

# Work, Society and Lifelong Literacy

Report of the inquiry into adult literacy in England

September 2011

# Contents

Foreword.....	3
1. The Inquiry.....	4
2. Our evidence.....	6
2.1. Where are we now? Our literature search.....	6
1. The Skills for Life Strategy.....	6
2. Literacy levels across the population.....	6
3. The impact of low literacy skills.....	7
4. Literacy demands on individuals, organisations, workplaces, communities and families in a period of economic challenge.....	7
5. International comparisons.....	8
6. What we might learn from other countries.....	8
7. Ongoing challenges.....	8
2.2. Responses from the field – and our analysis.....	9
1. What works for adult literacy learners?.....	9
2. Challenges.....	10
3. Training and development for a diverse workforce in multiple sectors.....	11
4. Addressing cycles of intergenerational literacy difficulties.....	12
5. Joining up policies, processes and providers.....	12
6. Diverse groups of people and contexts require different responses.....	13
7. Relevant and appropriate measures of success.....	13
8. Working with organisations, agencies and the media to increase awareness and motivation.....	14
9. Research.....	14
3. Conclusions.....	15
4. Recommendations.....	16
5. Acknowledgements.....	20
6. Glossary.....	21

# Foreword

When NIACE asked me last year to chair an independent Commission to look at adult literacy ten years after the launch of the Skills for Life Strategy and twelve years after the publication of the Moser report, I was delighted to accept. The topic has been a strong personal interest of my wife and myself for many years. I am very grateful to NIACE staff for their expertise, and also for the many thoughtful contributions from individuals and organisations, which are available on the inquiry website. I am particularly grateful for the work of my fellow Commissioners.

Our basic message is that we need to keep up our national investment in adult literacy, not just for economic reasons, but because in today's world no-one can function fully without good communication skills. We should all be concerned that such exclusion contributes to personal misery and civil dysfunction. The causes are complex, and so must be the remedies,

requiring attention to pedagogy, a holistic approach to family literacy, and challenge initiatives to tap into the creativeness of society as a whole, while of course maintaining our existing effort through colleges and at the workplace.

The fact that this is far from simple does not excuse us from failure to attempt it. We have a moral duty to do so, until the job is finished, and this becomes a problem of the past, rather than, as now, a scar on our society.



*Tim Boswell*

*“Being unable to read or write... took away my ability to choose how I interacted with the outside world.  
Can’t read; can’t vote; don’t have choices.”*

*(Linda Worden, learner and Commissioner)*

## 1 The Inquiry

Ten years after the introduction of the Skills for Life Strategy, which aimed to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of 2¼ million adults by 2010, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) launched an independent inquiry into the state of adult literacy in England. We appointed a group of twelve commissioners, chaired by Lord Boswell of Aynho, to guide the work. We wanted to discover how to respond to the current challenges faced by adults with under-developed literacy skills as well as seek ways of preventing the need for adult literacy initiatives and campaigns in future. Our focus was on adult provision and not on schools. We conducted a literature review, held expert seminars and focus groups and invited stakeholders to contribute papers, asking key questions about the successes on which to build as well as areas for

development. The full evidence, including all papers, contributions and analysis can be found on the NIACE website:

<http://www.niace.org.uk/literacy-inquiry>

We agreed a working definition of what we mean by adult literacy as:

*Literacy is the ability to read and write, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, to use information and digital technologies, as individual family members, workers and citizens.*

We agreed that purposes of literacy are broad and dynamic, contributing to individual fulfilment, social coherence and mobility as well as

economic prosperity. Literacy embraces the fast-moving, multi-modal communications environment which equips us to engage critically in 'Reading the word and the world'<sup>1</sup>

Our findings, analysis, conclusions and detailed recommendations are set out in this report. The study leads us to suggest the following priority actions:

- **The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) must work with the Department of Work and Pensions, local authorities, further education colleges and providers, higher education and professional bodies to continue to raise standards of teaching and learning.**
- **The Department for Education (DfE), working with BIS and local authorities must break down cycles of intergenerational difficulties with literacy through family literacy and learning programmes.**
- **BIS and DfE, working with employers, trades unions and civil society organisations should explore environments, opportunities and pedagogies which reach and respond to those who are currently under-represented in provision, through the development of a Challenge Fund.**

---

<sup>1</sup>Freire, P. and Macedo, D. (1987) *Reading the Word and the World*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

# 2 Our evidence

## 2.1 Where are we now? Our literature search

The Moser Report of 1999,<sup>2</sup> identified that 7 million people in England did not have the confidence, knowledge and skills to deal competently with the demands of reading and writing needed in daily life and work. The report prompted the government to create the Skills for Life strategy (2001) which has achieved enormous success through investment in a wide range of activities.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. The Skills for Life strategy

The scale of investment in Post-16 Literacy, Language and Numeracy since the launch of the strategy was estimated, by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, to reach £9 billion<sup>4</sup> by 2011. The strategy has overseen the development of National Curricula; supported the development of initial and diagnostic assessment tools; set standards and qualifications for literacy, language and numeracy teachers; supported Initial Teacher Training and a substantial Continuing Professional Development programme and established a National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

<sup>2</sup> Sir Claus Moser (1999) *A Fresh Start*. London: Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).

