

Commentary on the NFER Research Report Progress in Adult Literacy



NICK HAYES

Mary Hamilton

Foreword

Progress in adult literacy: do learners learn?

The NFER study *Progress in Adult Literacy* was completed in 2000 and a summary published in 2001. NIACE commissioned a critique of this research as part of the Institute's broader development programme on measuring achievement in adult learning. The research has claimed that

- the students achieved a small improvement in reading
- the students achieved very small... improvements in writing, but only in terms of length of script and quality of handwriting. No significant improvements were found in terms of reduction of errors or increase in complexity
- students who attended 51-60 hours of literacy tuition between pre- and post-test made the largest gain... these were students who had attended very regularly
- where tutors had... volunteers or paid assistants in the classroom, students made significant progress, but where tutors had no assistance students on average made no progress.'

(Report pp iv-v)

The summary of the research, commenting on the 'modest progress' noted that 'most [students] don't make any measurable progress in writing' and commented that, 'it would be encouraging to report... many more adults making substantial progress... It would be encouraging, but it wouldn't be true. (Summary p1)

The research is probably the only substantial recent study on the progress made by learners in literacy programmes. Partly because of this and partly because of the disquiet expressed by a number of colleagues in the field on the research methods used, NIACE commissioned this critique using our own funds. The weaknesses identified in the research raise questions about how future research should be undertaken. The commentary concludes with a helpful discussion on a strategy for future studies of student progress. This will contribute to debate and support the DfEE's objective of creating a dedicated centre for adult literacy and numeracy research as part of the Adult Basic Skills Strategy to be effective in making sure that a report on progress is more a cause for celebration in the future.

The commentary was launched at the national conference, '25 years of basic skills work; failed opportunities, new start?' in May 2001.

I am grateful to Professor Mary Hamilton for her work on this *Commentary*.

Dr Peter Lavender
Associate Director
NIACE

Executive summary

This commentary discusses a number of problems with the research report *Progress in Adult Literacy*. The main issues are that:

- only 57 per cent of students returned to take the second test. If progress is to be measured, then the other 43 per cent need to be accounted for. Many of the non-returners may have dropped out of programmes altogether.
- the tests used were unrelated to the course content, so did not measure progress on the course.
- there is no agreement as to how much should be learned in the time gap between the two tests and so no reason to expect a level change in students' performance.
- the test was inappropriate for the sample. Many students tested near the top of the scale at the beginning, so the test could not measure any improvement made by these students. Neither was the test good at measuring progress at the bottom end of the scale.
- the majority of students taking the first test were already scoring above the functional literacy level that is the government target. This suggests that these adults are not part of the 7 million that provision is supposed to reach.
- the writing 'test' used in the study was trivial so it was not possible to measure progress. Many students did not attempt the writing task at all.
- the information collected on tutors' professional development was inadequate and the findings are misrepresented in the conclusions. Sweeping assertions about professional development needs are made on the basis of a forced choice from a list of authors.
- claims are made that regular attendance and intensive provision are related to progress in literacy. These claims are not upheld by the findings.
- the measure of 'number of hours of literacy tuition' oversimplified students' learning experience and the study was therefore unable to identify the factors which might have affected progress.

1. Introduction

This is a commentary on a research study *Progress in Adult Literacy*. The study, to be carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), was commissioned by the Basic Skills Agency (BSA). The research began in 1998 and was completed in 2000. As the researchers point out, this means that the project fell across the period of the Moser Review of Adult Basic Skills and subsequent changes to national policy and practice in England and Wales. New Adult Basic Skills Standards, a new curriculum and new arrangements for professional development and qualifications for ABE staff have a particular bearing on the research project and its potential to inform the field.

