis conducted by the Review shows that, if the Government meets its current ambitious targets for improving the UK's skills, by 2020:

- the proportion of working age people without any qualifications will fall to 4 per cent; and the proportion of adults holding a degree will increase from 27 per cent to 38 per cent; and
- this will have significant benefits for the economy – increasing annual productivity growth by 0.2 per cent with a net benefit to the economy of £3 billion a year, equivalent to 0.3 per cent of GDP.

4.32 However, even if the UK can meet the current challenging targets, problems will remain; at least 4 million adults will still not have the literacy skills expected of an 11 year old and 12 million would not have numeracy skills at this level.

Foster Report: Review of role of Further Education Colleges (November 2005)

4.33 Remit: to advise on the key challenges and opportunities facing Further Education (FE) colleges. The report emphasises the values of greater clarity, improved leadership, organisation and management and a focus on the needs of learners and business as criteria for progress.

4.34 FE provides for over 3 million learners, and offers activity spanning employment skills, basic skills, second chance and higher education. There are many symptoms indicating that all is not well: 200,000 16-18 year olds are not in employment; education or training; 14% of adults of working age have no qualifications; over 5 million adults have literacy and numeracy skills below level 1; too many students fail to achieve the qualification for the course on which they enrol.

4.35 The causes of the lack of comprehensive impact are many: schooling shares responsibility in exporting too many failing pupils; incorporation liberated the individual college, but failed to provide a basis for locality strategy; there is a mismatch between the aspirations of FE colleges and available funding; persistent underperformance in some colleges and courses fails learners and damages FE's reputation; the FE system has suffered from too many initiatives and, there is strategic confusion about roles, especially between the Learning and Skills Council and the Department for Education and Skills. Above all, FE lacks a clearly recognised and shared core purpose.

Foster Report: Review of role of Further Education Colleges (November 2005)

4.36 The way forward includes: a core focus on skills and employability; increasing the pool of employable people and sharing with other providers the role of enhancing business productivity; acquiring an identifiable brand; evolutionary, not revolutionary change; learning from the strategic and management arrangements of other public services.

4.37 Putting the 'user' at the centre of policy and practice: ensuring that all intending students receive impartial advice; developing financial incentives to steer students onto courses valuable to the economy; strengthening learner advocacy at national and local LSC level, and college level, offering greater choice, not only between courses but amongst learning modes and, in streamlining qualifications and learning pathways.

- 4.38** And, nationally: seeing FE as a purposeful system, rather than as a bounded sector; within government, the disadvantaged 'middle child' experience of FE between schools and HE needs to be repaired; as the strategic architect of UK education, DfES should provide a coherent and managed framework spanning schools, FE and HE.
- 4.39** Within the FE system, addressing the problems – and possibilities - of a casualised and ageing workforce and the need to improve vocational and pedagogic skills through comprehensive workforce planning.

5. PROFILES OF INSTRUCTORS

The profile should include description of instructor's professional status, working conditions, as well as opportunities for training and professional development.

Introduction

- 5.1** All new adult education teachers appointed to teach literacy, numeracy or ESOL to post-16 students must gain a Skills for Life teaching qualification, as well as a Post graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or Certificate of Education.
- 5.2** Ofsted: 'significant progress has been made in implementing some aspects of the Skills for Life strategy since the last report but the lack of skilled teachers still remains and this is seriously affecting the quality of provision and the capacity to improve. (Skills for Life in colleges: one year on (2005. p. 2). There is general agreement about the shortage of specialist, skilled teachers in basic skills, especially in respect of numeracy; there is less agreement about the extent and explanation of the problem.
- 5.3** The workforce is predominantly female, white and middle aged. In Initial Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development, greater emphasis than previously is now given to subject knowledge relative to generic knowledge of pedagogy.

***Skills for Life* Core Curriculum training programmes 2001/3: characteristics of teacher participants**

- 5.4** This study reported on the characteristics of teachers who attended the *Skills for Life* core curriculum training programmes for literacy, numeracy and ESOL teachers from 2001 to 2003. The data is therefore not based on representative samples of the whole population of teachers, but on the substantial numbers of teachers who participated in the training.
- More than 80 per cent of literacy, numeracy and ESOL teachers were female.
 - More than half of literacy and numeracy teachers were aged over 46.
 - 75 per cent of ESOL teachers, and over 90 per cent of literacy and numeracy teachers were white.
 - 79 per cent of teachers had a qualification at level 4 or above, 90 per cent at level three and above.
 - 56 per cent had recognised teaching qualifications, such as Cert Ed/PGCE but many have other specialist professional teaching qualifications.

