World Literacy Day 2012  Berlin
Skills for Life: a story of investment in adult literacy and numeracy

1. The history
The story of Skills for Life is built upon a long history of developing provision in adult basic skills. In 1972 – 5 a campaign called, A Right to Read and a massive promotion, based on a TV series called On the Move, raised awareness and mobilised volunteer tutors and many new learners. Funding for programmes was predominantly by local authorities and there was no national entitlement or process. In 1993, first attempts were made to develop national programmes of learning, called Wordpower and Numberpower, as well as Basic Skills at Work and Family Literacy. These were all supported through the national funding streams for further education. Then, the largest Government intervention in the last decade was made, with the launch in 2001 of the Skills for Life strategy, and an investment of over £9bn over the following decade. ¹

The story is also based upon policies, programmes and practices in England only. Great Britain has devolved governments; Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have developed their own policies and approaches in order to respond to identified needs and stimulate demand in the field of adult basic skills.

The renewed case for a major intervention was made in England in the report A Fresh Start: Improving Literacy and Numeracy commissioned by Government, and published in 1999 (known as “The Moser Report” after its chairman).² The report drew on the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey of 1997, which suggested that some 7 million people (1 in 5 adults) needed to improve their basic skills in one or more areas. The result, it argued, was social exclusion and economic disadvantage for individuals, and a serious constraint on the economy.

The Strategy set ambitious targets:
- 750,000 adults to improve their language, literacy and numeracy by 2004 (target exceeded)
- 1.5 million to have improved these skills by 2007;
- 2.5 million to have moved up one level of the national standards framework by 2010.

The Strategy identified a number of specific target groups:
- unemployed people;

¹ http://rwp.excellencegateway.org.uk/resource/Skills+for+Life%3A+The+national+strategy+for+improving+adult+literacy+and+numeracy+skills++full+document/pdf/1/

² http://www.nrdc.org.uk/anr_details.asp?ID=135
• prisoners and ex-offenders;
• people in work, including public sector employees;
• unqualified young people;
• parents supported by the “Sure Start” programme, (a national programme designed to help parents in disadvantaged communities to support their children’s’ early development);
• people with English language needs (ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages).

2. Definitions

There is no universally agreed definition of “literacy” in the UK but Skills for Life were defined as: the ability to read, write and speak in English and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general.

In 2003 it was agreed to extend the definition to embrace a fourth element of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

However, within England the term “literacy”, and its associated terms “basic education”, “basic skills”, “key skills” and “core skills” continued to be widely used in a variety of senses. At times they were used to refer to:

• **Reading and writing only** – the narrowest definition;
• **Functional competences** – a range of competences, including some or all of: reading, writing, speaking, listening, numeracy and information technology skills;
• **Multiple literacies** – required to function as a full citizen, which may include ‘financial literacy’, ‘political literacy’, ‘media literacy’, ‘health literacy’, ‘computer literacy’, ‘legal literacy’, ‘social literacy’, and ‘economic literacy’;
• **Language skills** – to include English language for people whose first language is not English (“English for Speakers of Other Languages”, and “English as a Foreign Language”)

The term “literacy, language and numeracy” (LLN) was suggested, to distinguish the different curricula, pedagogies, skills, teaching expertise, and sometimes learners in each of the three fields.

3. What did we do?

**National standards**

Within the Skills for Life national qualifications framework there were three “entry levels” of qualification, level 1 and level 2. Separate standards were written for literacy and numeracy, providing a map of the range of skills and capabilities that
adults were expected to need in order to function and progress at work and in society. This was followed by new national qualifications for adults in all areas.

**Promotion and awareness raising**

Large scale promotional activities took place, including poster campaigns and national television advertising (Get On and The Gremlins) highlighting the challenges faced by people with basic skills difficulties. A national telephone helpline was established to help people to find appropriate programmes. The promotional activities aimed not only to encourage people to come forward for tuition. They were also designed to raise awareness more generally, including among staff in key positions in organisations, who could assist and refer people to learning, as well as employers of all kinds, including Government departments. A separate numeracy promotion took place.

**Capacity building**

Initial training programmes were developed for teachers working on *Skills for Life* programmes, including qualifications for the large numbers of volunteer and part-time teachers. Standards for such teachers were set in 2000, and revised in 2009. A large programme of continuing professional development, including short courses, workshops and longer programmes leading to accredited qualifications were provided to serving teachers, to maintain and update their skills and knowledge. Teachers of adult basic skills continue to benefit from the national entitlement to 30 hours per annum, continuing professional development.