2. The research study

The research team carried out an assessment of student progress in adult literacy using a national sample of students drawn from Further Education Colleges and Local Education Authority provision. The research used a pre-test/post-test design for assessing progress in literacy. The definition of progress used was functional skills-based and did not attempt to relate progress to student motivation or explore the wider impact on their lives. A special test of reading was constructed. 2,135 students were given the pre-test and 57 per cent of these returned for the post-test phase. A simple prompt was used to elicit a sample of student writing but fewer students responded to this: 1,724 students provided pre-test writing data, and 54 per cent of these returned post-test data. In addition to taking the tests, a student profile was completed by tutors for each student giving basic demographic information about them. Information was collected on the number of hours of tuition that each student received between pre-test and post-test.

The main data gathering exercise was supplemented by a questionnaire survey of 263 tutors in adult basic education, 177 (67 per cent) of whom responded. Interviews were carried out with seven of these who were working in what was judged to be the most effective provision. Interesting data are presented on the sample of Adult Basic Education (ABE) teachers, who turned out to be a surprisingly highly qualified group for Further Education. The tutor survey was only a subsidiary part of this study, however, and no attempt was made to obtain a representative sample, so these are tentative findings.

In terms of furthering our understanding of progress in ABE the findings presented are, as the authors acknowledge, disappointing. Unremarkable amounts of progress appear to have been made by the students. While a majority of students showed progress on the reading test, nearly one third scored lower on the second test than the first. A surprising finding was that the majority of students tested during the study were already scoring above the functional literacy threshold of IALS¹ Level 1/New Standards Entry Level at the pre-test stage.

Very few factors were identified as significantly affecting progress, either in terms of student characteristics or of programme features. Two teacher-related variables were found to be significant for student progress – presence of teaching assistants and all tutors on a programme having what the authors refer to as ‘QTS status’².

There were some other unexpected findings, not highlighted in the Executive Summary. These include the following:

- comparisons between students on a special intensive programme of study and the rest found that, contrary to expectations, the students on the intensive courses made less progress than the others;

¹ IALS stands for the International Adult Literacy Survey, which has developed a functional literacy test to provide a league table of adult literacy for 20 countries. The IALS test and findings are increasingly being used to underpin national policies for basic skills.

² Qualified Teacher Status or ‘QTS’ is a relatively recent term used for preparation for school teaching recognised by the TTA. The definition used in the study refers to formal teacher training of some kind but not necessarily TTA recognised. It is likely that many of the teaching qualifications held by tutors in this sample were obtained before QTS existed.

- important information is revealed about the extent of students who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) in general literacy provision (15 per cent) and the range of languages spoken by students in this sample (42 different languages).

A close look at these findings and the evidence on which they are based leads to the conclusion that although this study could be treated as suggestive pilot work, there are a number of flaws in the design of the research, data collection and analysis that must seriously reduce confidence in the findings. The lack of significant findings about factors affecting progress may well be due to confounding factors that mask patterns that might otherwise be seen. The patterns that have been found may be statistical artefacts due to 'ceiling' and 'floor' effects of the reading test. It is also worth emphasising that this is largely a study of progress in *reading*. No serious attempt was made to assess students' writing.

Concerns are discussed under three headings: (1) issues around the practical design of the study and the data collection; (2) issues about the validity and reliability of the tests and the way findings from them were analysed and interpreted; and (3) the original research brief and how this sets inevitable limitations on what the study can tell us about student progress.

Finally some reflections are offered about what has been learned from this study, and possible ways of building on knowledge about student progress in literacy in the future.

3. The practical design and data collection

There are a number of concerns about the adequacy of the sampling.