- 7 per cent had only an introductory teaching certificate in the form of the C&G 9281, and no other teaching qualifications.
- 5 per cent had no teaching qualifications at all.

New Initial Teacher Education Programmes for teachers of literacy, numeracy and ESOL

- 5.5** This study investigated the new initial teacher education (ITE) programmes for teachers of adult literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) in nine universities and, to a lesser extent, two colleges during the first year of implementation, 2002/03.
- 5.6** There was support among teacher trainers and trainees for the policy of raising subject knowledge to improve practice in the three specialisms of literacy, numeracy and ESOL. However, there were concerns about the content, level, depth and breadth of the subject specifications and how they related to the three stages of ITE qualifications.
- 5.7** For university-based teacher trainers from the generic tradition in adult teacher education, the inclusion of subject knowledge alongside pedagogic knowledge was new. For others from the subject specialist tradition, the extension to the full breadth of the generic standards was new.
- 5.8** Many courses adopted an integrated approach to teaching subject knowledge and pedagogic knowledge, some adopted a partially integrated approach and others taught the subject specifications separately.
- 5.9** There was little consistency across the universities in terms of numbers of course hours, the structure of modular programmes and university credit systems. All providers reported that the new programmes involved considerable extra expenditure.
- 5.10** Teacher trainers expressed concern about having insufficient time to teach the subject specifications and cover the pedagogic standards. Some teacher trainers and trainees said the focus on subject knowledge was in danger of marginalising knowledge of teaching.
- 5.11** Some trainees, particularly those who had little teaching experience, told us that there was too much theory, not enough practice, and little connection made between the two.
- 5.12** The research shows a wide diversity of experience and qualifications among trainees. However, there was little evidence of programmes making use of this prior experience or accrediting prior learning. Experienced and inexperienced trainees often followed similar programmes with little variation in the structure, pace and organisation of learning to meet their particular needs.
- 5.13** All course tutors expressed concern about the difficulty of attracting qualified and experienced teachers to teach on the university-based courses and were looking for new forms of partnerships with colleges. The shortage of suitably qualified teacher educators was reported as particularly acute in the area of numeracy.

Numeracy

- 5.14** Making Mathematics Count: The report of Professor Adrian Smith's Inquiry into post-14 Mathematics Education, (London, TSO, 2004):
- the most urgent need for CPD is on subject-knowledge and subject-specific pedagogies

- need for a National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics to provide central and distributed infrastructures to support the entire mathematics sector
- lack of appropriate CPD and teaching and learning resources for mathematics teachers.
- The need for CPD in the particular areas of mathematics is stressed, such as: diagnostic and formative assessment; working with special needs; new initiatives in curricula or resources; integrating ICT into teaching.

6. GAPS IN PROVISION AND TAKE UP

The report should identify major gaps in provision and barriers to addressing identified needs.

Introduction

- 6.1 We have been unable to identify evidence providing a comprehensive picture of gaps in provision and take up; what follows represents a selective analysis from a number of post 16 contexts.

The workplace

- 6.2 The need for adult numeracy/mathematical skills is extending throughout the workforce as a result of the demands of business and the introduction of ICT. Employees increasingly need to have broader general problem-solving skills, inter-relating ICT with mathematics.
- 6.3 Requirements for workplace mathematical skills are examined in *Mathematical Skills in the Workplace* (June 2002, Institute of Education and STMC), which concludes that there is an *increasing* need for workers at all levels to possess an appropriate level of mathematical literacy.
- 6.4 At the same time, evidence to date suggests that there is little workplace provision focussed exclusively on numeracy; the majority of training programmes or courses provided by employers for their employees focus instead on literacy or ESOL.

Numeracy

- 6.5 The Smith Inquiry reported that:
- Whilst there are international shortages of mathematics teachers, shortages are more extreme in the United Kingdom than elsewhere, and could become worse over time.
 - Shortage of practising specialist teachers of mathematics as the most serious problem in ensuring an adequate future number of young people with appropriate mathematical skills.
 - *Skills for Life* could be undermined by the shortage of competent teachers of numeracy working in the adult sector. Qualified staff will be needed to support trainers, even if they are not delivering programmes. Smith also emphasises the issue of leakage between the school and post 16 sectors.
 - The proportion of recruits to mathematics ITT with a 2:1 or higher is the lowest for all degree subjects. This has implications for subject specific CPD in relation to mathematics teaching.

