



Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy



BIS, MOD and NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) would like to thank all those in the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force who took part in and supported this study.

NIACE is the leading non-government organisation in England and Wales for all types of adult learning. NIACE is committed to supporting an increase in the numbers of adults engaged in formal and informal learning and to widening access to learning opportunities for those who do not traditionally take part in education and training.

This publication has been produced by NIACE as a summary of the Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study report (released in June 2012) for employers, training providers and the wider community with an interest in improving literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace.

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“When someone’s wounded and they need to be extracted by helicopter, you have to write down quite a bit of information and then pass that through the radio, and I’d be happy to read that off and speak it, but I would not want to be the man who had to write it down because other people have to [use this information to] find out what’s happened to that casualty. And that’s one of them things where I actually do lie in my pit at night and think, ‘Christ, imagine if I did’. When I write half of the letters are back to front, upside down... and that’s something I am not confident in myself, just to get down and write something if I needed to. It sounds ridiculous, I mean a grown man to be worried about doing that.”

Serviceman interview

Introduction

The Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study shows how a large employer has successfully put English and maths at the heart of its support for the development of the skills of their staff. The Study shows that when learning is closely aligned with and supports individuals' work roles, there is a large increase in both active engagement and the achievement of qualifications needed for progression and working more effectively.

The Study was commissioned jointly by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and was carried out between 2008 and 2011. It enables a better understanding of the link between English and maths skills and operational effectiveness, and highlights significant lessons learned for the Armed Forces that will be of interest to other employers.

The government is committed to ensuring that all young people and adults have the English and maths skills they need to function at work and in life generally. In May 2011, the government published its response to the Wolf Review,¹ accepting the recommendation that young people aged 16–18, who have not yet achieved English and maths GCSEs at A*–C, should continue to work towards these qualifications. In its national skills strategy, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*,² the government reinforces the importance of improved literacy and numeracy for economic growth, for transforming individuals' lives and driving social mobility. Its commitment to funding these adult skills improvements through more effective provision is underlined in its further education and skills reform plan, *New Challenges, New Chances*.³



¹ DfE (2011) *Wolf Review of Vocational Education: Government Response*. London: Department for Education.

² BIS (2010) *Skills for Sustainable Growth: Strategy Document. Full Report*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

³ BIS (2011) *New Challenges, New Chances. Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan: Building a World Class Skills System*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.



The Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) commissioned the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) to conduct a study into the basic skills of Armed Forces personnel during their early years of service.

The Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study (AFLS) presents a profile of literacy and numeracy levels and provision, and shows how improvements are related to the professional development and operational effectiveness of Service personnel.

The aims and objectives of the Study were to:

- assess the impact of literacy and numeracy skills and interventions on the personal and professional development of Service personnel and on their operational effectiveness;⁴ and
- make recommendations for the most effective interventions and support for Service personnel in their first two years of service.

The study focused on recruits assessed with low levels⁵ of literacy or numeracy skills on joining the Armed Forces, and the support they received during their subsequent two years in uniform.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research comprised a three-year investigation into literacy and numeracy learning in the Royal Navy (RN), Army and Royal Air Force (RAF). There were two strands: a qualitative exploration undertaken for each of the three Services; and a quantitative study undertaken amongst Army recruits. Each strand was conducted in three stages:

- at the start of recruits' Phase 1 (foundation military skills) training;
- during and soon after their Phase 2 (specialist trade) training; and
- during their first appointment in service.

The qualitative study focused on a series of detailed case studies (22–29 recruits from each Service). The evidence from these groups was supplemented by testimony from the recruits' line managers, trainers and senior officers from their chain of command, as well as from education staff and literacy and numeracy practitioners.

4 The ability to perform those duties and wider responsibilities expected of that individual's rank, job and experience, to the required standard.

5 Below national Level 1 standard. Level 1 is equivalent to GCSE Grades D–G.



The quantitative study assessed the literacy and numeracy skills levels and reviewed the literacy and numeracy needs and learning of around 1600 Army recruits during their first two-and-a-half years of training and service. The analysis of this representative sample of recruits was used to complement the qualitative evidence, which, in turn, was used to inform the quantitative evidence.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The Study addressed the following questions:

- What is the nature and what are the characteristics of literacy and numeracy provision and support in each Service?