- There was a high drop-out between the pre-test and post-test phases: 57 per cent of the original sample of learners returned for the second reading test. Although the authors are reassuring about the comparability of the pre-test and post-test samples in terms of their characteristics (gender, age, and so on), the main worry is that in this study the drop-out was not just from the testing but also from the ABE programme itself. By definition any student who dropped out of the programme would not get the chance to take part in the post-test phase and it might reasonably be expected for those who dropped out to have made less progress. It would seem important to include students who leave the programmes in any investigation of student progress, especially if attempts are being made to correlate progress with programme characteristics. There is a variety of ways that members of this group could have been followed up, but they cannot be treated simply as non-respondents to the test.
- Two different samples are combined in the study. This is not in itself a problem. However, it does put certain demands on the analysis: findings from each sample need to be separately presented as well as combining them. In addition, not enough information was given about the intensive sample (what was the purpose and structure of the experimental programmes from which the sample was drawn, for example, and were they all in Wales as the title of the published evaluation report implies?). In particular the hypothesis that more intensive tuition would affect progress was not supported (students on intensive programmes in fact made less progress than the rest). There are questions about how the comparison between sub-samples was carried out.
- The sampling basis for the tutor survey is not specified in the report. This is information that could easily be included and is important: first in order to judge how far they are representative of tutors as a whole across England and Wales; and second to give a better sense of tutors' relationships (if any) to the students included in the sample and the kinds of teaching activities they were engaged in. The information presented on tutors seems to be interesting and unique, so it is a pity that fuller information is not available in the report. It is known, for example, from comparisons with BSA statistics that full-time staff are over-represented in this study but it is not apparent why this should be the case.

Some aspects of the pre-test/post-test design are also problematic:

- Pre-test/post-test designs of this type are most appropriate when the tests relate quite specifically to the content and purposes of the programmes within which learners are studying. The test constructed for this study bears no necessary relation to what students had been doing in the programmes, especially the items drawn from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and from the reading tests designed for school-children. It is possible that learners were involved in some activities related to the Basic Skills Communications Standards, but this is not known for sure and reports from the tutors suggest that a broad and variable range of activities was taking place in the programmes.
- The time gap between pre-test and post-test was variable, as explained in the description of the practicalities of carrying out the testing programmes (see Appendix A). In itself this is not a problem, but there are two aspects of the design that make it hard to interpret the findings.

First, even if it was not possible to control the length of time between pre-test and post-test for an individual learner, the research should surely have aimed for an average period of tuition that might have had a reasonable chance of showing some progress if it existed. This could be based, for example, on the number of hours of tuition that school-children typically need in order to show a certain amount of progress in reading (for instance, the number of months of literacy tuition that would, on average, result in a child moving up one key stage). There is no indication that this was ever considered by the researchers in their original design. Yet without such a rationale, the finding of ‘undramatic but worthwhile progress’ means very little. By extending the average period between pre-test and post-test (or, indeed by reducing it) a range of different results could be obtained.

The second serious problem is that the design of the study fails to discriminate between the mode of teaching students experienced (for example, group, individual or drop-in open learning), the number of tuition hours and the intensity of tuition (for example, eight hours in a single week or spread over eight weeks). Experience of researching ABE provision shows that this is not a trivial matter. It is potentially a complex issue to solve in terms of research design and data collection but one that has to be tackled if the aim is to discover something meaningful about the relationship between progress and learning hours.

While it is useful to have the measure of ‘number of hours of literacy tuition’ to correlate with test scores, the suspicion is that such a simple measure masks a whole range of different learning experiences, all of which might affect progress. It would have been good to be able to cross-reference this measure with mode of tuition and intensity of provision (i.e. time elapsing between pre-test and post-test) for each student.

- A final confounding variable is that there were problems in estimating the extent of tuition that students were receiving concurrently on other courses. Again this is important, as one might reasonably expect additional teaching/learning hours on other basic skills related courses to contribute to progress.

4. The test construction and analysis

The second set of concerns relates specifically to the construction of the tests that were used to assess student progress, and the ways in which the findings they generated were analysed and interpreted. For a variety of reasons explained below, the test results are of dubious validity and there is a range of confounding variables that might explain both the few statistically significant findings and the non-significance in many other areas. To double-check this interpretation of the test results a commentary on these aspects of the report was requested from the Lancaster University Centre for Applied Statistics. As well as confirming the concerns listed below, the consultant’s overall conclusion was that the statistical analysis presented is variable in its sophistication and that not enough information is presented in Appendix E to enable proper evaluation of the item response analysis reported there.