ENGAGING WITH LEARNERS IN COMMUNITY SETTINGS

6.6 The NRDC Adult Learners' Lives project focused on learners in community settings, including a centre for young homeless, an Entry to Employment programme, a drug and alcohol support centre, a tenants' association and a domestic violence self-help group.

6.7 Emerging messages:

- Providers need to take time to get to know individuals and understand their reasons for being there
- The relative priority of different goals for people, and the place of *Skills for Life* learning within these, needs to be considered. High-priority and immediate goals should be distinguished from those that are longer term
- 'Progress' should be documented in terms of 'distance travelled', and related to people's own goals. This might or might not involve qualifications
- People often 'dip in and out' of provision. This is not necessarily failure - it can be an important and brave step
- Training needs to develop ways of working with learners as whole people. This can be as important as subject knowledge
- People's responses can change radically from one day to the next, in response to other things going on in their lives
- It is crucial that provision does not recall previous negative experiences of education and authority. Ownership and shared accountability are important
- Practical financial support (eg transport costs) may be necessary

Rural provision

6.8 Since 2001, all government policy proposals, including those for health, housing and education, are supposed to consider the impact they will have on rural communities and whether the policy have any significant differential impact in rural areas.

6.9 At present, *Skills for Life* is based largely on urban models of delivery and patterns of funding which are often inappropriate in rural areas. There are two main barriers faced in delivering rural provision: the scattered nature of rural communities; and difficulties with transport.

6.10 Low levels of population density make it difficult to get enough learners together in any one place at any one time to run cost-effective provision. Funding criteria normally require classes to have a minimum number of learners, usually between eight and ten. In rural areas this is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

6.11 Transport infrastructure is a well documented problem in rural areas. Many rural learners do not have access to a car. They cannot afford a car, or the family has only one which is used by the main wage-earner to get to work or, especially in the case of ESOL learners, they cannot drive. This means that many have to rely on public transport which is often very limited. Where it does exist, it is slow, costly and infrequent. As a result, rural learners find it difficult, if not impossible, to attend provision that is not based in the locality.

7. ASSESSMENT POLICIES/STRUCTURES.

The report should include information on formal assessment for adults with basic skill needs, including qualifications, examinations, participation and performance targets, and so on.

Introduction

- 7.1 The role of national tests and summative assessment is described, and a selection of critical remarks from inspectors and other national experts are included to give the reader an understanding of the primary points of controversy.
- 7.2 There is no formal government policy on formative assessment in adult basic skills in England. Moser's *Fresh Start* was supportive of formative assessment; it is matter for dispute how far *Skills for Life* has been faithful to the letter and spirit of Moser in that respect.
- 7.3 The profession needs, but does not have, valid, reliable and manageable instruments for assessing adult literacy and numeracy.

The Moser Report and the Skills for Life strategy

- 7.4 The revised national strategy *Focus on Delivery to 2007* states:
- Our goal is to reduce the number of adults in England with literacy, language and numeracy difficulties to the level of our main international competitors – that is from one in five adults to one in ten or better. We aim to help 750,000 adults achieve national certificates by 2004, and to help 1.5 million achieve the same by 2007 (DfES, 2003b, section 5).
- It's not enough just to help them reach levels of functional literacy, language and numeracy. Our strategy aims to improve their skills up to and including Level 2 of the National Qualifications Framework, whether they choose to follow programmes leading to qualifications in literacy or numeracy or key skills. (DfES, 2003b) section 12.
- 7.5 Lavender: 'The strategy does *not* recognise that learners may not wish to follow a programme leading to a qualification. The choice is between 'key skills' and 'literacy, language or numeracy' (not working towards a qualification or not). In addition, it is clear that reaching levels of functional literacy, as suggested by the Moser Committee, is now no longer the goal. The new focus is to become qualified, to improve 'skills up to and including Level 2 The *Fresh Start* report had recognised that both portfolio and test-based methods of assessment have their strengths and weaknesses. The link between formative and summative assessment is a crucial part of the learning process for most learners. The Moser Committee argued that coursework assessment is attractive to learners who would be put off by having to take a test, helps teachers to provide effective feedback and is a motivating process for learners (10.23).^{xiii} At the same time it should be said that there are substantial numbers of adults for whom qualifications serve as an incentivising and sought-after feature of provision, and the same applies to the qualification-bearing progression routes now much more in evidence in England following the introduction of the *Skills for Life* strategy.
- 7.6 In *Focus on Delivery to 2007* 'achievement' means 'national qualifications' or end tests (DfES, 2003b, 'Learner achievement' sections 108-24), and since September 2002, all literacy, numeracy

and ESOL learning programmes are based on the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (DfES, 2003b, section 109). The standards, or 'fixed benchmarks' are described as 'broadly equivalent to the attainment expected of seven-year-olds, 11-year olds and GCSE grades A*-C respectively'.