<sup>3</sup> DfEE (2009) *Skills for life, The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy*; (Third report of sessions 2008–09, 29 January 2009).

<sup>4</sup> House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009) *Skills for Life: Progress in improving adult literacy and numeracy* (Third report of session 2008–09; 29 January 2009).

(NRDC). National learner qualifications were created, along with teaching materials and resources. A media campaign was also launched.

By 2008/2009, 5.7 million adults had taken up over 12 million learning opportunities, and over 2.8 million adults had gained a first qualification.<sup>5</sup> A Skills for Life Survey (2003)<sup>6</sup> revealed revised data, indicating that, in England, 1 in 6 (16 per cent / 5.2 million) of 16–65 year olds did not have the literacy skills to enable them to function effectively in modern society.

### 2. Literacy levels across the population

Research reveals strong links between low literacy, poverty and disadvantage.<sup>7</sup> While people with entry level 3 skills are just as likely to be men as women, the 2003 survey did find differences across the population. It found **older people** tended to **have lower levels of literacy** and fewer qualifications overall than younger people. The North East, London, Yorkshire and Humberside and the West Midlands **regions reported higher numbers of people with lower levels of literacy achievement** than other English regions. The survey found that people with lower-level literacy skills were **likely to live in areas of multiple**

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009) p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> DfES (2003) *The Skills for Life Survey, 2003*, Research Report 490. London: DfES.

<sup>7</sup> Bynner, J. and Parsons, S. (2007) *Illuminating Disadvantage: Profiling the experiences of adults with Entry level literacy or numeracy over the lifecourse*. London: NRDC.

**deprivation**, with almost 40 per cent of respondents living in the most deprived 20 per cent of the country. Employed people operating at **entry level 2 or below were likely to be in routine work**. Surprisingly, the survey reported that one-third of people in higher managerial or professional occupations did not achieve level 2 or above, indicating that **literacy learning can be challenging for a wide range of people**. Few people appear to regard their reading and writing skills as below average, with over half of those adults with entry level 1 or lower skills suggesting that their everyday reading ability was very or fairly good. There is also some evidence that **dyslexia is strongly concentrated amongst those adults operating at entry level 2**.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. The impact of low literacy skills

Many adult literacy learners report **a lack of confidence**,<sup>9</sup> evidenced by feelings of being ‘outside the norm’ in terms of life circumstances. They report poor experiences of traditional educational system/settings, with some history of trauma that can impact on learning e.g bullying or ill health.

Longitudinal research studies<sup>10</sup> show that those with limited literacy face increasing **problems as they get older**. They are more likely than those with good or average skills to be **unemployed or in jobs with low income and poor prospects** of promotion. They are more likely to be in **poor health or suffer from depression**. Similar studies<sup>11</sup> show that individuals

<sup>8</sup> Bynner, J. and Parsons, S. (2006) *New Light on Literacy and Numeracy*. London: NRDC.

<sup>9</sup> NRDC (2006) *Relating adults' lives and learning: participation and engagement in different settings*. London: NRDC.

<sup>10</sup> Bynner, J. and Parsons, S. (1995) *It Doesn't Get any Better – the impact of poor basic skills on the lives of 37-year-olds*. London: The Basic Skills Agency.

<sup>11</sup> Bynner, J. and Parsons, S. (2007) *Illuminating disadvantage: Profiling the experiences of adults with Entry level literacy or numeracy over the lifecourse*. London: NRDC.

with literacy skills at or below entry level 2 experience substantially worse life chances, quality of life and social inclusion. **Children of parents with poor skills are also more likely to have poor skills**.

Although there is evidence that having good **literacy and numeracy skills has a positive impact on earnings, employment, health and well-being**, there is less evidence on the economic returns to attaining literacy skills in adulthood.<sup>12</sup>

### 4. Literacy demands on individuals, organisations, workplaces, communities and families in a period of economic challenge

Identification of the literacy demands for living and working in 2011 is a neglected topic. This year, the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC) survey includes questions around the literacy (and numeracy) demands adults face in the workplace but the results will not be available until late 2012.

**A complex combination of skills** is demanded for living and working in 2011, embracing critical thinking and problem solving, as well as new skills such as multimodal communication, using digital technology, collaborative writing, online networking and use of mobile phones. Employers frequently cite the need for (improved) reading, writing and maths skills in the workplace,<sup>13</sup> and report a significant **gap between the skills levels of employees and skills needs in the workplace**.