1. Reading: The reading test was designed by combining test items from three different sources. One source was the International Adult Literacy Survey, normed against the

adult population of the UK. A second source was an international study of children's reading, normed against a population of 9-year-old children. The third source were items developed in relation to the BSA's Communication Standards – appropriate for this sample of adults. However, the BSA standards became redundant half-way through the study as a result of the Moser review of adult basic skills and the subsequent new framework being introduced.

There is no problem, in principle, with combining items from different sources, but the concern would be that they might not be as discriminating when used with a different population. For example, an item designed for a 9-year-old may be ineffective when used with adults. Changing the criteria against which some of the items are referenced mid-way through the study is an added difficulty.

The risk of items not being suitably discriminating for this population does appear to be borne out. The authors discuss the problems of both ceiling effects on high-scoring students and the inability of the test to discriminate adequately small amounts of progress made by students at the bottom end of the scale. These effects mean that differential progress made by different groups of students will interact with their initial level of performance on the test, making it difficult to interpret any patterns that arise. The test results were in a number of ways quite chaotic and the authors refer to the 'turbulence' of students' responses. A very plausible alternative interpretation is that the test itself is faulty and unreliable.

One of the claims made is that students attend courses to maintain their skills rather than to improve them. This is a reasonable assertion, but not really based on the research findings. This claim was put forward to explain the fact that the majority of adults pre-tested already had functional reading when they entered the study. This might have been interpreted as a recruitment problem since this result means that these students are not part of the 7 million adults whom courses are supposed to be reaching. The 'finding' about students attending to maintain their skills should be considered only as a plausible hypothesis for future studies to investigate. If it is true, it suggests that a different type of provision is needed.

Tables presented in Chapter 6 show a very mixed set of results for the relationship between reading progress and hours of tuition. The summary of the results in these tables misrepresents the findings by implying that there is some regular pattern relating progress and regular attendance at provision – but none is present. There is no consistent trend linking more tuition hours with more progress. The most significant result is for the category of attendance 51-60 hours. This lack of pattern strongly suggests that 'hours of tuition' was just not a discriminating enough measure. It confounds too many other variables, and there are the problems of problems of 'floor' and 'ceiling' effects on the progress test scores themselves.

II. Writing: Chapter 5 of the report offers an important assertion about writing progress, based on trivial evidence. This study is largely about progress in reading. Arguably, no useful data at all are presented about progress in writing, because writing was not properly tested. Writing was assessed by means of a simple prompt, 'Write a bit about what you hope to/have learned here'. The paper form on which this question was written was left to tutors to administer and some of them wrote the response on the student's behalf. The responses were scored in a detailed way for structure, length and errors, in a way that is totally misplaced given the fragility of the data on which the analysis is based. On the other hand, the *content* of the students' responses was ignored even though it is reasonable to assume that both tutors and students might have interpreted this question as a request for students' own views of their progress.

Studies of need (such as those based on the National Children Development Study data) show that adults are more likely to need help with writing than with reading. The lack of attention paid to writing therefore seriously limits the usefulness of the current research. This is an undiscussed bias in almost all quantitative surveys of adult literacy. The reason is totally understandable – it is much harder to develop good measures of writing than of reading. But this is something that the government should tackle if it wants to do credible research – first carrying out detailed studies of adult writing needs, motivations and strategies for learning, and only then developing quantitative measures.

III. Teacher-related information. As mentioned above, two teacher-related variables were found to be significant to students' progress in reading – the presence of teaching assistants and all staff in a programme having formal teaching qualifications. Both of these factors are interesting and important, though there are definitional problems of what is meant by them – they appear to be being viewed by the researchers through a school-focused lens. The result given in Table 6.6 about classroom teaching assistance is very striking. However, the table shows that the degree of tutor support was related to the pre-test scores of students. This is exactly what we would expect: lower scoring students often need, and are offered, more individual support. But this means that there is an interaction between level of student pre-test scores and amount of tutor support. Given the ceiling on higher-scoring students' gains, this very striking result may be simply a statistical artefact. The finding on teaching assistants is one area where it would also have been very useful to have the findings broken down by mode of teaching.