7.7 The tests at Level 1 and 2 are multiple-choice and machine-marked, providing immediate feedback on-screen. Qualifications at Entry level have also been devised by QCA, and these involve assessments which are independently or externally set or validated, externally marked or moderated, and are conducted under supervised and specified conditions. (QCA website: National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Qualifications – Entry Level.)

7.8 Providers are expected to:

. . . draw up an Individual Learning Plan with each learner which sets out the learning aims, the learning goals and the smaller 'steps' that the learner will take in order to achieve their goals. Learners can also expect to have a teacher who gives regular, positive, recorded feedback, and who is able to use a full range of teaching approaches, from group work, to one-to-one and online learning (112).

7.9 Lavender: it is a short step to make this teaching methodology a part of both the formative and summative assessment process and an integral part of the identification and recording of achievement. But in order for a national qualification to match the expectations on providers we need more than a national test. The government suggests that we don't.^{xiv}

Qualifications: ALI Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2003-04^{xv}

7.10 [There is a] plethora of awarding bodies and awards which populate the adult market for qualifications. The emerging national qualifications framework, with its first elements due for introduction next year, should deal in time with the vexed issues of progression, equivalence, part-qualification and transferability. Until it does, many adult programmes – most notably apprenticeships – will appear less successful than they are in reality, if we consider success to be the transformation of career prospects.

7.11 There are more than a million learners in the adult and community learning sector. The fact that some 60 per cent of them do not take qualifications could be seen as an indication that this is a leisure sector. In fact, ALI inspectors found that many serious adult and community learners take a positive decision to shun awards. They see a qualification as a distraction from learning and an award as irrelevant to the kind of personal, career or community development they seek. The exceptions to the rule are qualifications which confer a licence to practise – often literally. Adult learners who seek specialist qualifications to drive taxis, buses or lift trucks, or those who need licences for using chainsaws or hazardous crop-sprays, are well motivated to achieve the award. This is a problem for government, which properly wants to invest in something tangible, something which clearly adds to the national stock of capability, but which recognises that a great deal of learning which is valuable is not instrumental. *What is needed is a form of confirmation of progress that is also formative for the adult learner. If lifelong learning is to become a reality, a portfolio of national lifelong learning awards will be a necessity. We are not there yet.* (Italics added).^{xvi}

7.12 Among offenders in prison or the community, the over-riding priority has been to teach and certificate literacy and numeracy, dealing with the very low levels of basic skills found among the majority of those who break the law repeatedly. Speed of awarding and transferability of qualifications remain serious problems. Analysis of learning needs is still haphazard, with some

offenders assessed many times, some never to any real effect, and a lack of clear connection between the results of assessment and the learning programme taken. Unit-by-unit qualification is available in some establishments but not in others.

8. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The report should include any information on studies, major programme evaluations and/or inspectorate findings regarding the “state of the art” in instruction and formative assessment in adult basic skills education. The reports should also include promising innovations or research directly informing policy and practice in teaching and formative assessment for adults with basic skill needs in the country, and avenues for wider dissemination (such as professional development programmes, and formal and informal networks).

Introduction

- 8.1** Assessment of any formal kind is new to literacy, language and numeracy; there is no history in adult basic education of using the term ‘formative assessment’, and until recently formative assessment practices have had a low profile.
- 8.2** The 2005 anthology, *Insights from Research and Practice: a Handbook for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL practitioners*,^{xvii} extends to 660 pages, and includes a substantial sample of the subjects practitioners have wanted to write about over the last 20 years. The term ‘formative assessment’ does not appear anywhere.
- 8.3** Inspectorates are critical of the quality of teaching and learning in adult literacy, language and numeracy, whilst also recognising many areas of good practice, including formative assessment. Promising and effective formative assessment practices have a pivotal role in national initiatives to improve the teaching and learning of adult basic skills
- 8.4** This section includes: an account of two national attempt to include formative assessment as integral to the process of recording adult learning; details of a national research and development project designed to improve formative assessment practices; excerpts from recent inspection reports commenting on formative assessment practices in the learning and skills sector.