- What are the connections between, on the one hand, literacy and numeracy levels, interventions and military training and, on the other, individuals' subsequent operational effectiveness? What are the links between literacy and numeracy learning and using these skills in each Service?
- How do Service personnel experience literacy and numeracy provision? How do personnel perceive and value literacy and numeracy learning in relation to their professional identity, job performance and career progression?

The final year included an inquiry into the literacy and numeracy related features and requirements that are distinctive to each Service, including a consideration of issues arising from specific learning difficulties (SpLDs).

National policy context

In 1999 Lord Moser's inquiry into adult literacy and numeracy skills⁶ estimated that one in five adults in England had poorer literacy than was expected of an 11-year-old child and around 40 per cent had low or very low levels of numeracy. In response, the then government launched its Skills for Life strategy for England, designed to raise the levels of literacy and numeracy skills among the adult population. The current government remains committed to ensuring all adults have a level of skills to enable them to function effectively at work

and in life generally – see Table 1 for the estimates of adult literacy and numeracy skills in England.

In publishing a new national skills strategy for England, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, the Coalition Government made a commitment to funding provision in full for those without basic literacy and numeracy skills. It has since completed a review of adult literacy and numeracy provision and set out in *New Challenges, New Chances* the actions that are being taken to make provision more effective.

Table 1: Definition and prevalence of literacy and numeracy skill levels

	Equivalent to...	Estimated adult population with literacy skills at this level	Estimated adult population with numeracy skills at this level
Entry Level 1 (EL1) or below	...the level expected of a 7 year old. Adults below Entry Level 1 may not be able to write short messages or select floor numbers in lifts.	5% (1.7m)	6.8% (2.3m)
Entry Level 2 (EL2)	...the level expected of a 9 year old. Adults with below Entry Level 2 may not be able to read instructions or use a cash point to withdraw cash.	2.1% (0.7m)	16.9% (5.8m)
Entry Level 3 (EL3)	...the level expected of an 11 year old. Adults with skills below Entry Level 3 may not be able to understand price labels and percentages.	7.8% (2.7m)	25.4% (8.7m)
Level 1 (L1)	...GCSE grades D–G. Adults with skills below Level 1 may not be able to read timetables or check the pay and deductions on a wage slip.	28.5% (9.7m)	29% (9.9m)
Level 2 (L2) or above	...GCSE grades A*–C. Adults with skills below Level 2 may not be able to read complex sentences or work out a budget.	56.6% (19.3m)	21.8% (7.5m)

Source: BIS (2011) *Skills for Life survey: Headline Findings*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

6 Moser, C. (1999) *A Fresh Start: Improving Literacy and Numeracy*. London: Department for Education and Employment.

The Skills for Life strategy and the current national skills strategy provide the general policy context for the Armed Forces Literacy and Numeracy Policy, on which each individual Service's policy is based. Armed Forces policy states that 'sound literacy and numeracy skills enhance the ability of Service personnel to assimilate training more effectively,

to cope more readily with the demands of their specific roles and to take full advantage of career opportunities, thereby contributing to reduced wastage in training and improved retention'. The improvement of literacy and numeracy skills thereby makes a 'significant contribution to Service personnel strategies'.



Literacy and numeracy within the Armed Forces

‘Opportunities to access literacy and numeracy support are organised through the network of training units and education centres in the UK and overseas.’

The current overarching Armed Forces Literacy and Numeracy Policy (2010) seeks a whole-organisational approach to literacy and numeracy improvement across the Services and states that ‘the case for pursuing improvements to the literacy and numeracy skills of our personnel is unequivocal.’ The Policy reinforces the MOD’s long-standing aim to ensure the literacy and numeracy needs of Armed Forces personnel are addressed at the earliest opportunity, enhancing their trainability, operational effectiveness and their potential for personal and career development, both in-service and on resettlement into civilian life. It imposes minimum literacy and numeracy standards on the individual Services and sets out the key principles that are to underpin the Services’ literacy and numeracy provision.

NATIONAL POLICY AND IMPACT OF FUNDING

The development of the Armed Forces Literacy and Numeracy Policy is shaped by national policy and government priorities. Like other departments, the MOD has been expected to lead by example.