The finding about teachers' qualifications is also very marked, and it is important to know whether this was related to some specific types of providers who recruit especially well-qualified staff, and perhaps vary in other ways as well.

In general, some aspects of tutors' background, experience and activities are reported very briefly while others are inexplicably thorough. For example, more information is needed on the backgrounds and qualifications of ABE teachers. Fifty-six per cent were graduates and 75 per cent are reported to have 'qualified teacher status' (including a PGCE or Teaching Certificate, over and above any Basic Skills Teaching qualification). This therefore looks a very highly qualified group in comparison with FE teachers in general. 'QTS' is a relatively recent term used for approved preparation for school teaching. Possibly many of the basic skills teachers may have done their first degrees and PGCEs some time ago, before this term was in use. Ninety-one per cent of respondents reported some professional development activity (broadly defined) in the previous three years, suggesting a surprisingly 'in touch' group, though this result would need to be compared with figures for FE teachers more generally. So the conclusion about lack of opportunities for professional development does not seem to be borne out by these findings.

Findings about the attitudes, activities and professional development of ABE teachers are misrepresented in the summary and based on a very inadequate methodology. Tutors' statements of their aims and activities in teaching indicate a broader set of concerns than those measured by the progress tests, including issues to do with developing students' confidence and self-esteem. The tutors were presented with a list of authors who had written about literacy (compiled by the research team) and asked which ones were familiar to them. The most familiar authors were Frank Smith and Ken Goodman, leading the researchers to conclude that tutors' ideas are out-of-date. The list of authors offered is a partial one (well-established British authors such as Brian Street, Jane Mace and Peter Hannon were not included, for example). Tutors were not asked to suggest their own names for the list.

5. Assessing progress: the brief and boundaries of the study

The third set of concerns relates to the original research brief and design which has built in limitations to what the research team could have found out.

First, there is a built-in bias against representing the diversity in the student population and goals for literacy. The definition of progress comes from outside the programmes, through the test. It works with a notion of a 'typical' programme and a national adult norm, both of which are highly fictional. Both the population of learners in ABE in England and Wales, and consequently the programmes offered to them, are diverse. A number of exclusions were made of minority provision in order to provide a clear scope and to simplify the research design: non-FEFC funded programmes, small programmes (especially in rural areas), provision in prisons, numeracy, specialist programmes for adults speaking English as an Additional Language and adults with learning difficulties, secondary basic skills support. Even after these exclusions, we are left with a range of study modes and programme types, none of which were clearly

acknowledged in the design of the study. Unless there is an intention to reduce ABE provision to a standard repetition of initial schooling, there can be no justification for setting up research in a way that ignores these differences.

Second, the research prioritises the search for descriptive quantitative trends rather than explanation and analysis of what is going on in order to inform policy and practice. It is not clear whether the original brief encouraged this or whether it is the researchers' own interpretation of what was required. However, research does not have to operate in this way and the review of previous work should have alerted the authors to the probable pitfalls of this approach. In their review in Chapter 1 the authors say that the NFER study carried out in the mid-1970s ran into severe data collection difficulties, and that the statistical analysis they used was later discredited. Similar problems occurred with the impact studies carried out in the US, including problems with assessment measures and problems with tracking students in a pre-test/post-test design. The authors should have been able to conclude something from these previous studies about the potential problems of the data design and collection that they subsequently encountered. These pointed to the need to balance qualitative and quantitative methods and the need for national surveys to be complemented by smaller local studies, which can be accumulated over time in a co-ordinated strategy and evaluation process. However, none of these lessons seems to have been learned.

The present study is a good example of how descriptive, quantitative research in an under-documented field has to revert to guesswork to interpret its findings, in the absence of qualitative information. The guesswork appears to be informed by the researchers' experience of school literacy rather than adult learning and there is an apparent lack of critical awareness on the part of the report authors of the limitations of what they have done.