Planning Learning and Recording Progress and Achievement^{xviii}

- 8.5** A practitioner guide for good practice in planning learning, recording progress and recording achievement, for all learners in adult literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). It applies to all types of provision, whatever the context or style of delivery and all kinds of learners, including adults with learning difficulties and disabilities.
- 8.6** The guide describes a process, involving both teacher and learners, to ensure that learning programmes meet learners’ needs and that their progress and achievements are recognised. The essential features of this process are drawn from practice developed over many years in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. The guide has been well received by co-ordinators and teachers of literacy, language and numeracy.

The Process in Outline

- Establishing a starting point

- Setting goals and targets
- Planning teaching and learning activities
- Reviewing progress
- Final assessment and review
- Planning the next step
- Setting new targets for returning learners

Formative assessment as integral to the process

8.7 Formative assessment is integral to the planning and recording process, as illustrated by selected elements of two phases in the process:

Planning teaching and learning activities

- Planning teaching and learning activities using: (i) Learners' targets - Make sure the learners understand how each activity relates to their goals and targets; Involve the learners as much as possible in the planning of their learning. (ii) Information from initial and diagnostic assessments - Plan activities and choose, or create, materials that are pitched at the right level for the learners' different skills; Design activities that suit the learners' preferred ways of working.
- Build in opportunities to check progress with the learner: making time to check learners' progress in the skills and understanding that make up their targets during session activities and at the end of each session; Asking learners to record what they have learnt at the end of the session and to comment on whether they need to do more work on the same skill; Planning time for individual discussion at regular intervals throughout the learner's programme to review progress towards their targets and goals
- Build in opportunities for learners' to provide evidence of their achievements: this may mean planning opportunities for observation of learners' performance, for example – activities that enable the teacher to assess, and record learner's speaking and listening skills; the use of a learning journal or a portfolio to record learners' self- reflection.

Reviewing progress

- Plan time with the learner to reflect on learning and progress. This should include: time during each session to reflect on learning and progress within that session; time set aside at appropriate intervals to allow the learner and teacher to stand back from immediate work and reflect on progress. Review may include: 1:1 review with the teacher; Review by the learner; Peer-review with other learners; Time for the whole group to reflect on their learning with the teacher
- Check progress against learners' targets. At the regular review the learner and teacher should discuss and agree: which targets have been achieved; what new targets are needed to progress towards the learners' goals; whether the targets need to be revised; learning that was not planned; identification of support needs not identified earlier
- Keep a written record. It needs to be accessible and meaningful to the learner and anyone else who may need to use it. It should include the learner's views. Learners' involvement can be prompted in the paperwork through: questions that encourage discussion and evaluation of unplanned learning and application of learning outside the class; questions that encourage

reflection and evaluation of the learning that has taken place, the methods, resources and any additional support given.

Recognition and Recording of Progress and Achievement

Introduction

- 8.8** The Recognition and Recording of Progress and Achievement (RARPA) describes an approach to quality assurance that places formative assessment at its centre.
- 8.9** RARPA applies to providers in the post-school sector for non-accredited provision. The term ‘non-accredited’ denotes all provision in the Learning and Skills sector that does not lead to a qualification or to an externally-accredited certificate. ‘Externally accredited’ means that the certificate is awarded by an organisation independent of the provider of the programme.
- 8.10** The RARPA approach is made up of two elements:
- The application of an explicit and common process to the recognition and recording of progress and achievement
 - The validation of the consistent and effective application of this process

The project brief

- 8.11** The overall vision for the project envisages: ‘a learner-focused system of recognising both anticipated and unanticipated learning outcomes arising from non-accredited programmes. Quality systems in relation to RARPA will be robust, fit for purpose and meet each learner’s needs. Providers will use the approach as a tool for quality improvement and to increase recognition of learner achievement.’

Elements of the process

- 8.12** The process comprises five elements:
1. Aim(s) appropriate to an individual learner or groups of learners
 2. Initial assessment to establish the learner’s starting point.
 3. Identification of appropriately challenging learning objectives: initial, renegotiated and revised.
 4. Recognition and recording of progress and achievement during programme (formative assessment): tutor feedback to learners, learner reflection, progress reviews
 5. End of programme learner self-assessment; tutor summative assessment; review of overall progress and achievement. This will be in relation to appropriately challenging learning objectives identified at the beginning/during the programme. It may include recognition of learning outcomes not specified during the programme.