<sup>12</sup> NRDC and SQW (2011) ‘Review of evidence on adult literacy and numeracy: summary for BIS project board’. 25 May 2011.

<sup>13</sup> The *CBI Employment Trends Survey 2008*, revealed around 50 per cent of employers were dissatisfied with the literacy and numeracy skills of school-leavers and around one-fifth were dissatisfied with the literacy and numeracy skills of graduates.

## 5. International comparisons

According to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) (2009),<sup>14</sup> of 34 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the UK is 17th on ‘low’ level skills; 18th on ‘intermediate’ level skills; and 12th on ‘high’ level skills. The Commission argues that too many people are in danger of being left behind: **one in eight of adults of working age have no qualifications; more than a quarter are not qualified to level 2;** and almost half are not qualified above level 2.

Obtaining accurate comparative statistics on literacy rates is difficult. One data set is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an OECD comparison of students’ performance at 15 years in reading, maths and science. Whilst PISA data for the UK has been challenged, some conclusions suggest the country is ‘falling down the league table’. The OECD suggests that performance of the UK over the past decade is probably ‘flat’, but cautions that any statistical model “...is always an approximation of reality.”<sup>15</sup>

## 6. What we might learn from other countries

Drawn from our brief analysis (<http://www.niace.org.uk/literacy-inquiry>) there is some evidence which provides insight as to why countries at the top of education (schools) league tables seem to perform particularly well. The diverse countries of Singapore, Finland and Korea reveal indicators, including: **strong investments in initial education; highly trained,**

<sup>14</sup> UKCES (2009) *Ambition 2020 World Class Skills and Jobs in the UK*. London: UKCES.

<sup>15</sup> The note re PISA is taken from a Radio 4 programme, *More or Less*, led by Tim Harford, on 22 April 2011.

**respected and rewarded teachers; cultures of lifelong learning which begin in schools; support from families and high levels of autonomy for teachers in relation to how their pedagogies respond to their pupils. They also have strong education policies, realising that these are key to their economic survival.**

England may have led the world in investment in adult literacy policy and practice, at least in its open and transparent approach to the problems which we may share with many other advanced countries. It is very difficult to compare the challenges of literacy in one language with another, but examining evidence from seven countries, as well as PISA results, the following key messages could help to inform future development.

A highly **trained and qualified teaching workforce** is a priority. Developing **networks and partnerships** of interested organisations and agencies, including employers, as well as a diversity of providers is vital to working across policy domains and opening up reach and access. Setting **goals to increase participation** is felt to be very helpful. Developing and recognising **social as well as human capital** is important and **initial and re-assessment** can offer a way to measure improvement and progress, without relying on qualifications. **Persistence** with learning is a key to individual success; this means continuing, but not necessarily continuous engagement. However ways of tracking multiple learning episodes and the summation of their outcomes must be developed.

## 7. Ongoing challenges

England has much to celebrate and share from its strategic investment in adult literacy. Nevertheless research has evidenced both neglected areas and some previously unidentified challenges:

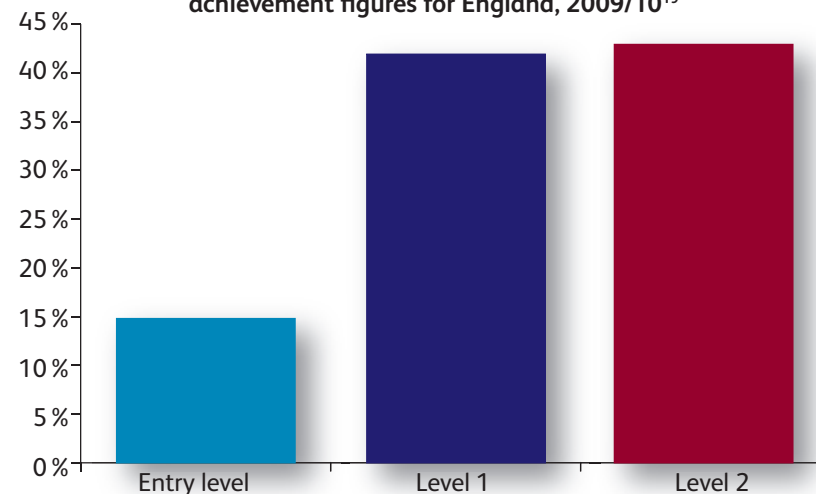


- the percentage of adults who participate in learning is still relatively small;<sup>16</sup>
- a high proportion of qualifications achieved at entry level are by learners who did not progress to a higher level;<sup>17</sup>
- many of the qualifications achieved at levels 1 and 2 did not represent progress for individuals but offered recognition and accreditation of what learners could already do.<sup>18</sup>
- the balance of provision is skewed towards those at or above functional levels of literacy. An analysis of BIS/Skills Funding Agency participation and achievement figures for England<sup>19</sup> reveals that of the 950,700 literacy learners participating in 2009/10 (see also chart opposite):
  - Entry level learners = 149,800 (15 per cent)
  - Level 1 learners = 418,300 (42 per cent)
  - Level 2 learners = 435,600 (43 per cent)

This data broadly reflects the distribution of literacy levels across the population, as indicated by the Skills for Life Survey, 2003. However, if the aim of provision is to support people to reach functional literacy levels then provision should be weighted towards those at the lower levels.