The skills agenda

The commitment by successive governments to ensuring all adults have adequate literacy and numeracy skills has been the driving force behind the developments within the Services. Most recently, the development of the functional skills qualifications will support and promote contextualised learning and the accumulation of transferable skills. The Armed Forces have been at the forefront of developments around functional skills. Since September 2012, all literacy and numeracy provision offered to Service personnel must lead to a functional skills qualification or

‘There is a strong culture of training and development to prepare for immediate job roles and promotion, with overt encouragement and support for individual improvement, progression and ‘getting on’.’

GCSE English and maths, where appropriate. In addition, the apprenticeship programmes that support military trade training now provide the principal route for improving English and maths skills amongst Service recruits.

Funding

Since 2001, young people and adults with literacy and numeracy needs have been able to access provision that is fully funded by government. In more recent years, an increasing focus on apprenticeships, with their integrated literacy and numeracy requirements, has provided additional access to government-funded literacy and numeracy provision for many.

The Armed Forces are strongly committed to helping Service personnel with literacy and numeracy needs to improve their skills. They have therefore sought to enhance their own investment in their literacy and numeracy programmes with externally funded provision. As with other employers, the use of externally funded provision has influenced the Services’ literacy and numeracy policies, implementation plans and the configuration of provision.

LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROVISION IN THE ARMED FORCES

Many characteristics of the Service context that impact on literacy and numeracy provision are common across the RN, Army and RAF; the training culture, the training regimes, the demands of operational commitments and pressures of Service life are broadly similar and exert considerable influence on the configuration of literacy and numeracy services that are made available. Of particular note is the strong Service ethos that generates high expectations of success amongst learners and their line managers. The scale and scope of literacy and numeracy needs, however, differ significantly between the three Services and within each Service. As a result, each Service has developed its own literacy and numeracy policy and provision, tailored to reflect its needs.

The literacy and numeracy support service across the Armed Forces provides initial and diagnostic assessment of individual needs, the maintenance of individual learning plans and the provision of support programmes leading to nationally recognised qualifications.



All literacy and numeracy provision is delivered or supported by qualified, specialist literacy and numeracy staff (either MOD-funded, in-house practitioners or externally funded tutors) and is organised to meet the needs of learners and their employing units. A substantial share of the literacy and numeracy needs of recruits is met through functional skills provision on accredited apprenticeship programmes delivered as part of specialist trade training.

Outside these apprenticeship programmes, opportunities to access literacy and numeracy support are organised through the network of training units and education centres in the UK and overseas. These are available either as mandatory training to support military requirements of a specialist trade, role or rank; or as elective training for personal development.

THE SERVICE ENVIRONMENT

Scale of need

Each year, up to 50 per cent of the Army's 8000–10,000 recruits join the Service with literacy or numeracy skills at Entry Level 3 or below. About

8–9 per cent of recruits are at Entry Level 2 with about 1 per cent at Entry Level 1. This profile has been reasonably consistent over the past ten years. In contrast, the RN and RAF have a very much lower incidence of poor literacy or numeracy skills amongst recruits (1–3 per cent below Level 1). See Figure 1, page 18.

In addition, the recruitment of foreign nationals varies significantly, with some 9000 serving in the Army, compared with only a few hundred in the RN and the RAF. Most of these have ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) needs; many join with English speaking and listening skills at Entry Level 3 or below.

For the Army, at least, simply raising the minimum literacy and numeracy entry requirements is not a viable or practical solution. There is no confidence that the numbers of recruits required for certain Army specialisations will be found, if entry standards are increased.

CULTURE OF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The Services have historically recruited all their personnel at the lowest rank and proceeded



to 'grow their own', promoting staff to all posts from within the organisation. There is a strong culture of training and development to prepare for immediate job roles and promotion, with overt encouragement and support for individual improvement, progression and 'getting on'. Securing sound literacy and numeracy skills forms an integral part of the development pathways, as they are recognised as essential 'enabling' skills. Indeed, across all three Services, attainment of minimum literacy and numeracy standards is now a mandated requirement for promotion to specific ranks.

