

## Skills for Life

A note for the Westminster Hall debate, Thursday 26 June 2008

### Orientation

*Skills for Life* is the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy in England. It was launched by David Blunkett before the 2001 election and was the Government's response to the report (*A Fresh Start*) commissioned from Sir Claus (now Lord) Moser. The report found that:

*'Seven million people have poor literacy and numeracy skills, including around half a million or more who struggle with English because it is not their first language. This has disastrous consequences for the individuals concerned, weakens the country's ability to compete in the global economy and places a huge burden on society. People with poor literacy, numeracy and language skills tend to be on lower incomes or unemployed, and they are more prone to ill health and social exclusion.'*

Spending on the *Skills for Life* programme has increased from £167 million in 2000-01 to £995 million in 2006-07 and the programme has been well scrutinised, most recently by the National Audit Office in a report (*HC 482 Session 2007-2008*) published on 6 June 2008. During this period 2 million learners have gained a first certificate, mainly in literacy and ESOL and 3 million have participated successfully overall. However numeracy still remains severely underdeveloped. Furthermore, during these years ESOL tripled in response to significant demand, particularly from Eastern European migrants. Spending was subsequently capped leaving an important number of settled British citizens without access to English language courses.

It is estimated that in order for 1.5 million learners to achieve a qualification, at least 4 million need to be actively involved in learning. This in turn involves widening participation to include large numbers of people who might have had negative experiences of education in the past and who might need persuading to get back into learning.

### NIACE comment:

*"Skills for Life is a world-class programme – a strategic, significantly funded and comprehensive attempt over more than one electoral cycle seeking to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of a significant number of people. The Government deserves credit for the sustained commitment it has made. But there is plenty of room for further improvement and achieving our targets should not make us complacent, as the most marginalised learners are yet to be reached. "*

## Issue 1: Achieving the targets represents partial success

The 2007 Public Service Agreement's target of 1.5 million learners achieving a qualification has been comfortably exceeded. However, from the beginning it was recognised that **national tests would only be appropriate measures of achievement for a portion of Skills for Life learners and budgets needed to reflect this**. As budgets tighten there is a risk that funding will be narrowed to learners who can gain qualifications at entry level 3 and above, at the price of meeting the needs of learners at entry Level 2 and below, the specific groups where Parsons and Bynner's research shows poverty is greatest and replicated inter-generationally.

## Issue 2: The 'hardest to reach' adults have scarcely been touched by the Skills for Life Strategy

*Skills for Life* has been successful in helping those adults who have the confidence to self-identify their needs or those who can be reached in a straightforward manner (for example in workplaces through union learning representatives). Because the strategy defines achieving a qualification as the proxy for progress in basic skills, those with the shortest distance to being successful in the national tests have benefited the most. But **there are many more who are less visible and more marginal**. Reaching them will take more time and money but their involvement is essential to truly tackle social exclusion. Whilst learners are able to join programmes that do not need to a qualification, **there is evidence that some providers have neglected Entry Level provision**, as it does not contribute to the PSA targets.

People with the lowest level of skills have barely been touched by the *Skills for Life* strategy. NIACE believes that it is only by working through local communities, local 'brokers' and local voluntary organisations that these people can be successfully engaged. The voluntary sector could be used more effectively to tackle the challenges of engaging hard-to-reach learners. There is a case for considering a programme building the strengths, skills and capacity of local people to act as Champions in communities as part of the Skills for Life strategy.

## Issue 3: Train to Gain's focus needs broadening

As concluded by the NAO report the take-up of *Skills for Life* courses through Train to Gain has been lower than expected (28,630 fewer learners than expected for January 2008).

We know that the majority of people with literacy, language and numeracy needs are in work but we also know that those with the most need tend to be in low-skilled and short-term employment, where training is least likely to be offered and where employers might prefer their staff to have low skills. With the labour available from Eastern Europe, employers have little to gain from upskilling their workforce, and might not see a profit to their businesses in doing so.

While the change made to Train to Gain making *Skills for Life* qualifications a free-standing option, instead of part of a full Level 2 package, is a step in the right direction, access to pre-entry level courses also need to be available through Train to Gain.

The concentration of funding on Train to Gain over the next few years (over £1 billion by 2010-2011), and the consequent decrease in funding for other programmes, is dangerously close to putting all our eggs in one basket. **Therefore closely linking the opportunities available through Train to Gain with the needs of those with the lowest level skills is of utmost importance.**

## Issue 4: Numeracy

The numeracy dimension of *Skills for Life* is underdeveloped compared to literacy. One reason for this is cultural: Being 'bad at maths' is almost a badge of honour among many adults in Britain – there is little or no stigma attached to it. Many adults were turned off maths at school and see little need to improve. A second reason for the relative weakness of numeracy work is a shortage of specialist teachers. The generally low status of the work, reflected in its part-time nature and often insecure contracts, does not readily attract new recruits. Although a variety of initiatives have been undertaken to encourage training and qualifications there is little guarantee of permanent full-time employment for specialist teachers or for career progression.