<sup>16</sup> For example, only one in five offenders with an identified literacy or numeracy need enrol on a course. House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009).  
<sup>17</sup> Evidence submitted to the Inquiry at the Expert Seminars.  
<sup>18</sup> Evidence presented to the Inquiry from expert seminar on Measuring Success, 21 March 2011.  
<sup>19</sup> BIS/SFA (2010) *FE and Skills – Learners’ Skills for Life Participation 2005/6–2009/10*. Table S6.1 Learner volumes. London: BIS.

Analysis of BIS/Skills Funding Agency participation and achievement figures for England, 2009/10<sup>19</sup>



A new Skills for Life Survey is about to report, eight years on from the 2003 survey, which will provide new and updated insights and data.

## 2.2 Responses from the field – and our analysis

### 1. What works for adult literacy learners?

*“We must recognise that literacy is broad [multi-layered] and includes activities related to work and home life as well as such things as creative writing and the joy of reading.”*

(Focus group, Newcastle)

Evidence of ‘what works’ included **flexible, individualised approaches** within small groups, which offer friendly, fun, informal and **small steps to learning**. Respondents cited the importance of contextualised, relevant materials and curricula, **embedded approaches, embracing**

ICTs and using multiple teaching and learning strategies which include **confidence-building and raising aspiration**. They suggested that trained, enthusiastic, **skilled teachers** were essential and **working in partnerships** with intermediaries was productive. They felt that using **different ways of recognising learning**, not just through a final test were helpful. Some contributors highlighted the importance of **Whole Organisation Approaches** which involve providers in acknowledging the priority of literacy (and numeracy) and seeking ways of embedding and integrating their development across the organisation.

Equally, respondents were clear about **what is not working**.

They suggested that **learning driven by qualifications** rather than the learners can distort who is included in learning. (37.94 per cent of all Skills for Life qualifications funded through the LSC in 2006/7 were awarded to 16–18-year-olds who are not necessarily a priority target group). The qualification-led funding methodology may have led to the recruitment of learners whose journeys to a qualification were the shortest, unintentionally **excluding those who might take a long time to achieve**.

Respondents also believed that approaches which appear to blame individuals for a lack of skills, or unemployment (where there are few job opportunities) and label them as ‘failures’ are exceedingly unhelpful.

Other learners may have been **excluded because they are not at the ‘right’ level of learning** (i.e. within easy access of gaining a level 1 or 2 qualification).

Some reports suggested that **writing, speaking and listening can be neglected**, as the national literacy qualification focuses on reading.

Some teachers have felt unable to take up professional qualifications due to availability of time and accessibility of opportunities.

There were suggestions from some teaching staff that gaps between levels of achievement are too great for many learners, meaning they can’t progress up a level, in the funded time available.

Many reported they are **unable to use ICTs** due to lack of training and equipment or technical support.

Contributors were very concerned about **funding reductions** which will remove ‘weighting’ for adult literacy from August 2011, and lead to large groups, reduced provision and less responsive teaching and learning.

Reports suggested that workplace delivery for SMEs in particular is difficult to fund and provide.

## **2. Challenges**

In response to questions about challenges, contributors suggested that some **particular groups of people are not widely involved** in learning. They include adults with learning difficulties; those with mental health difficulties; adults involved in drugs and alcohol addiction; homeless people, those who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) or at some of the lowest entry levels of achievement.

**Time for outreach** was identified as a challenge as well as a need for information, advice and guidance, including well-trained and informed intermediaries.

Reports indicated the **huge challenges faced in the light of the fact that 48 per cent of offender learners have literacy skills at or below level 1.**

Reference was made to the difficulties of addressing the needs of **older people**, especially those who are likely to be in work for much longer than in the past, as well as marrying the demands of employers and the workplace with the personal needs and interests of individuals. Some reports indicated the challenges presented by **intergenerational literacy difficulties** and associated cycles of disadvantage.

Submissions from the British Army pointed out the great advantages of the new functional skills, whilst recognising they might not be appropriate for all adult learners. **Digital literacy and e-learning** challenges were identified, along with concerns about the shortage of skills and experience of teachers and a lack of ICT equipment.

Overall, contributors felt that a focus on skills for employment only, negated the **diverse purposes for which adults learn literacy**. They believed this emphasis must change in order to tap into motivations and assist the development of all learners.