Some progress is made by the majority of learners in this study, as measured by a functional skill-based test but no convincing explanation can be offered as to why or how. No information is given about the impact of ABE on learners' lives or progression in terms of employment or further education, and there is no attempt to look at the relationship of measured progress with the aims and motivations of either tutors or learners. It is clear, however, from the tutor survey that the tutors, at least, have broader aims than the test assumes. No data were collected on what either staff or adult learners are trying to achieve. Test items from the IALS and elsewhere were adopted uncritically.

No information is presented about what might be important factors for progress in terms of student characteristics or motivation. Although some basic information about gender, age, ethnicity and language was gathered there was no serious attempt to explore such variables. Important information is revealed about the extent of EAL students in general provision (15 per cent) and the range of languages spoken by students (42) but this is not picked up in the recommendations. Neither students nor tutors were given the opportunity to comment on their own views of progress even via the questionnaire. The content of the responses students gave to the question of what they had learned was not analysed. The study is therefore unable to represent a range of information potentially available from both students and tutors about what was going on, and so fails to improve our understanding of student progress in literacy.

6. A strategy for future studies of progress

A well-designed study of student progress in adult literacy needs to cover the following:

- a discussion of the 'outcome measures' against which progress is being defined and the boundaries that are drawn around these: plausible measures are language skills, but also impacts on students' lives and other activities, measures related to the curriculum and purposes of the programme, the tutors and the students. If a skills-based definition is used then it might include basic language skills, functional task-related skills, literacy practices and critical literacy.
- an exploration of the characteristics of the students – basic demographics, cultural and language background; plus their previous experiences and incoming literacy needs and aspirations, motivation for joining the programme and circumstances around this choice (or forced allocation in some cases).

- an account of the characteristics of the programme. Many variables need to be described carefully, including: the location and ‘framing’ of the programme; aims and purposes, including any curriculum followed; style of learning/type of teaching support offered; technologies used; size of learning group; availability of individual tutor and peer support; frequency of tuition; knowledge of and links with local community; forms of assessment used (including initial placement, diagnostic assessment, progress and achievement).

A variety of sampling strategies is possible and a range of data might be collected in the course of such a study, including tests/student records; observation of programmes; interviews with students and programme workers.

If the current study were to be seen as the first stage in a planned set of projects using mixed methods as appropriate to the issues and the practical constraints on research, then there is much of value that could be built on. Such a series of studies should be built on an approach of on-going evaluation of programmes, with full participation of tutors and with the voices of students represented. Models of such evaluation strategies are readily available and basic skills teachers could be trained and supported to incorporate these routinely into their practice. This strategy should be put in place now, starting with the Pathfinder projects, so that we do not ever arrive at the same situation again where 25 years of practice have largely disappeared from historical view.

In their recommendations, the authors suggest further studies. These are variable in their specificity and in how far they are derived from the findings of the study. For example, ‘The conditions in which students’ learning is best consolidated and maintained need to be understood much better’ is a very general suggestion that needs to be refined. A further list of such studies might include: the role of volunteers and paid teaching assistants; studies of writing with an emphasis on developing tutors’ knowledge as well as students’ and appropriate ways of assessing progress in writing; and an investigation of the training needed by tutors who work with bilingual literacy learners and the strategies they currently use.

The study of ABE teachers included in this project could well have been conducted as a piece of important research in its own right. It is suggested that it be treated as a pilot for a more robustly designed survey. This would include tutors’ own views of their training needs and be used to inform staff development programmes in ABE. The role of volunteers and assistants in ABE has a long and specific history. A thorough study of this is needed to determine the future roles for such learner support.