Impact On Staff

- 8.13** Tutors played a key role in implementing the process, and it worked best when presented to learners as an integral part of the process of teaching and learning. The great majority of tutors involved in the projects were enthusiastic about the benefits of the RARPA approach to their learners. Newly appointed staff were generally more enthusiastic about RARPA than more experienced tutors.
- 8.14** There was a concern across most providers that the process could generate bureaucracy demands if it became over-dependent on paper-based methods of recording progress and achievement. However, most staff were content that a proper balance between learning activities and the recording of progress and achievement had been established.

Impact On Learners

- 8.15** Many providers reported enthusiasm from learners about setting goals and following progress towards them. Benefits identified by learners included better motivation, faster progress and better engagement in learning. The process seems to be a major benefit to learners with previously negative experiences of learning, where gains in self-confidence and positive attitudes to learning were reported.
- 8.16** Some providers questioned whether the individualised approach to the staged process was appropriate in all cases. Other providers found it difficult to identify clear learning objectives for some groups of learners (eg. basic skills learners or homeless people).

Improving formative assessment: national research and development

Introduction

- 8.17** A national three year project (2005 – 2008), ‘Improving Formative Assessment’ (IFA) undertaken by the Universities of Exeter and Brighton, NRDC, the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, and the Learning and Skills Development Agency. The project builds upon the work of the Assessment Reform Group on formative assessment in compulsory schooling, and will evaluate whether and how principles of formative assessment developed by the ARG for the school sector should be amended to suit post 14 contexts.

Context

- 8.18** The ARG has incorporated principles and practices of formative assessment in schools into a theory of ‘assessment for learning’, and devised a successful approach to changing teachers’ practice (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Black and Wiliam, 2003; Black et al, 2004; Wiliam et al, 2004). Their work identifies gains to students’ achievement once teachers regard formative assessment as ‘assessment for learning’, and offers strategies for sharing the practical implications with teachers and non-academic audiences (Black and Wiliam, 2003; Wiliam et al, 2004). Barriers to changing practice include high stakes testing, lack of resources for staff development, poor managerial support within institutions and conceptual and practical confusion amongst teachers (Black et al, 2003; Black, 2004).
- 8.19** The Kings-Medway-Oxford Formative Assessment Project (Black 2003), together with problem-based post-16 development projects show the potential and limitations of changing teachers’ formative assessment practices in higher, further and adult education (Ecclestone and Swann,

1998; 1999; Ecclestone and Hall, 2002). Studies by Morgan and Robbins illuminate factors that need to be taken into account in changing formative assessment in alternative curricula for young people (Morgan and Robbins, 2003; 2004).

8.20 Ecclestone has developed a model connecting formative assessment to different types of autonomy and motivation. This offers more precise measures of learner autonomy than general notions of ‘learner centred-ness’ or ‘independent learning’, and reveals more subtle types of motivation than those encompassed by simple distinctions between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In a two-year study, she applied this model to the assessment regime of the Advanced General National Vocational Qualification in further education (FE) colleges and showed how teachers and students conceptualised and practised formative assessment. Formative assessment was dominated by the demands of summative assessment and awarding body regulation, and also by low expectations of students’ potential for autonomy and motivation (Ecclestone, 2002; Ecclestone and Hall, 2000; Ecclestone, 2004a).

8.21 The Learning and Skills Research Centre has recently published research on the impact of different modes of assessment on achievement and progress in the learning and skills sector.^{xix} Whilst the study did not focus on either adult basic skills or formative assessment practices several findings are pertinent to this report:

- Assessment methods *per se* do not directly affect learners’ choice of award or likelihood of success
- The move towards criterion-referenced and competence-based assessment, which has underpinned the move towards greater transparency of learning outcomes and the criteria by which they are judged, has significantly benefited learners in the Learning and Skills Sector - in terms of the numbers of learners retained in the system and the awards which they achieve.
- The clearer the tasks of how to achieve a grade or award becomes, and the more detailed the assistance given by tutors and assessors, the more likely candidates are to succeed: but succeed at what? Transparency of objective, coupled with extensive use of coaching and practice to help learners meet them, is in danger of removing the challenge of learning and reducing the quality and validity of outcomes achieved.

The Project

8.22 The IFA project examines how changes to teachers’ formative assessment practices affect learners’ motivation, autonomy and achievement in programmes for basic skills, citizenship and personal education, and vocational education. The project includes a systematic literature review of research, followed by a programme of development work with teachers in post-14 and post-compulsory settings. In addition, a pre-project and post-project questionnaire to students will evaluate types of motivation and autonomy in relation to exit and entry achievements and the effects of changes to formative assessment. Development projects will comprise interviews, observation and questionnaires to students and staff in 14 small projects.