Some welfare and employment agencies and organisations that are working in programmes dealing with education and training appear to have expectations, systems and processes which conflict with those in the adult teaching and learning sectors. Respondents recorded how working in such **partnerships is challenging** and time-consuming.

### **3. Training and development for a diverse workforce in multiple sectors**

A substantial number of **teachers are still not qualified** at the appropriate levels, so initial training remains a priority.<sup>20</sup> Evidence suggested that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is vital for all teachers, including ways of using the curricula in creative and flexible ways; understanding and responding to dyslexia; developing effective and appropriate learning of phonics; embedding and integrating literacy into other forms of learning or activities (e.g. vocational programmes, finding work; looking for a home); developing speaking and listening skills; using ICTs and digital learning as well as ways of building the confidence of learners.

Similarly, responses suggested that adult literacy teachers should be equipped to **work with school or early years partners on family literacy** and that school staff must understand the intergenerational challenges and recognise the benefits of partnership working.

The demands of workplaces are not homogenous, and teachers need support in understanding both generic and specific aspects of business, commerce and trade environments, working alongside trade unions, Union-Learning Representatives and employers.

Some teachers and trainers in the voluntary and community sector and in work-based learning appear to have received fewer opportunities for both initial and ongoing development; they must be included in workforce development.

<sup>20</sup> LLUK (2010) *Recent Trends in the Initial Training of Teachers in Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL for the FE Sector in England*. London: LLUK.

Volunteers, including Union Learning Representatives and Community Learning Champions, make valuable contributions to rewarding learning experiences. Mentors or buddies could be extended to more adults. All **volunteers, however, need clear roles, training** and ongoing support and management from professional teachers trained for this purpose. Respondents reminded us of such programmes as Link Up which helped in the training of volunteers in supporting adult learners.<sup>21</sup>

#### **4. Addressing cycles of intergenerational literacy difficulties**

Some young adults continue to emerge from compulsory education without the necessary levels of literacy. **Schools alone cannot address the multiple disadvantages** faced by many families. The problems of intergenerational transfer of low literacy are well documented,<sup>22</sup> but working with adults and their children in family literacy programmes has demonstrated success.<sup>23</sup> In such programmes, children improve their literacy skills and adults improve not only their literacy skills but also their ability to support their children's learning.

Challenges relate to schools, adult and family literacy services working together. Ways forward must communicate clear outcomes for all partners. Time is needed to develop trust and understanding as well as to train all staff involved in delivering such programmes. Time is also needed to reach out to families with relevant and attractive opportunities. Nursery, early years' staff, Unionlearn representatives and local learning champions can be effective intermediaries.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/RB573>.

<sup>22</sup> Bynner and Parsons, 2008; De Coulon et al, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Brooks et al, 2002; Desforges, (2003) Ofsted, (2009); Swain et al (2009); Thomas (2009).

Diversity of imaginative opportunities is a key element in addressing intergenerational challenges, which must be supported by information, advice and guidance.

#### **5. Joining up policies, processes and providers**

Concerns were expressed about a **lack of understanding and co-operation between key policy implementers**, especially in relation to people who are not in work. They lamented a lack of knowledge about who might provide what in a particular geographical area, which could help 'sign-posters' and referral agencies to guide potential learners to the most appropriate and relevant providers. Some of the biggest challenges identified were between provision funded by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). Housing, welfare, employment, health, libraries and financial support agencies have key roles to play in networks of agencies and organisations concerned with adult literacy learning challenges and opportunities. More and better **Information, Advice and Guidance**, would assist such networks, but providers and practitioners need the time to make them work.

Many vocational education and training programmes have literacy learning embedded in them, but this is not a universal approach; respondents suggested that all such programmes should have related **literacy embedded** in them. Awarding and examining bodies could integrate the relevant literacy (and numeracy) in their awards. Responses suggested that the procurement of services for unemployed people; those for people moving from mental health services into wider community provision; contracts offering financial information and guidance as well as services procured by local authorities could be examined for **integrating literacy learning opportunities**.

## **6. Diverse groups of people and contexts require different responses**

Literacy difficulties impact upon people's lives in many different ways and situations, as well as on a large number of public policy areas. Bridging the gap between specialist services for homeless people; offenders and ex-offenders; young adults who are NEET; adults with learning difficulties and disabilities, older people; those experiencing drug and alcohol abuse or mental ill-health; Travellers, those out of work and adult and youth literacy programmes and opportunities is vital. This means **designing programmes in partnerships** involving providers, other organisations and the potential learners.

**New technologies can break down barriers**, open up new ways of learning, remove some of the stigma associated with low literacy achievement and motivate further learning. E-learning and blended learning can be particularly helpful in offender and ex-offender settings, but access and isolation can be challenging. Contributors said that the importance is to recognise diversity of purposes and motivations for learning whilst harnessing the powerful digital and e-learning tools.

