

Helpful approaches to the delivery of English and maths provision for unemployed adults

Report to the
Department for Business,
Innovation and Skills

BIS

Department for
**Business Innovation
and Skills**

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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

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent charity which promotes adult learning across England and Wales. Through its research, development, publications, events, outreach and advocacy activity, NIACE works to improve the quality and breadth of opportunities available for all adults so they can benefit from learning throughout their lives.

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Foreword

NIACE was asked by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to carry out research into the ways in which unemployed adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills are supported, and could be better supported, through joined-up approaches between Jobcentre Plus and learning providers.

The report offers providers, Job Centre managers and policy-makers clear evidence of the impact of poor basic skills on those adults seeking employment, including employers' views. It explains what is meant by poor literacy and numeracy, and how the system works for those adults who present with basic skills difficulties to Job Centre advisers and subsequently to providers.

We know that adults with poor literacy and numeracy face tremendous challenges in accessing, retaining and progressing in sustainable employment; we know that systems and processes often militate against these adults being able to access the support they need; and staff working with this cohort of learners and potential learners would themselves benefit from development to better support learners.

Just this one quote tells us all we need to know about the challenges: 'Basic skills needs among benefit claimants are more than double the national average. Nearly two fifths (38 per cent) of claimants lack functional literacy skills and 45 per cent lack functional numeracy skills.'¹ Work carried out by NIACE recently with employers showed that their biggest issue with recruiting young adults into work was a lack of literacy, numeracy and communication skills.

However, what this report also tells us is how providers and Job Centres are working together, often in very creative ways, to ensure that adults with poor basic skills are able to get the support they need. The case studies offer tangible evidence that a joined-up approach can work – with some creative thinking and a willingness to work in partnership from everyone, including the customer.

There is obviously a need for more provision, offered at times that suit adults; there is a need for Jobcentre Plus advisers to be given support to better work with adults with basic skills needs, which we suggest includes time to work with providers; and there needs to be better collecting and sharing of data, particularly job outcomes data.

Finally, we recommend the consideration of intensive English and maths provision for Job Centre customers with basic skills needs, an approach which has been piloted successfully within offender settings.² While not suitable for all learners, NIACE suggests that this approach might offer an effective way of delivering provision which would be attractive to both Jobcentre Plus and learners.

Carol Taylor, OBE
Director of Development and Research, NIACE

¹ CBI (2009) *Jobs for the Future*.

² Novitsky, J. and Jones, E. (2013) *Intensive English and maths provision in prisons: Evaluation report of the pilots*, Leicester: NIACE.

Executive summary

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent charity which promotes adult learning across England and Wales. Through its research, development, publications, events, outreach and advocacy activity, NIACE works to improve the quality and breadth of opportunities available for all adults so they can benefit from learning throughout their lives.

In 2011, the Wolf Report identified that:

“Good levels of English and mathematics are rewarded directly by the labour market throughout people’s careers.”³

Conversely, people with English and maths skills needs experience a labour market penalty throughout their lives. In recent years, this penalty has increased, the deteriorating labour market position of unemployed people with skills needs prompting the government to say that:

“If people are not able to achieve basic levels of English and maths, then they will struggle to find work of any kind in today’s demanding labour market.”⁴

It is therefore vital that unemployed people with English and maths skills needs can access skills provision that effectively addresses these needs. This report outlines the findings of a NIACE research project, commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), into helpful approaches to the delivery of English and maths provision for unemployed adults. The research involved a survey of 100 providers followed by in-depth research interviews with 25 of these survey respondents. In addition, research interviews took place with five Jobcentre Plus managers and a number of key stakeholders were interviewed, such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), The UK Commission for Employment and Skills, the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) and the Federation of Small Businesses.

Working in partnership to engage unemployed adults

Our research revealed that many providers were receiving increased numbers of referrals of unemployed adults for English and maths provision from Jobcentre Plus (JCP), local authorities, housing associations and community organisations. Some providers said that they were also receiving increased volumes of self referrals due to peer-to-peer recommendation amongst unemployed adults and media reports emphasising the importance of attaining GCSE English and maths. Some providers were concerned that

³ Department for Education (2011) *Review of vocational education: The Wolf Report*.

⁴ BIS (2013) *Rigour and responsiveness in skills*.

their consistently high volumes of unemployed learners could displace other English and maths learners within the community.

As a consequence of differing referral agent policies and approaches to screening, not all providers experienced high referral volumes. Some providers received very few referrals or only received referrals of learners at Pre-entry and Entry Level 1 or 2. In some cases, this made their English and maths provision financially unviable. Providers said that they received more referrals when they attended JCP meetings, arranged information sessions at referral premises, arranged visits to their provision and provided bulletins incorporating learner success stories.

To support the referral process, some providers co-located staff within Job Centres. Co-location enabled providers to raise awareness amongst both JCP advisers and unemployed adults of the positive impact of addressing English and maths needs. This increased learners' motivation to attend their first appointment at the provider venue. Where co-location was not possible, providers often established single points of contact through which referral agents could book new referrals into regular pre-arranged slots for initial interviews. In addition to sending back the JCP tracking form, several providers gave their referral agents access to their management information service systems through which the referral agent could see the outcome of their referral in real time.