The Services endeavour to make the most of the potential of their personnel throughout their careers by means of education and training. The accreditation of military training and experience, and the opportunity for staff to gain new skills and nationally recognised qualifications, are significant features of Service culture. In this way, personnel completing their Service engagement are also better placed to secure a second career and make a successful transition back into civilian life. This positive learning and development culture generates an expectation of success in training

for both the individual and the organisation. This in turn promotes an 'enabling' environment that encourages Service personnel to engage with literacy and numeracy provision as well as other training opportunities throughout their careers.

The training system

On joining, recruits develop their Service-specific foundation skills during intensive Phase 1 (initial) training before undergoing their trade training (e.g. telecommunications, catering) at specialist Phase 2 training establishments. On successful completion, they assume their first appointments as trained ratings, soldiers and airmen/women. As part of their through-career professional development, they undergo further specialist Phase 3 and in-unit trade training and extensive collective unit training, as well as integrated or stand-alone education programmes to support this training and their promotion. Literacy and numeracy provision is delivered within these education programmes.

The training system reflects the organisational demands of the Armed Forces. Training is intensive and very closely linked to job and rank requirements; programmes are often

‘The challenge for the Services lies in building a system of literacy and numeracy provision that meets the needs of all personnel, wherever they are stationed across the UK, overseas including on board ship, and on operations.’

centralised; and there is persistent pressure to increase training efficiency and to reduce costs. Teaching programmes and resources that are not contextualised to the specific Service setting are not readily tolerated by learners, military instructors and the chain of command. As such, they are likely to have a reduced impact on learning unless they are shown to be highly responsive to the Services’ contexts. Training includes a large number of programmes (especially in recruit training units) running frequently, allowing only limited opportunities for individualised provision. The training systems are large, incorporating significant organisational and programming complexity, and there is a high turnover of military instructors as part of the routine posting to different locations and appointments.

These features make for systems that are difficult and costly to adjust or change at short notice. They offer little room for experimentation and limited support for teaching and learning approaches that cannot readily be accommodated within the regime. In this context, it is a significant challenge to integrate mandated literacy and numeracy provision, tailored and delivered at a

time and place that meets individual needs in a manner that is sustainable.

Operational environment

The challenge for the Services lies in building a system of literacy and numeracy provision that meets the needs of all personnel, wherever they are stationed across the UK, overseas including on board ship, and on operations. All personnel are likely to be moved every 18 to 36 months on postings, as well as deployed away from home station on operations or training exercises. Daily work patterns are demanding, rigorous and far from routine. Operational tempo for some Service units has been high over recent years, with personnel either preparing for operations, on operations or on post-operational leave. This can significantly constrain opportunities to gain access to literacy and numeracy support and other education provision.

Successful approaches include the provision of flexible educational support during ‘off-duty/down time’ for personnel in operational theatres such as Afghanistan, or who are deployed for long stretches at sea. Operating a responsive and



flexible service requires that close attention is given to the distribution of specialist tutors, their ways of working, their teaching/mentoring/support roles, the use of non-specialist staff and the combination of delivery and learning approaches.

ARMED FORCES POLICY ON LITERACY AND NUMERACY SKILLS

The aim of the overarching Armed Forces Policy is to address the literacy and numeracy needs of Service personnel as early in their careers as possible, in order to maximise the benefit to both the individual and the organisation. Alongside support for new entrants, however, it is also important that the Services meet the significant needs of the rest of the workforce, who were recruited before 2004, when the systematic

approach to literacy and numeracy improvement was introduced.

The principles underpinning the Armed Forces Literacy and Numeracy Policy are that:

- literacy and numeracy competence is directly linked to an individual's operational effectiveness and therefore, operational capability;
- personnel will have the literacy and numeracy specified for particular rank, role and training requirements;
- learning should be progressive and coherent between recruitment, selection, initial training and throughout productive service;

- individuals have a responsibility, shared with their chain of command, to address their literacy and numeracy needs;
- appropriate literacy and numeracy guidance and support will be provided wherever the individual is serving, and work time will be made available to address their needs, wherever practicable;
- learning and accreditation are free to all, with government funding fully exploited; and
- all literacy and numeracy support is geared towards supporting individuals to achieve a nationally recognised qualification.