Some evidence indicated how **Informal Adult and Community Learning (IACL) can be used to attract learners**, engage them in learning and identify areas for individual development. The value of reading groups in encouraging literacy as well as a love of learning was sharply argued. The creation of Quick Reads was seen as an essential contribution.

**Workplaces demand differentiated responses** in relation to learning content, timing, and work patterns and small and medium sized enterprises express different needs from larger employers.

Time and commitment to understand different workplace cultures and customs must be available, in order to benefit from co-operation, and develop responsive, effective and efficient provision.

## **7. Relevant and appropriate measures of success**

Recording and measuring success is far more than gaining a qualification, but any approaches must be reliable, valid and comparable. **Of 35 learners who reported to the Inquiry on their reasons for learning only one said "To gain a qualification."** All evidence received indicated how literacy gains involve increases in familial and social as well as human capital. Work in Canada indicates that other countries are also working to identify possible ways of measuring and recording success which are non-bureaucratic but responsive to what learners have achieved.<sup>24</sup> Functional Skills accreditation was welcomed by some respondents, but others felt that emphasis on vocational skills and employability did not match many learners' motivations and purposes. **Including speaking and listening** was felt to be an important aspect of any assessment.

The need for teachers to be highly skilled in **initial, formative and summative assessment** processes, was argued. However, there is a range of initial assessment tools, which have not been standardised, meaning that 'distance travelled' or progress from initial assessment is not

<sup>24</sup> Measures of Success in Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills: <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/projects/measures-success-workplace-literacy-and-essential-skills> accessed 15 August 2011

comparable or transferable. In recognition of the complex and busy lives of adults, unitised approaches to credit accumulation were felt to offer possible routes forward as long as they reflect adult rather than young people's needs. Some simple steps could begin to help to address the complexities of measuring success.

### ***8. Working with organisations, agencies and the media to increase awareness and motivation***

**Increasing demand is a vital** aspect of adult literacy development. All respondents recognised the importance of intermediaries. They know the importance of informed front-line services staff; co-operation with key agencies and the role of volunteers and champions, in raising awareness of the demands and opportunities associated with under-developed literacy skills. However, they cited difficulties in convincing some organisations of the role of poor literacy in relation to other issues. There are some exemplary organisations including libraries, museums and galleries; some health providers; trades unions and Union Learning Representatives as well as Community Learning Champions. Many adults

believe that learning is not for them because they found initial education so difficult. Drawing on **experiences of using mass media**, including TV (e.g. Ireland), as well as segmented marketing approaches, could help break down attitudinal barriers and raise awareness of opportunities. Exploring contributions of celebrity champions, to raise awareness, was also suggested

### ***9. Research***

NRDC, along with its partner institutions, has established a large body of researched evidence, not available before 2001. It has also demonstrated the necessity for continuing to update and increase insight into the complexity and diversity of this area of learning. Indicative suggestions for **future research** included an examination of: the needs of older people; what works best and for whom in relation to digital learning; the real social and economic gains of developing literacy for families and workplaces; how we can attract and successfully engage those learners who are under-represented in current provision and how our funding methodologies impact upon learners and learning.

# 3 Conclusions

Our analysis of the evidence gathered concluded that, whilst the challenges facing policy makers, providers and practitioners are different from those when Skills for Life was introduced in 2001, challenges remain to address current adult literacy learning requirements in England as well as minimise future difficulties. Adult literacy under-achievement impacts upon work, active citizenship, community and personal well-being as well as on families. The underlying causes of literacy difficulties are multiple and complex, demanding diverse and holistic responses rather than mechanistic skills approaches.

Some challenges relate to **equipping teachers**; others to our inability to **join up policies, practices and partnerships** across departmental and organisational silos. The evidence suggests that those adults with some of the lower levels of achievement, in the most challenging situations and with the biggest barriers to overcome have benefited least in the past. We cannot rely entirely on investment in schools to remove the challenges; the complexity of issues is testimony to that. **Family approaches must be supported, advocated and extended. Older people can find it difficult** to be motivated to engage in learning, because provision does not appear

relevant or convincing. Fostering a **positive attitude to lifelong learning**, in order that individuals and organisations can tap into learning at any life stage or life context, is vital.

Opportunities arise through partnerships and using new technologies. They emerge in different locations and organisations, supported by volunteers acting as buddies or mentors, under the guidance of well qualified and passionate teachers. Challenging schools, employers, trades unions and government agencies as well as voluntary organisations to work together can be exciting, demanding but rewarding.

We conclude that we must **review and change systems and processes as well as stimulate participation**. We must **continue to research** and discover what works best and for whom and to reveal the evidence of the impact literacy learning makes on individuals, families, their workplaces and society. Nudging people who are close to attaining required literacy levels, but also scooping deeper to engage those who might be disillusioned, detached and demoralised are essential.