**Research and Development**

The Strategy included the creation of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, with a remit to undertake and disseminate research into the development of these skills. The Centre sponsored a wide range of research studies, and each year it organised national and international conferences to discuss and disseminate findings to practitioners, policymakers and researchers. The Centre continues as part of the Institute for Education, London.

**Curricula**

Core curricula for learners were introduced, based on the national standards for literacy, language and numeracy, and a Pre-Entry Curriculum Framework was designed for people with learning difficulties and disabilities, who are unable to access the national curricula. Guidance on how adults with learning difficulties and disabilities can be involved in all levels of literacy, language and numeracy learning was also published.

Many teaching and learning materials were commissioned to link to the national standards and support the core curricula. They included paper-based and web-based materials, as well as a wide range of e-learning opportunities. ICT has proved to be not only a motivator for adults to become involved in literacy, language and numeracy activities but also a lively and imaginative way for people to learn. Further

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3 http://www.ifl.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/6639/14130_national_standards_for_adult_literacy_numeracy_ict.pdf

4 www.nrdc.org.uk
curriculum development has addressed literacy, language and numeracy in the contexts of employment, community learning and vocational training, with accompanying assessment materials and resources.

Qualifications and assessment
Both initial assessment and summative assessment was addressed in the strategy. Suites of initial assessment frameworks were published in order that detailed and individual learning plans could be designed by teachers. A framework of qualifications was established, with national standards of achievement, to enable individuals to progress in their learning, and to measure progress towards the national targets. A set of national tests were developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to accompany the framework. Further research and development on formative assessment (assessment for learning) was also pursued and published, to assist teachers in developing effective approaches to teaching and learning.

Inspection and quality assurance
England has a quality and standards assessment process carried out by inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). During the early years of the strategy, literacy, language and numeracy were inspected as discrete areas, but they are now combined with other curriculum areas for inspection purposes.

Numeracy
In the light of low take-up of numeracy through the Skills for Life strategy, and further research into its impact, the government developed (2008) a Numeracy for Employability strategy which aimed to reach the targets set in World Class Skills.\(^5\)
This meant that by 2020, 95% of the working age population of England should achieve Entry Level 3 or above, in numeracy. There is general recognition that this target is much more challenging than those for literacy and ESOL, and that without a specific focus on numeracy, it is unlikely to be met. The strategy addresses several issues; the need for separate reporting of numeracy activity, raising demand among learners, expanding the teaching workforce, and raising the quality of provision. The maths4life research and development project (hosted by the National Centre for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics\(^6\)) supported adults who are learning mathematics at and below Level 2, with a particular emphasis on work at Entry Level and Level 1. It has produced research papers, resources to support collaborative professional development for teachers, and materials for learners. Numeracy is a key current developmental priority.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
The Skills for Life Strategy emphasised that the standards for language and literacy were the same for mother-tongue learners as well as those for whom English is another language. However, the routes and approaches to learning were different for the two groupings. Learners came forward to take up opportunities in huge numbers, indicating great demand for learning English. Research was conducted

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\(^6\) [www.ncetm.org.uk](http://www.ncetm.org.uk)
and materials and resources were developed. Concerns were raised that many people from Europe and new migrants, along with asylum seekers and refugees were taking up opportunities at the expense of people who had been resident in England for many years, especially women from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. In 2006, NIACE conducted an independent review. The report made recommendations for a government review as well as for changing funding and prioritising learners from particular backgrounds. This resulted in clearer distinctions between English as a foreign language for people who do not intend taking up permanent residence and those who have been resident for many years; the funding systems also changed, to reflect greater clarity about who should pay, or not, for tuition.

**Family learning and literacy**

Family learning, family literacy and family numeracy have been increasingly acknowledged as important planks of the government’s adult learning strategy, often linked to Sure Start Centres. Under the Skills for Life strategy, many programmes were developed, using diverse models and approaches. A national evaluation carried out by NIACE found that these programmes had contributed greatly to parents’ and carers’ own literacy, language and numeracy by helping them to help their children.