Following the Leitch review of skills, Government set a target that by 2020, 95% of the adult population should have 'functional' numeracy at Entry Level 3. (This equates the level expected of an 11 year old). There is a serious likelihood that this target will not be met.

Much more attention is needed to boost both demand (and the concept of 'financial literacy' appears to have potential for helping adults see the benefits of improved numeracy) and also supply of classes.

## Issue 5: English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

**This is undoubtedly the most politically contentious area of *Skills for Life*.**

Demand for courses far exceeds supply despite increased public spending. Much of the new demand has come from migrants from within the EU who must be treated as 'home' students.

In August 2007, for the first time since the introduction of the *Skills for Life* strategy in 2001, the Government introduced fees for ESOL provision. This has had the effect of making it harder to reach the most excluded and marginalised groups – for example Pakistani and Bangladeshi women (NIACE figures show the latter are 14 and 23 percentage points respectively below the average of all minority ethnic groups participating in learning).

The position of Asylum seekers is also problematic as they cannot access ESOL at all until they have been in the UK for 6 months although evidence suggests that early introduction to English is the most efficient way of learning the language. Early access to ESOL is also key to ensuring that asylum seekers are able to make their case for asylum fairly and effectively. NIACE believes that Government's current policy is hard to reconcile with our obligations to offer care and support to people who have suffered violence and oppression. Our view is that if rationing were needed, it would be better to stop supporting asylum seekers when their application fails (this is the principle of innocent until proven guilty).

Since November 2005, the Government has required applicants for British citizenship to take an online test or achieve a *Skills for Life* ESOL qualification in speaking and listening. This creates a real difficulty for applicants for citizenship who are required to improve their English and achieve a qualification before their visa expires but who cannot find a place at a local class.

Migrant workers are frequently unable to use their skills in jobs commensurate with their abilities and qualifications because of language difficulties, yet very few employers are willing to contribute to cost of language training.

There is particular concern about the quality of ESOL provision. The quality and range of teaching was judged by Ofsted to be poor in many places. There are simply not enough teachers at present who are sufficiently skilled when it comes to both delivering the teaching, and understanding the complicated cultural, social and political issues that affect learners from minority and migrant groups. In addition a great deal of ESOL provision is part-time and not integrated into other vocational training.

In those areas where demand is highest, the number of hours is often rationed. Learners who need intensive, focused courses to help the transition to higher-level courses or employment suffer most in this situation. In rural areas where there is an increase in the numbers of migrant workers, demand also outstrips supply. Learners choosing vocational programmes often encounter subject tutors with little or no awareness or training in language learning.

## **Issue 6: ICT the 'forgotten' basic skill?**

The 2003 white paper *"21st Century Skills: realising our potential; individuals, employers, nation"* (Cm5810) made the commitment to help adults to develop ICT as a third 'skill for life' alongside literacy and numeracy (omitting ESOL!). To support this, national standards for ICT have been developed by QCA alongside existing standards for adult literacy and numeracy **yet ICT has never been adequately integrated into Skills for Life.**

## **Issue 7: Targets include a significant number of young people completing key skills**

Whilst there is no doubt that the cohort of 16-18 year olds need and benefit from support in literacy, language and numeracy they are not the cohort that Moses' analysis addressed. There is a recurrent trend to shift initiatives designed for adults to benefit young people disproportionately. If rationing happens it should not be at the expense of addressing the real challenges adults face in their lives and those Lord Moser analysed.

## **Issue 8: Older adults are sidelined**

Older adults have the highest concentration of people with literacy and numeracy problems and so far the strategy has given little attention to engage them successfully. This is especially worrying with regards to the financial vulnerability of poorer older people who have difficulty in distinguishing between paperwork that requires an essential response and the range of complicated enticements they receive.

## Questions for the Government

1. What will the Government do to review the targets to ensure that proper priority is given by providers to the needs of people with the greatest level of need, notable those at entry Level 2 and below?
2. Will the Government highlight the importance of literacy, numeracy and ESOL in any guidance offered to employers on skills?
3. What strategies does the Government have in place for engaging hard-to-reach learners?
4. What plans does the Government have to follow-up the 2005 *Skills for Life* survey?
5. What measures are the Government taking to ensure inter-departmental cooperation around *Skills for Life* and financial literacy?
6. What is the Government doing for its own staff and with regards to the advice it gives local authorities to ensure the right to basic skills?

NIACE is a registered charity, founded in 1921 to represent the interests of adult learners, and of those who make provision for them, at all levels and wherever adults learn. Its membership is drawn from all sectors of post-compulsory education and training, and NIACE works within and across sectors. NIACE membership also includes bodies operating wholly or partly in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

NIACE seeks to secure an education system responsive to the diversity of adults' needs and aspirations as learners, and in particular to those who benefited least from initial education. We believe that a system fit for adults of all ages and in all their complexity will work better for all learners.

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