# 4 Recommendations

In the light of the evidence gathered, our analysis and conclusions, we recommend the following adult literacy priority development areas:

## **1. The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) must work with the Department of Work and Pensions, local authorities, further education colleges and providers, higher education and professional bodies to raise standards of teaching and learning.**

---

They must:

- increase the number of qualified adult literacy teachers by offering varied and different modes of training;
- offer priority training in those sectors where least teacher development has taken place, particularly amongst Work-based Learning Providers and in the Voluntary and Community Sector;
- provide Continuing Professional Development opportunities for all teachers, including part-time staff, particularly in the use of digital learning and resources, blended approaches, and making the curriculum and accreditation work responsively for learners;

- train volunteers to act as assistants, buddies and mentors, Community Learning Champions and Union Learning Representatives to enhance the learning experience;
- train teachers to manage a range of people in civil society roles who support learners;
- support, through partnership work, development of different approaches to embedding and integrating literacy in education and training programmes and practice.

## **2. The Department for Education (DfE), working with BIS and local authorities, must help to break down cycles of intergenerational difficulties with literacy through family literacy and learning programmes.**

---

They must:

- work in partnership with primary schools and children's centres to train staff, raise awareness, provide information, and demonstrate the impact of adult literacy difficulties on children, to encourage and support commitment to family literacy;



- support and oversee provision of CPD for existing teaching and learning staff to improve the quality of provision and learning experiences;
- challenge every primary school to organise a family literacy learning programme;
- support family literacy teachers, IAG services and intermediaries to provide signposting to local lifelong learning opportunities and to encourage progression from family literacy programmes;
- recognise the important contribution of Family Learning – including Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy – to the development of adult literacy and numeracy skills, through the introduction of a separate, specific funding stream.

### **3. BIS and DfE, working with employers, trades unions and civil society organisations, should explore environments, opportunities and pedagogies which reach and respond to those who are currently under-represented in provision.**

---

They should:

- establish a Challenge Fund to develop innovative, intensive approaches to learning, for different learner cohorts, such as those who are in work, people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET), offenders, older people and Travellers, using for example, cross-sectoral promotion and delivery; blended learning; effective use of volunteers; mixed methods;

- ensure that some funds should be drawn from existing budgets, together with funds from DWP and other stakeholder government departments as well as contributions from business, commerce and the 3rd sector;
- monitor and evaluate the impact of such approaches, including cost efficiencies and distribute the outcomes widely;
- work with key organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Institute of Directors and the Federation of Small Businesses, trade unions and Unionlearn to support actively the development of workplaces as learning organisations, recognising the potential contributions of all staff and supporting them to develop literacy skills to contribute effectively, in a framework of lifelong learning;
- promote policies and practices that encourage providers of public, private and voluntary services (such as health, finance, welfare, housing, energy) working with trade unions and Unionlearn to make information and customer services accessible and responsive, using Plain English and such quality assurance models as the Crystal Mark.

### **4. BIS should lead on optimising effective organisational processes and structures, which help to join up policies and provision and ensure adequate resourcing.**

---

They should:

- support the joining up of policies from BIS, Department of Work and Pensions, DfE and Departments of Culture Media and Sport and

Communities and Local Government, as well as local delivery networks, to improve reach, effectiveness and efficiency and reduce unnecessary duplication;

- encourage the development of initiatives, such as Quick Reads, which bring together the public, private and voluntary sectors to use their particular experiences and expertise to support awareness raising, engagement of new learners, resourcing and delivery of learning opportunities;
- work with the Federation of Awarding Bodies to ensure every award and accreditation programme has literacy as an essential, integrated component;
- identify and implement ways of including a literacy imperative in procurement processes in national and local government delivery programmes;
- incentivise providers through the funding mechanisms to deliver and maintain literacy outcomes.

#### **5. BIS should support the development of a range of measures to identify and record success including:**

---

- initiating labour force surveys or longitudinal studies (cohort studies) to measure population impacts of literacy learning;

- updating the Skills for Life initial assessment, to develop a standardised suite of tools and processes to be used pre and post learning activities, in order to identify the distance travelled;
- developing processes which ensure that initial assessment results travel with the learner;
- developing participation measures for particular groups, especially those at entry levels, offenders, ex-offenders, those who are NEET, older people;
- actively promoting the use of unitisation of awards to create portfolios of recognition of achievement which travel with the learner.

#### **6. BIS must work with the media to raise awareness, demand and motivation to:**

---

- support initiatives which bring together private, public and voluntary agencies to use their particular expertise – Quick Reads and Adult Learners' Week are excellent examples;
- build upon research about learning champions, national celebrity champions, Union Learning Representatives, libraries and museums staff and intermediaries to recruit, educate and train local Community Learning Champions and mentors/buddies from business and commerce;

- mobilise awareness-raising programmes and processes for ‘front-line’ services, e.g. in health, housing, welfare, libraries, information and advice-giving organisations, and voluntary and community organisations with interests in specific groups of people and causes;
- work with radio and TV to develop story-lines as well as campaigns to raise awareness and encourage participation in learning;
- use procurement with leading media organisations to include promotional activities related to literacy and learning.