New entrants face training that places immediate demands on their literacy and numeracy abilities. Applicants who do not hold the equivalent of Level 2 qualifications in maths and English are required to undertake an initial assessment (IA) of their literacy and numeracy skills. A minimum recruiting standard of Entry Level 2 is applied but higher levels are imposed, where appropriate, for specific employment groups such as engineering. The Army assesses all applicants irrespective of qualifications they hold. Additionally, all applicants to join the Services must undergo a screening of their English speaking and listening skills during recruitment to confirm these skills are at least at Level 1 standard. Each Service should then seek to improve the literacy and numeracy abilities of all their recruits by at least one national level and to a minimum of Entry Level 3 by the start of their Phase 2 trade training. Those seeking promotion are required to hold minimum literacy and numeracy qualifications: Level 1 or equivalent for Junior NCO (Non-Commissioning Officer) and Level 2 for Senior NCO.⁷

For those already serving, literacy and numeracy needs are addressed at the earliest opportunity. However, the system of organised provision

must take account of the scale and distribution of needs amongst the workforce, the high level of operational commitments and any requirement for additional teaching and support.

ARMED FORCES POLICY ON SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES (SpLDs)

The Armed Forces Literacy and Numeracy Policy does not treat SpLDs as a literacy- or numeracy-specific issue. The Policy aims to ensure that Armed Forces personnel with SpLDs are identified, assessed and supported in order to maximise their training and learning potential. For the purposes of this Policy, SpLDs encompass dyslexia, Meares-Irlen syndrome, dyscalculia and dyspraxia.

The Services' recruiting and selection processes, which are focused on aptitude, make no separate allowance for personnel with a formal SpLD assessment. Nevertheless, many personnel with SpLDs are able to pass recruitment tests and enter the training pipeline. However, SpLDs can have significant impact on the training, operational effectiveness and prospects for advancement of individual recruits. The Services therefore offer advice and guidance on strategies for coping with SpLDs, designed to enable individuals to improve their ability to assimilate training, cope with the demands of work, and facilitate their career progression.

Each Service must provide support to individuals who have voluntarily come forward or who have been identified by their line manager or instructors as possibly having SpLD needs. They ensure that these individuals have appropriate support and time available to address their needs, so enabling personnel with SpLDs to make a full contribution to operational capability. All personnel, irrespective of their SpLD, must be able to meet the requirements of their job, when carried out under operational conditions.

⁷ Or, for the RAF, within eight years of service.



Lessons learned from the AFLS

‘The development of an overarching literacy and numeracy policy is an essential element in securing a whole-organisational approach to literacy and numeracy provision.’

The AFLS shows how three large employers – RN, Army and RAF – have successfully put English and maths at the heart of their support for the skills development of their staff. It demonstrates how staff can be engaged in learning that supports them to undertake their work roles more effectively, as well as to develop the knowledge, skills and qualifications required for progression. As such, the Study highlights significant lessons that will be of interest to other employers.

A WHOLE-ORGANISATIONAL APPROACH

The development of an overarching literacy and numeracy policy is an essential element in securing a whole-organisational approach to literacy and numeracy provision.

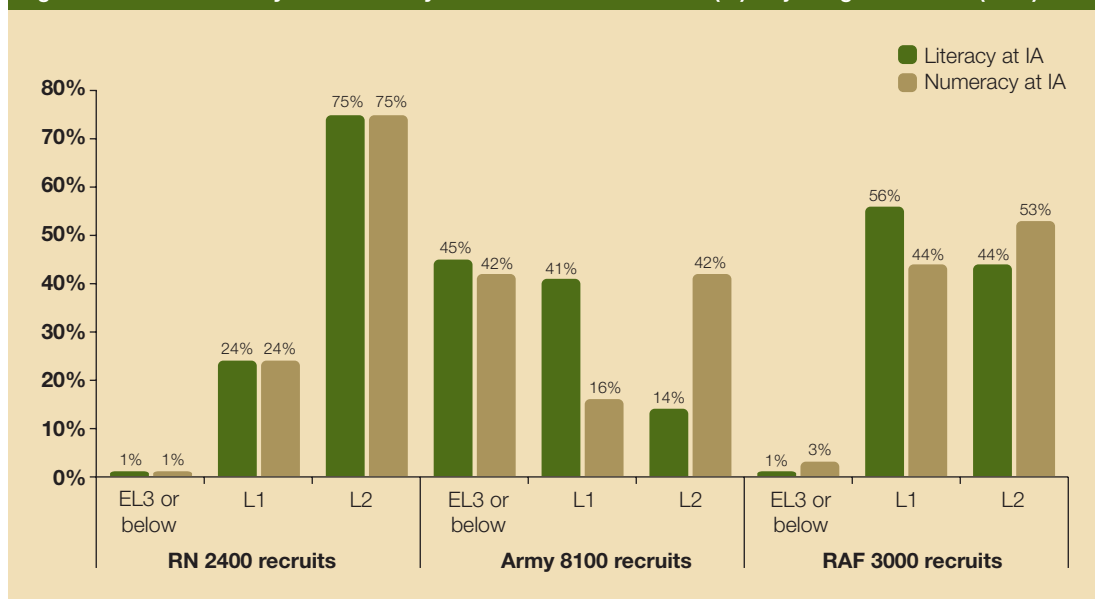
The Armed Forces has an effective Literacy and Numeracy Policy. The Policy provides a statement of high-level support, reflecting its commitment to helping personnel with literacy and numeracy