8.23 The project focuses on three areas:

- basic skills provision embedded in academic and vocational qualifications or offered as discrete literacy and numeracy courses
- vocational qualifications at key stage 4
- personal and social skills programmes

8.24 The research will:

- evaluate whether theoretical understanding of the principles of formative assessment have to be translated in context-specific ways for post-14 and post-compulsory settings
- evaluate whether changes to formative assessment improve students' motivation, autonomy and educational achievements
- develop teachers' and learners' formative assessment practices through a problem-based approach to staff development
- highlight factors that help and hinder the development of teachers' practice in different contexts

8.25 Outputs:

- knowledge of the principles and practice of formative assessment in post-14 and post-compulsory qualification systems
- quantitative and qualitative evidence of the links between students' achievement, autonomy and motivation and formative assessment in different contexts
- indicators of successful formative assessment in different contexts
- qualitative evidence of the factors that help and hinder change to teachers' assessment practice in different contexts
- insight into how to amend assessment systems and qualifications in order to promote formative assessment
- guidance for staff development and initial teacher education programmes

Inspection Reports

Skills for Life in colleges: one year on (Ofsted: 2005)

8.26 From the Ofsted summary of inspections of General Further Education (GFE) Colleges and Independent Specialist Colleges (ISC):

- The setting and monitoring of individual targets using individual learning plans (ILPs) are major weaknesses in GFE colleges, ISCs and FE teacher education (p. 3)
- Initial screening is followed up with more detailed diagnostic testing to implement individual programmes for students. Staff are usually made aware of their students' literacy and numeracy levels and many use the information to inform their planning (p.6).
- In all colleges, there is a wide range of quality in the targets that are set for learning, including the consideration of nationally recognised awards. Monitoring of students' progress is often infrequent and there are too few detailed records of their learning. The language of the documentation for tracking progress is often too difficult for learners to understand if their first language is not English (p. 6).
- Good assessment and target setting are characterised by:
 - effective use of ILPs, in language that the student can understand
 - skilful questioning to check understanding regularly
 - constructive and positive written and verbal feedback

- clear, specific targets (e.g. use commas appropriately, rather than improve punctuation.)
- recording of learning rather than activities (e.g. can use ‘their’, ‘they’re’ and ‘there’ appropriately, rather than ‘completed worksheet 2 on homophones’.)
- students’ awareness of their targets and progress
- regular review of the ILP with the student, amending targets if necessary (p. 7)

Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2004-5: Adult Learning Inspectorate

8.27 The report of the Chief Inspector included the following observations bearing on formative assessment in the learning and skills sector:

- ‘Negligible progress in . . . improving staffing and assessment arrangements and placing learning in a practical context which has relevance for the learner’ (pp. 8-9).
- Of adult and community learning: ‘insufficient attention given to initial assessment and assessing progress thereafter against clearly expressed personal objectives (p. 20).
- Of work-based learning: ‘persistent problems in . . . initial assessment, ongoing assessment of competence and the planning and management of learning’ (p. 23).
- Of Adult and Community learning: ‘many of the mechanisms essential for supporting the new breed of learners were cumbersome – advice and guidance, initial assessment and learning support’ (p. 29).

Literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages: a survey of current practice in post-16 and adult provision (2003): Ofsted, ALI.

8.28 From the 2003 Ofsted report on post 16 and adult basic skills provision:

- Executive summary: ‘Weaknesses in initial assessment and the poor quality of most individual learning plans mean that it is difficult to assess the progress of individual learners, especially those who are not working towards external accreditation’ (p. 3).
- ‘The quality of assessment of learners’ progress and achievement in literacy, numeracy and ESOL is poor in all sectors. In many cases, neither the learners nor their teachers know what progress they have made. Even more often, learners cannot see how what they have learnt is useful to them in their work, their studies or their life in general’ (p.5).
- ‘In most provision, many tutors do not identify learners’ precise learning needs and, when planning their learning, do not set specific learning targets. Many tutors do not understand the different functions of screening tests and diagnostic assessments’ (p. 11.).
- Quality of teaching and training: ‘In all sectors of provision, where teaching and learning are good, planning is thorough, the needs of all the individual learners are met, an appropriate range of activities and learning materials is used, tutors employ skilful questioning techniques, they give constructive feedback and the learning is made relevant (p. 19).
- ‘The best providers carry out a comprehensive initial assessment of learners’ literacy, numeracy and language skills. . . Detailed ILPs are then drawn up, based on the results of initial assessment. In the best work-based provision, initial assessment forms part of an extended induction. In some colleges, skilled practitioners are used to carry out follow-up diagnostic assessments and to develop ILPs.’