## 7. BIS should work with research and development organisations to carry out more research, such as:

---

- how we can reach, motivate and teach different groups of learners such as older people, NEETs, offenders, Travellers and gypsies;
- identifying the economic benefits of increasing reading and writing – to the individual, the family and the workplace;
- exploring what strategies, processes and practices create effective ways of joining up policies and practices, in the interest of reaching and teaching learners of adult literacy;
- holding regular (at least quinquennial) reviews of the impact of funding on the delivery of adult literacy learning provision, including outcomes and enhanced ability and performance.

*“... addressing adult literacy is not only vital for economic success, personal and collective fulfilment but is a moral imperative.”*

*(Tim Boswell)*



# 5 Acknowledgements

NIACE acknowledges the valuable contributions made freely and generously by the Commissioners, as well as by a large number of individuals and organisations, through writing papers and attending focus groups and expert seminars. This report is the result of their keen interest in adult literacy learners and learning.

A full list of contributors is available at  
<http://www.niace.org.uk/literacy-inquiry>

## Commissioners

Lord Boswell of Aynho (Chair)  
Barry Brooks, Group Strategy Director, Tribal  
Dr Gabrielle Cliff-Hodges, United Kingdom Literacy Association  
Professor Mary Hamilton, Lancaster University  
Pam Johnson, UNISON  
Seyi Obakin CEO, Centrepont  
Susan Pember, Director of Further Education, BIS  
Clare Riley, Microsoft Education  
Nick Sanders, Member of Council, University of Warwick  
Nick Stuart, Chair of NIACE Company Board  
Professor Lorna Unwin, Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies, Institute of Education, London  
Linda Worden, learner

## Observers

Alan Tuckett, former CEO, NIACE  
Carol Taylor, Director of Development and Research, NIACE

## Project Manager

Jan Novitzky, NIACE

## Specialist advisor to the Inquiry

Dr Janine Eldred, Senior Research Fellow, NIACE

# 6 Glossary

Dyslexia	The word ‘dyslexia’ is Greek in origin and means ‘difficulty with words’. Though the precise origins and meaning of the syndrome has attracted controversy, it is generally believed that dyslexia arises from a variation in the brain area that processes language-based information and affects the underlying skills that are needed for learning to read, write and spell. Symptoms are found in people from all socio-economic and education groups, from those who cannot read to those with higher education awards. It is estimated that about 4 per cent of the population is severely dyslexic, with a further 6 per cent having mild to moderate problems. (Source: Bynner and Parsons (2006) <i>New Light on Literacy and Numeracy</i> . London: NRDC.)	article from a tabloid newspaper and pick out their favourite programme from a TV guide but may read slowly with little understanding. They may not be able to find details for a plumber in an alphabetical index on line or in the yellow pages.
Entry level skills	Level 1 literacy skills are deemed to be the level of skill needed for adults to function effectively in society. Entry level skills are below Level 1. Level 2 skills are deemed to be equivalent to GCSE grades A–C. Adults may have reading writing speaking and listening skills at different levels. Someone with entry level reading skills may be able to read a short	Functional Skills Functional skills refer to those core elements of English, mathematics and ICT that provide individuals with the skills and abilities they need to operate confidently, effectively and independently in life, their communities and work. A new set of qualifications has been developed to assess these skills.
		Human Capital Human capital refers to the skills and qualifications held by individuals.
		National Research and Development Centre The National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) is an independent centre established by the Skills for Life Strategy to conduct research and development projects to improve literacy, numeracy, language and related skills and knowledge.

PISA	The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment surveys 15 year old students every three years to assess how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society.	Social capital	Social Capital refers to the participation in networks where values are shared so that people contribute to common goals.
Skills for Life Strategy	Skills for Life is the national strategy in England for improving adult literacy, language and numeracy skills. It was established in 2001 and set out how the Government would reach its target to improve the basic skill levels of 2.25 million adults between the launch of Skills for Life in 2001 and 2010.	Work-based learning	Work-based learning embraces programmes of learning based on the skills needed for work. It can include preparation for work skills.
		Workplace learning	Broadly speaking, workplace learning takes place in or through work. It can include formal as well as informal learning for personal development funded through the workplace.

Published by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), England and Wales

21 De Montfort Street  
Leicester LE1 7GE

© NIACE 2011

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without the written permission of the publishers, save in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties and disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

[www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

Company registration no. 2603322  
Charity registration no. 1002775

**niace**  
promoting adult learning