needs improve their skills. This, in turn, supports both operational effectiveness and workforce development.

Clear evidence exists that this high-level support, combined with a strong culture of training and development, results in a strong record of achievement in literacy and numeracy. The Policy thus represents a model of national significance, with lessons and implications for large employers in non-military contexts.

IMPLEMENTATION AND INVESTMENT ARE INFLUENCED BY RECRUITMENT PROFILE

Although the Armed Forces have one overarching literacy and numeracy policy, wide variation exists in the scale of need between Services. This variation strongly influences the implementation of separate Service policies and thereby the scale of investment made in delivering, managing and assuring literacy and numeracy provision.

Figure 1: Levels of literacy and numeracy skills at initial assessment (IA) on joining the Service (2010)

A far higher proportion of Army recruits have low levels of literacy and numeracy, compared with the RN and RAF. In 2010, up to 50 per cent of Army recruits joined the Service with literacy or numeracy skills below Level 1. In contrast, the RN and RAF have a significantly lower incidence of poor literacy and numeracy skills amongst recruits (see Figure 1). This reflects the size and share across the Services of technical trades, such as engineering, that demand higher qualification entry requirements compared with those specialisms that set few or no academic/vocational entry requirements.

As for any other large employer, the literacy and numeracy profile of its recruits should tailor the level of investment required, as well as how provision is managed, delivered and assured.

DEVELOPING LITERACY AND NUMERACY SKILLS BRINGS PROFESSIONAL AND WIDER BENEFITS

The Army is likely to continue to recruit large numbers of personnel with low levels of literacy and numeracy who show the necessary skills, attitudes and potential to meet entry requirements.

Evidence from the AFLS confirms recruiting entrants with low-level skills need not be detrimental to operational performance, as long as effective support mechanisms that are sensitive to individual and business needs are put in place.

Employees with sound literacy and numeracy skills are more flexible in the roles they can undertake, are able to work more effectively without supervision and are better able to cope with training. In addition, the development of literacy and numeracy skills can also support personnel to become more employable both within the Service and in subsequent civilian life. As such, the Services demonstrate the important professional and socio-economic function that a large employer can successfully play in supporting individuals both at work and in wider life.

LITERACY AND NUMERACY SKILLS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Within the Armed Forces, literacy and numeracy provision is designed to 'enhance the ability of

‘The Services demonstrate the important professional and socio-economic function that a large employer can successfully play in supporting individuals both at work and in wider life.’

Service personnel to assimilate training more effectively [and] to cope more readily with the demands of their specific roles’, i.e. to contribute to their operational effectiveness.

The Study provides strong evidence of the importance of literacy and numeracy skills for both operational effectiveness and professional development.

Trainees across all three Services are required to convey and absorb information swiftly and accurately. This explains why, of all the literacy and numeracy skills, sound speaking and listening skills are considered the most important and essential for an individual’s operational effectiveness at all ranks. In particular, the elements judged most important for operational effectiveness across the Services were ‘being a good listener’, ‘understanding orders and instructions’ and ‘being able to talk confidently to all ranks’. One line manager explained the following in emphasising the importance of listening skills:

“Because if I give him a task he needs to know that task and he needs to be able to take that information in. If he doesn’t do it the job doesn’t get done, and the job could cost somebody their life ... It’s a life-saving skill.”