**Health and Financial Literacy**

Two areas where literacy and numeracy developed in particular contexts are health and finance. In both cases, the decisions which individuals have to make are increasingly complex, making heavy demands on the ability to interpret written and oral information. Since low levels of literacy are also associated with low levels of income and poorer health, this group tends to suffer multiple disadvantages. Efforts to develop health and financial literacies aim to address this challenge by not only encouraging individuals to develop their skills but also to change the communication/literacy and numeracy behaviours of those who are responsible for communicating with the public. The simplification of language in public information documents has been a theme of public policy for some years, and real progress has been made, but many issues like pensions and medical treatments remain inherently complex.

**Learning On-line**

The UK has a well developed range of public libraries, which provide reference and lending facilities as well as information about learning opportunities (including literacy, language and numeracy services). Many also provide Internet access, and online learning facilities, sometimes incorporating *Ukonline* and *Learndirect* Centres. The Government financed a national network of 6,000 local *Ukonline* centres where the general public could have free access to the internet, and support in using it. It also provided a national network of *Learndirect* centres in community locations (in sports clubs, leisure and community centres, churches, libraries, on university campuses and railway stations). They provided access to online adult education programmes and associated support, including some or all of: free internet access, crèches, cafés, parking, lending libraries, games rooms, and desktop publishing.

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facilities. In addition, research into what works best for learners, including the training of teachers in the use of on-line learning, has developed.

**Dyslexia and Learning Difficulties and Disabilities**

A development programme, led by NIACE, identified common and effective approaches to dealing with dyslexia and published a *Framework for Understanding Dyslexia*. The publication was designed to offer support to literacy tutors, who were not dyslexia specialists, but who had learners with dyslexia in their groups and classes. A large consortium developed *Learning for Living* programmes for literacy, language and numeracy for people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

**Embedded approaches**

A partnership with *Ukonline* and *Learndirect* delivered awareness raising and training to their staff on integrating literacy, language and numeracy in their centres, which exist to provide advice and tuition, especially in the use of ICTs. Conceptual frameworks were developed, whilst NRDC researched embedded and non-embedded approaches to delivering vocational education and training in Further Education colleges. The results of such research, indicated that learners’ achievements were strong in both the vocational area and literacy, language and numeracy.

**Unionlearn**

Trades unions in England have taken active roles in advocating, encouraging and supporting adult learning, particularly literacy, language and numeracy under the Skills for Life strategy. They see basic skills as those which are essential for effective job roles. Many unions have appointed Skills for Life advocates who provide information and sign-post learners to learning opportunities. The government dedicated funding to Unionlearn so that provision could be offered in workplaces and in partnership with learning providers. This aspect of Skills for Life was seen as vital to engaging more and different learners.

**Voluntary and Community Sector**

A number of initiatives sought to develop *Skills for Life* by building capacity in community and voluntary agencies whose primary purpose was not to offer literacy, language or numeracy provision. Embedding *Skills for Life* in their mainstream work has made it possible to reach clients who are included in the government’s target groups. This has involved organisations for homeless people; those under the supervision of probation services; people experiencing mental ill-health or organisations which work in neighbourhoods experiencing particular disadvantages. The government recognised that without the contributions of voluntary organisations, its ambitions for reaching particular target groups, improvement and achievement would not be met.

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10 [http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/)
4. What was achieved?

5.7 million adults took up over 12 million learning opportunities (including English for speakers of other languages) and over 2.8 million adults gained a first qualification. The target of 2.25 million people succeeding was met well ahead of the timescale in 2008. Over 25,000 teachers working on Skills for Life programmes were involved in gaining qualifications and capacity-building activities. The renewed targets of 95% of the working population to have Entry level 3 in numeracy and level 1 in literacy, by 2020, continue to drive the impetus for learning.

For the first time, teachers working in adult basic skills received recognition for the challenging job they were fulfilling. The levels of specialist knowledge in literacy, ESOL, numeracy and ICT, as well as teaching and learning skills were recognised in the new qualifications for the workforce.

Similarly, the development of national standards, curricula and qualifications for learners were the first to be created in the history of adult basic skills.

The majority of vocational preparation programmes for both young people and adults now include the necessary literacy, numeracy and ICT, at the appropriate levels to help learners to succeed in basic skills as well as in their chosen vocational area. Many vocational and technical programmes for adults and young people adopt an integrated or embedded approach to teaching and learning.

