The Skills for Life Strategy – successes and setbacks

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2011 population estimates

- 5.1 million people (15% of population) lack basic English
- 8.1 million people (24% of population) lack basic numeracy

The Skills for Life Strategy 2001

Aimed to:
- Boost demand
- Ensure capacity
- Raise standards
- Increase learner achievements
The strategy included:
- National advertising and promotion campaigns
- Engaging with employers
- Action across all government departments
- Funding for provision of learning opportunities
- Targets for achievement
- National standards for qualifications
- Learning infrastructure and materials

Headline achievements
- First target – 750k learner achievements by 2004, target met
- Second target – 2.25m learner achievements by 2010, target met in 2008, two years early
- These were for learners achieving their first qualification

Learner participation 2001 - 2011
- Over 14 million courses taken by individual learners
- Over 8 million qualifications achieved
- Qualifications offered to learners were online and on-demand
- Literacy qualifications primarily tested reading skills, not writing or speaking and listening
Population surveys 2003 and 2010

- Surveys measure progress in the population as a whole
- Good progress at higher levels: increase in number of people with Level 2* or above skills (from 42% to 57%)
- No significant progress for those with Level 1 or above skills (from 84% to 85%)

* Level 2 is equivalent to GCSE, expected standard for 16 year olds

Less successful at lower levels...

- Surveys show a growing population of learners at the lowest levels of skills (5.4% to 7.1% with skills at Entry 2 or below)
- Implications with regard to funding mechanisms, which incentivised work with learners who have less distance to travel

Government review of progress

- Concluded that the achievement of qualifications is not always a reliable proxy for skills gained.
- Too many learners are only achieving marginal improvements or are validating existing skills.
- Too many learners are taught to pass the test rather than develop a broad range of skills.
- Need to change system to better incentivise, measure and fund the skills gained.
Quality of teaching and learning

- Quality is mixed. Strong evidence about what makes good teaching and learning, but this is not always happening.
- Initial assessment needs to ensure learners are placed on the right course at the right level, but this is not consistent enough.
- Provision is not always flexible enough or tailored enough to individual needs.

Learner qualifications

- Evidence that basic skills qualifications do not have the same brand recognition as English and maths GCSEs (well recognised as the L2 standard and understood by employers).
- Appropriate English and maths qualifications are needed to support the range of adult learners’ needs, including those at lower levels to help them progress.
- Functional English and mathematics assess all skill areas and assess application of skills.

New programme of research

- Survey of employer attitudes – still low demand from employers although those that engage are persuaded of the benefits of offering workplace learning.
- Economic returns – need to build on evidence that low English and maths skills cost the exchequer billions of pounds.
Any questions, please contact

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The wider evidence base

There is strong evidence on:
• the benefits of embedding English and maths in vocational learning
• the positive impact on learners of working with qualified teachers
• the personal and social impact of improved skills
• the need for multiple ways of engaging in learning – in class, self study, distance learning, ICT supported learning

Evidence on effective practice

In literacy teaching:
• teachers build on learners' experience,
• encourage fluent oral reading,
• use reciprocal teaching and explicit comprehension strategies,
• adequate time for active reading in class,
• accurate phonics teaching.
Evidence on effective practice

In numeracy teaching:
- teachers build on knowledge learners already have,
- help them overcome fear of maths,
- treat misconceptions as a subject for discussion,
- promote reasoning and problem solving over ‘answer getting’ and everyday problems,
- make creative use of ICT, use small group work and
- create connections between topics.