THE CONTRIBUTION OF SOUND LITERACY AND NUMERACY SKILLS IS A MESSAGE THAT NEEDS TO BE FREQUENTLY RE-ENFORCED

The AFLS powerfully illustrates the importance of re-enforcing the message, across all staff, of the benefits that sound literacy and numeracy skills have on operational effectiveness and career progression.

While the literacy and numeracy skills of AFLS participants were rarely thought to hamper their capacity to be operationally effective if appropriately supported, line managers agreed that literacy and numeracy demands become more exacting following a first promotion. Thus, with increasing requirement to work unsupervised and increasing seniority, low levels of basic skills tend to exert a larger influence on the capacity to be operationally effective and to progress through the ranks.

Sound levels of literacy and numeracy can therefore be regarded as enabling skills that assist staff to take full advantage of training and on-the-job experience. Consequently, line managers, training managers and senior staff have a responsibility to maintain an appropriate level of awareness across their chains of command of the impact of literacy and numeracy skills.



HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND A STRONG TRAINING CULTURE ENCOURAGE SUCCESS

Provision in the Services is distinguished by an ethos that includes high expectations, high levels of motivation and effective incentives for recruits to succeed. These are all characteristics of a positive adult learning environment and are transferable to other major employers.

Many trainees with low literacy and numeracy skills have poor experiences of formal schooling and negative attitudes towards education. In this context, the Services have an impressive record in encouraging staff to understand the importance of literacy and numeracy to their career.

Across all Services, there is an exceptionally high record of achievement in literacy and numeracy qualifications. Learner motivation and engagement are increased by provision that is discrete and intensive, contextualised to Service settings and highly relevant to workplace scenarios. This applies

even to those with very poor experiences of school education.

"I really didn't care about anything at school, just wouldn't study for my exams, but then, when I got to [the Army Foundation College (Harrogate)], it made me realise, right, I need to do it. If I want this so badly, I need to do it."

(Serviceman interview)

With their emphasis on relevance to the workplace, the extensive use of apprenticeships for Service personnel during the first two years of service is widely supported. This provides many opportunities for embedding literacy and numeracy within vocational training. Securing sound literacy and numeracy skills is integral to the development pathways, as they are recognised as essential 'enabling' skills. Indeed, for all Services the attainment of minimum literacy and numeracy standards is a mandated requirement for promotion to specific ranks.

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QUALIFICATIONS MAY NOT ALWAYS BE A RELIABLE PROXY FOR SUSTAINABLE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Linking literacy and numeracy qualifications to promotion acts as an effective incentive for trainees to achieve those qualifications. However, the Services are concerned that ‘qualification-chasing’ funding regimes and the pressure to deliver literacy and numeracy programmes within too short a timescale have encouraged tutors to ‘teach to the test’ (particularly in the case of the Adult Basic Skills Literacy Certificates at Levels 1 and 2). This may not always produce sustainable skills in the long term, or even, possibly, in the short term.

Functional skills qualifications have been adopted across the Armed Forces. These awards will place greater demands on learners, on tutors and on the training organisations. However, the Services consider that the effective introduction of functional

skills awards will go a long way towards improving the impact of literacy and numeracy provision on the development of sustainable and transferable skills.

As re-enforced in the recommendations of the Wolf Report,⁸ the attainment of GCSE A*–C in maths and English is still seen as fundamental to employment and education prospects. This presents a significant challenge to major employers, in respect of the qualifications and English and maths levels their employees should be expected to attain.

APPROPRIATE SUPPORT ENABLES PERSONNEL TO SUCCEED

In line with Armed Forces policy, the Services provide appropriate and coherent support to recruits with SpLD needs. The RAF in particular has established an effective model of supporting

⁸ Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report*. London: Department for Education.



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those with dyslexic needs throughout their Service careers. As such, the Services provide a notable example of how employees can be supported to successfully undertake demanding jobs, despite having an SpLD.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECORDING AND TRACKING PERFORMANCE

The Study highlights the importance of recording, tracking and reporting the literacy and numeracy performance of individuals and corporately for each Service. This informs quality assurance, the development of support programmes for learners, and any future investment in delivery capacity and capability.