The Excellence Gateway, provided by the Learning and Skills improvement Service (LSIS) hosts thousands of resources developed to support staff, including research as well as teaching and learning materials. Materials to support Skills for Life, basic and functional skills dominate this on-line facility.11

Systematic and wide-ranging research took place through the NRDC and an international resource was made available to inform policy and practice in literacy, language and numeracy.

The levels of awareness and understanding of the impact of poor literacy, language and numeracy, amongst educators, policy-makers, employers, many providers of services such as health, housing and welfare are much higher than before the Skills for Life Strategy. Employability is now a key driver of literacy and numeracy learning.

The Skills for Life strategy paved the way for the development of functional skills in English and Maths, from 2012.

5. Comments, Challenges and Questions

The English approach, since 2000, was to invest very heavily in improving Adult Basic Skills with a strong national programme, supported by national research, promotion, staff training, and a body of national materials, standards for teachers and learners, and qualifications. All these were reinforced by a guarantee of free tuition and prioritised funding. However, in spite of this huge investment, a number of issues arose:

- the English approach tends to privilege cognitive and functional notions of literacy over the social practice and transformative models which have been developed in some countries, and it is also prone to stigmatise learners through “deficit models” of literacy;
- national assessment focused on reading; writing, speaking and listening were not included although were often taught and this led to arguments about whether national tests were fit for purpose (functional skills in English and Maths now address this);
- concerns were expressed about the way in which counting the qualifications were indicators of success and used to measure progress towards the targets; some argued that this encouraged tutors and organisers to privilege those with a ‘shorter learning journey’ to take and ignore those who needed more support, encouragement and tuition;
- further concerns were expressed that many of the people gaining qualifications, especially at level 2, had not really made very much progress in their learning; they had simply gained recognition for what they could do already (for some people, this was very important as this was their first ever certificate);
- target driven policies tend to prioritise those with relatively minor difficulties and those who are more easily accessed. This has to some extent, happened, with a high proportion of measured achievements coming from people under 19 years of age. We continue to explore and develop the best ways of reaching and working alongside those with the ‘longest learning journeys’.
- a similar issue arises with English for Speakers of Other Languages, where recent immigrants from EU countries (who have entered in very large numbers since the EU expanded its frontiers in 2004) have been more keen to take up opportunities than long standing immigrants with poor English. There is also fear that the resources required to meet this particular need have diverted resources from Skills for Life provision for British born people;
- the need to measure individual performance, and the achievement of policy objectives, imposed formal assessment (testing) on some people who are reluctant to become involved because of very negative experiences of testing at school. Some of this was reported by over-protective tutors; ensuring learners receive impartial information and support about assessment opportunities can be challenging.
- there were concerns that the hundreds of volunteers in the system, or paid staff who were unable or unwilling to gain further qualifications would be lost. Tensions were raised by the attempts to professionalise the workforce of both paid and voluntary workers already in the system;
• the most disadvantaged people, socially and economically, are those with the lowest skill levels, but these remain the least likely to be aware of opportunities, or to perceive the benefits of taking part.\textsuperscript{12}

• the focus on the economic impact of poor literacy and emphasis on employability, diverts attention from older people, who may have severe problems, but have no intention of returning to the labour market;

• a strong focus on one curriculum area has the effect of diverting resources from other groups. The focus on basic skills in England has led to a reduced supply of more general informal adult education, some of which has traditionally provided non-threatening entry routes to learning, including basic skills programmes;

• tackling basic skills requires long term, and large scale Government investment – these skills take time to develop;

• the rapid expansion of a programme of this kind puts strains on the supply of teachers, especially in a field of education which is of low status, and which has traditionally depended heavily on part-time casually employed staff and volunteers. This has particularly affected ESOL teaching and learners with learning difficulties or disabilities;

• numeracy remains a problem area; it is increasingly seen as important, particularly for economic prosperity.

6. Studies, surveys and Inquiries

Evaluation of the impact of Skills for Life learning

A government study aimed to assess the impact of participation in literacy and numeracy on economic outcomes for individuals as well as the economy.\textsuperscript{13} Some headline findings, in 2009, suggested that participation in learning:

• led to gains in qualifications; had a positive impact on self-esteem; increased involvement in lifelong learning and contributed to improved health and increased independence;

• had little impact on either employment or earnings;

• adults who were older; were lone parents; had long-term illness or disability; or very low levels of literacy were less likely to join college courses.