- ‘Almost all providers carry out some form of initial assessment, but this is often just a screening test The information is not always used to develop ILPs and vocational teachers make little use of the results of initial assessments when planning their lessons.’
- ‘ILPs are generally weak across the sector. They do not contain specific short- and long term targets. Targets are frequently vague and expressed too generally such as ‘improve writing skills’ The weakest ILPs are usually found in ESOL, work-based provision and learning support....At the very best colleges, ILPs are reviewed regularly and they are clearly understood working documents. Targets are referenced to the national standards, but they are written in language learners can understand and learners are closely involved in reviewing and monitoring their targets. Learners in these colleges have a clear understanding of the progress that they have made and what they need to do to improve further. In many colleges, however, learning plans are not reviewed effectively and learners do not feel part of the review process. Many learners are unaware of their targets and the progress that they have made.’
- ‘Assessment is sometimes used in constructive ways to develop learners’ understanding. The standard of marking and of the feedback given to students varies and is largely dependent on the skill and expertise of the tutor. Some learners’ folders contain work that has not been marked or work that has been ticked, but where no suggestions for improvement have been given. Too few tutors recognise that marking is a skill which, when used well, can promote good learning. Internal verification systems usually meet awarding-body requirements on externally accredited courses, but internal verification is not always carried out on non-accredited programmes A small number of colleges are . . .working with others in their locality to develop an internal moderation system to ensure standards of assessment are consistently high.’ (pp. 19-20.)

9. FINAL REMARKS

Formative assessment is now an established feature of much teaching and learning practice in adult literacy, language and numeracy, and it is also a regular item on the agenda of policy and research communities. That itself represents a substantial advance. We understand what makes for good formative assessment, and there are many teachers and organisations for whom this is now standard practice. At the same time, formative assessment remains vulnerable to competing priorities, not least the related matter of summative assessment, which it ought ideally to complement, but which is too often the overwhelmingly dominant preoccupation, leading to ‘teaching to the test’. There is still some way to go.

NOTES

ⁱ See Derrick, J., 2004, Making the grade: assessment and achievement in adult literacy, numeracy and language, in Lavender, P., et al, *Testing, Testing* NIACE.

ⁱⁱ Paras 3.5 – 3.31 are extracts from The Skills for Life survey: A national needs and impact survey of literacy, numeracy and ICT Skills (DfES, 2003)

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Level 2 is broadly equivalent to GCSE at grades A* to C; level 3 to A-level; Below level 2 there are four bands to show increasing competence in literacy/numeracy skills: three 'entry' level bands 1, 2 and 3, followed by level 1. (Compare with the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS): tests identified three dimensions of literacy, - prose, documentary and quantitative literacy, and the results were banded into five levels of attainment, of which level one was the lowest, and level five the highest. Level three was deemed to be a suitable minimum for coping with everyday life and work in a complex society.)

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- iv New Light on Literacy and Numeracy (summary report), NRDC, 2006: pp. 25-28.
- v Does Numeracy Matter More? NRDC 2005.
- vi Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2004, 05, Adult Learning Inspectorate, 2005, pp. 8-9.
- vii Study of the Impact of the *Skills for Life* learning infrastructure on learners, Interim Report, NRDC, 2006
- viii Success for All: Reforming Further Education and Training, DfES, 2002:
- ix Skills Alliance: Skills Strategy Progress Report, DfES, 2004
- x 14-19 Education and Skills Summary, DfES, 2005.
- xi Every Child Matters, DfES, 2003
- xii p.7, Summary.
- xiii Peter Lavender, Director of research, development and information at NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education), in *Testing, Testing*, p. 5.
- xiv Lavender, P., op. cit.: p.7
- xv Paras 7.9 - 7.11 from Commentary – Qualifications.
- xvi Paras 7.9 - 7.11 from Commentary – Qualifications.
- xvii Herrington, M., and Kendall, A., 2005, *Insights from Research and Practice – a Handbook for Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL Practitioners*, NIACE
- xviii Grief, S., et al, ((2003) Planning learning and recording progress and achievement: a guide for practitioners, DfES.
- xix Torrance, H., et al, (2005) *The impact of different modes of assessment on achievement and progress in the learning and skills sector*, Learning and Skills Research Centre

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