Where record keeping is not effective, line managers are often unable to identify and confirm an individual’s educational record. An effective system, on the other hand, enables the employer to track progress and achievement in literacy and numeracy, and to report performance against organisational targets. This demands investment in appropriate management information systems, processes and user training. Streamlining systems alone is not the answer. Investment in coherent systems and improved working practices is required.

Within the Armed Forces, work is taking place to improve the capability of management information systems, though more progress is required.

The Services require that records of their learners’ achievements follow them throughout their career. The majority of line managers, however, reported paying little attention to their subordinate’s level of literacy or numeracy unless a problem presented itself when carrying out their roles or duties, or when checking over records in the course of recommending a Serviceman/ woman for promotion. As one NCO explained when referring to a young female recruit:

“I would assume that basic skills-wise she is competent enough to be operationally effective, because it’s not been highlighted to me that she’s not ... unless it specifically affects the job she’s doing.”



Implications for other employers

This report brings to a close a major three-year longitudinal study. The Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study provides a unique and authoritative body of evidence on the impact of literacy and numeracy on the personal and professional development of personnel in the Armed Forces and, in particular, on their ability to carry out their jobs effectively.

Moreover, the Study makes an important contribution to the wider evidence base on workforce basic skills: what skills are needed in order for employees to carry out their job roles effectively and how employers can best support the development of these skills.

In addition to the specific recommendations for the Armed Forces contained in the full report, messages from this Study will also be invaluable to other large employers in the UK and beyond, and should inform national policy and practice on workforce development.

In particular, NIACE believes that the implications of this Study for other employers are the following:

1. Employers should take a whole-organisational approach to literacy and numeracy provision. This should include the development of an overarching literacy and numeracy policy aligned to their specific business environment, as well as an assessment of the literacy and numeracy profile of their employees.
2. Employers should develop their awareness of the contribution that literacy and numeracy skills make to individual job performance and career progression within their business by:
 - developing and maintaining a network of literacy and numeracy champions at senior stakeholder level and in the workplace;
 - introducing literacy and numeracy awareness training and briefings as part of induction training for specific roles, such as HR staff and line managers; and
 - developing effective and co-ordinated MIS capability and procedures to record, track and report literacy and numeracy progress and performance of individual learners.
3. Employers should consider how best to offer timely literacy and numeracy provision that effectively engages learners and delivers sustainable skills, by working with providers to:
 - offer literacy and numeracy provision that is contextualised to relevant vocational settings and specific organisational contexts, and that is managed to fit around business commitments and routines;
 - maintain the use of discrete, intensive, literacy and numeracy programmes leading to a full qualification and, where appropriate, to basic skills profiles with a mix of levels linked specifically to job roles, entry requirements for technical training programmes and career progression; and





- provide greater focus on speaking and listening skills relevant to the specific needs of learners and their job roles.
- 4. Employers should consider using in-house, qualified literacy and numeracy specialists and networks of trained volunteer support in order to reduce over-reliance on externally-funded provision and provide greater flexibility in delivery.
- 5. In addition to offering literacy and numeracy provision, employers should seek to consolidate literacy and numeracy skills development through re-enforced and supported practice on the job.
- 6. Large employers should share effective approaches to literacy and numeracy skills improvement within workforce development, with other employers and with government, through an appropriate national forum, in order to inform national policy and practice.

Links to the full Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study reports are available at:
www.niace.org.uk/news/armed-forces-effective-approach-to-literacy-and-numeracy

The reports can also be accessed on the BIS website:

Full report, in two parts: www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/a/12-884-armed-forces-basic-skills-part-1 (part 1, doc 12/884)
www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/a/12-885-armed-forces-basic-skills-part-2 (part 2, doc 12/885)

“Sound literacy and numeracy skills enhance the ability of Service personnel to assimilate training more effectively, to cope more readily with the demands of their specific roles and to take full advantage of career opportunities, thereby contributing to reduced wastage in training and improved retention.”

Armed Forces Literacy and Numeracy Policy



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

21 De Montfort Street

Leicester LE1 7GE

Company registration no. 2603322

Charity registration no. 1002775

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