Professor Mary Hamilton
CSET, Lancaster University
m.hamilton@lancaster.ac.uk

Appendix: Answering the Press

Points from *The Times* article*

- 'poorly qualified and part-time teachers with ideas rooted in the 1960s'
This was not a representative sample of tutors: for example more full-timers than in the population of tutors as a whole. 56 per cent were graduates and 75 per cent had 'qualified teacher status' so this is actually looks a very highly qualified group in comparison with FE teachers in general. In addition, 91 per cent of respondents reported some professional development activity (broadly defined) in previous three years, suggesting a surprisingly 'in touch' group, though I don't know the figures for FE more generally. So the conclusion on page xxvi about lack of opportunities for professional development does not seem to be borne out by these findings.
The assertion that tutors have 'ideas rooted in the 1960s' comes from two sources of evidence in the study. The first is tutors' statements of their aims and activities in teaching which indicated a broader set of concerns than developing skills, including issues to do with developing students' confidence and self-esteem. The tutors were presented with a list of authors who had written about literacy (compiled by the research team) and asked which ones were familiar to them. The most familiar authors were Frank Smith and Ken Goodman. The list of authors is partial (people such as Brian Street, Jane Mace, Peter Hannon and Shirley Heath were not included, for example) – and tutors were not allowed to suggest their own names for the list.
- '1 person in 8 makes enough progress to meet the new targets after 20 weeks' tuition.'
Yes, but see my comments about the validity and reliability of the test, plus the lack of a rationale for why one would expect 20 weeks to be the criterial period for learning.
- 'Improvements in writing were negligible'
Writing was not tested. See comments under my report Section 4.II
- 'only more intensive teaching would produce significant improvements'
The findings of this study do not support this. Although the design was faulty and the analysis incomplete in this study, the results we do have suggest that students on the intensive programme made less progress than those on other programmes.
- 'Those who were taught regularly by qualified staff with classroom assistants made twice as much progress as the rest'
These are clear findings but the second is confounded by the fact that learners with classroom assistance were those with lower level scores on the pre-test and such students made more progress on the test than those starting at a higher level.
- '60 per cent could read simple texts but wanted to improve skills such as spelling and punctuation'
We have no idea what the students wanted to do on these programmes as no-one asked them. This 'finding' is a way of accounting for the awkward discovery that the majority of students in the sample were already reading above the functional literacy level at the pre-test stage! The researchers developed the argument that this means students are attending courses to maintain their basics skills rather than to improve them.
- 'only about one third moved up one of the three levels by which basic literacy is assessed'
True, but see my arguments about how much time you would expect an adult to take to move up a level. Without this yardstick we have no idea whether this is reasonable progress or not.
- 'The new research had prompted an intensive programme of re-training'
I believe this is a re-writing of history. The intensive programme of re-training is to induct tutors into the new curriculum and standards and would have happened regardless of the findings of this study.

* 'Teachers blamed for adult illiteracy', *The Times*, 23 January 2001

Answering points from *The Guardian* article*

- 'students make disappointingly little progress in reading and even less in writing'
see answers above
- 'the survey showed that tutors are largely part-time'.
We have already known this for a long time from BSA monitoring statistics The survey did not tell us this as it is not a properly representative sample. In fact it over-represented the number of full-time staff.
- 'Although well-qualified they lacked opportunity for professional development.'
See above: in fact, 91 per cent of those questioned said they had been involved in some professional development activity over the previous three years
- 'Classroom assistants made a real difference but were not available to 40 per cent of tutors'
See above also: this very clear finding was confounded by a difference in the pre-test scores of the student groups where assistance was available.
- 'students were tested before and after the courses'
The courses did not have discrete beginning and ending points in this way. In fact, there was no control over when the pre-test and post-tests took place (variably between October 1998 and July 1999) and the range of teaching hours that elapsed between tests ranged from over 60 to less than 20.
- 'reading students showed a small but statistically significant improvement'
the majority did, but nearly a third showed a decline in their post-test scores
- 'writing students showed no significant reduction in errors and no increase in complexity in their re-tests'
Whilst this is accurately reported from the study, my view is that writing was not really tested at all during this study – see earlier comments

* 'Poor progress report', *The Guardian*, 23 January 2001



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