NIACE Inquiries

NIACE has a strong history of commissioning independent inquiries; one into ESOL, in 2006, was followed in 2010, by one into adult numeracy and the other into adult literacy. The Institute was concerned that the great momentum established over the past decade and the achievements gained would cloud the concerns that many people continue to find difficulties with their basic skills. The relevant government departments were invited to be Commissioners for the inquiries, along with representatives from interested and influential agencies and organisations.


\textsuperscript{13} http://www.niace.org.uk/news/bis-evaluates-skills-for-life-impact
**Numeracy**

A great deal remains to be done in numeracy; many people, at the lowest levels of literacy achievement who are often socially and economically marginalised, have not engaged in learning nor reached their potential. The inquiry suggested that we must change the way we think about numeracy, with a focus on how adults use it in everyday living. It recommended a new way of measuring how adults use numeracy and how it is used for work and home as well as how we measure their ability and success. It suggested that we need more and better numeracy teachers and that we should prioritise adults with the poorest skills. This latter group was barely contacted by the Skills for Life Strategy. The inquiry also called for more research into what works best in teaching and learning numeracy with adults.

**Literacy**

The literacy inquiry reported in September 2011 and recommended that raising standards of teaching and learning must continue to be a focus of effort; quality learning experiences are key to learners’ success. It recommended that family and inter-generational learning should be supported in order to address intergenerational literacy difficulties. In response to those adults with the poorest skills, the inquiry recommended that a Challenge Fund should look at innovative ways of engaging and working with those who are currently under-represented in learning. In addition, the development of different ways of measuring success, working with the media to raise awareness and demand as well as carrying out more research into working with different groups and identifying economic impacts were included in the recommendations.

**Family learning and literacy**

NIACE has recently launched an inquiry in England and Wales into family learning.

**National survey 2011**

The first Skills for Life survey, in 2003, included assessments for literacy and numeracy; the second, reporting in 2011, included two ICT tests.

Some of the key findings included:

- A large increase in those achieving level 2 or above in literacy; over 57% of learners had gained a level 2 qualification in literacy compared with 44% in 2003.
- 85% of respondents achieved level 1 or above in literacy; 15% performed at entry level 3 or below. This represented no significant change from 2003;

**7. The story goes on**

**Functional Skills**

Skills for Life achieved enormous gains but there continue to be inequalities, particularly related to adults at the lower levels of achievement, some of the most marginalised adults and those needing numeracy. The target-driven culture led to ‘qualification chasing’ which did not meet the needs and interests of all learners.
development of Functional Skills\textsuperscript{14} is building on the Skills for Life strategy in recognition that English, maths and ICT are the basis of all learning and should be taught in context. A more holistic approach is advocated and an application of skills to link topics and themes together as well as to every-day contexts is a strong feature. Teacher-development programmes are in place to support the profession to make the transition. The changes begin in September 2012, following a pilot phase, and will be fully in place after September 2013. Challenges have already been identified but this major development indicates the continuing priority for the government, teachers, employers and many adults themselves to address the challenges of under-achievement in both English and Maths.

\textbf{Employability}

In the current economic climate, great emphasis is on English and Maths for employment, whether this is linked to a vocational skills development programme or simply for greater employability. Whilst this driver must not be excluded, many would argue, as with the Skills for Life strategy, that it must not be the only outcome of learning. Personal development, learning for health, financial and community participation, it is argued, are important purposes for learning basic skills.

\textbf{Social returns and outcomes}

Practitioners and learners readily recognise the social outcomes of involvement in literacy and numeracy learning, most commonly described as gains in confidence and community involvement. Recently these outcomes have attracted interest, as supporters of social capital have advocated and worked to improve ways of capturing and calculating social gains. Much remains to be done but progress is marked and public.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Attracting learners with the lowest skills}

Many policy-makers and practitioners argue that the continuing marginalisation of those learners who have the longest learning journeys to make is likely to lead to increased health, social and welfare costs. Finding creative and innovative ways of engaging individuals and supporting their learning should be a priority for both the individuals and the wider community.

We have travelled a long way along the literacy and numeracy road, since 2001 but, many would argue, there are still mountains to climb on the journey. As we face increasingly challenging economic and social contexts and issues, improved basic skills could help individuals, communities and companies to respond to them.

\textsuperscript{14} \url{http://www.niace.org.uk/current-work/area/functional-skills}

\textsuperscript{15} \url{http://www.niace.org.uk/influencing-policy-0}
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