Providers were keen to minimise waiting times to maximise conversion rates and meet JCP's expectation that learners begin provision in the shortest possible time. Just five of the 61 providers of discrete English or maths providers that responded to our survey said that new referrals had to wait more than four weeks to start. Longer waiting times were due to staff capacity and room capacity constraints.

Initial and diagnostic assessment

The vast majority of the 100 provider survey respondents used one of two initial assessment tools: BksB or ForSkills. Some providers developed their own in-house initial assessment tools or tailored the existing tools.

Several providers said that they encountered more learners with learning difficulties and disabilities amongst unemployed adults in comparison with other learner cohorts. Because many unemployed adults had not taken part in learning for some time, dyslexia, dyscalculia and other specific learning difficulties and disabilities were often undiagnosed before entry to provision. However, some providers said that waiting times for the arrangement of additional learning support made this difficult to organise within the often short courses undertaken by unemployed adults. Providers also said that more unemployed learners had welfare needs in comparison with other learner cohorts.

Many providers had tailored their standard individual learning plan (ILP) format to meet the needs of unemployed adults by:

- ensuring it could accommodate intensive, short course provision;
- enabling more frequent progress reviews; and
- recording employment goals and the steps required to achieve these goals.

Providers said that regular and frequent progress reviews against ILP objectives and timescales kept unemployed learners on track and provided an opportunity to adjust the pace or direction of learning. These reviews were also motivating for learners as they could reflect on what they had achieved.

Curriculum design

Providers felt the move to Functional Skills was beneficial, several saying that employers appeared to recognise the value of Functional Skills. The move to Functional Skills had inspired renewed interest in teaching and learning approaches to support problem solving, spoken communication skills and writing skills. Although at the time of our research, only a few providers were using the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) unit-based English and maths qualifications, many providers felt they were going to be particularly helpful for unemployed learners by:

- building learner confidence through recognising bite-size achievement;
- accommodating flexible patterns of attendance where necessary;
- enabling spiky skills profiles to be addressed in a focused manner which facilitated progression to the next Functional Skills level; and
- accrediting skills within JCP's and Work Programme providers' preferred timescales.

A few providers were infilling unemployed adults into their standard community-wide English and maths provision, which could be as little as two or three guided learning hours (GLH) per week. However, in response to JCP expectations that unemployed learners address English and maths skills needs in the shortest possible time, many providers had established more intensive provision, ranging from 10 to 20 GLH per week for all learners or specifically for unemployed learners. Several providers said that they had had reservations about launching more intensive provision but their actual experience of running more intensive provision had been positive. Providers who were not already offering more intensive provision said that it would be helpful to research approaches to – and the potential impact of – more intensive provision.

To effectively prepare learners to gain employment within their local labour market, providers:

- sought to engage employers to identify the English and maths skills required in particular sectors;
- contextualised their discrete English and maths provision to meet local employment demands;
- offered English skills workshops and work clubs through which learners could receive help with job applications; and
- embedded or bolted on employability skills provision to develop learners' wider employability skills.

Providers found it helpful to use blended learning approaches where learners had the necessary IT skills. As well as offering opportunities to personalise learning, blended approaches introduced variety within more intensive provision. Because they felt their unemployed learners needed closer support, several providers had reservations about the potential of distance learning.

Building and maintaining motivation

Forty of the 100 providers surveyed said that at least half of their unemployed learners were mandated to attend English and maths provision under Skills Conditionality arrangements. Providers with greater proportions of mandated learners tended to report lower levels of motivation; however, several providers said that levels of motivation and retention rates were better than expected and not unmanageable. Providers said they would welcome advice on measures that they and their referral agents could take to build unemployed learner motivation. Providers suggested that where learners were not motivated this might be due in large part to a lack of confidence that they could progress in English or maths. Providers tried to build learner confidence by displaying learner success stories, arranging employer talks, establishing peer support and recognising small achievements.

Supporting progression and capturing learner destinations

The majority of providers had no means of tracking English and maths learner employment outcomes, although some of these providers were in the process of developing a means to do this. Several providers said it would be helpful if JCP could share the information they held on learner job outcomes. The few providers that were tracking learner outcomes were often able to report good outcome rates, some in the

region of 40 per cent into jobs and apprenticeships and 60 per cent into other positive forms of progression.

Employed learners told providers that improving their English and maths skills had enabled them to:

- establish a routine out of the home, away from family demands;
- better read and respond to job adverts;
- grow in confidence, leading to increased job search activity;
- perform better at interview;
- meet the entry requirements for specific job vacancies, including apprenticeships; and
- meet the day-to-day English and maths requirements of their current job role.

Despite the challenges associated with supporting unemployed learners, many providers reported that their unemployed learners were achieving well in English and maths. If they did not find employment, many providers encouraged learners to progress to higher level English and maths or vocational skills provision. To facilitate their continuation in learning once learners found employment, many providers had established provision at weekends and in the evenings. Several providers reported their frustration that learners were forced to abandon their learning on being referred to the Work Programme.

In light of the report findings, we recommend to government that:

- BIS commissions research to identify the different English, maths and, where appropriate, vocational skills levels needed for adults to function in society, secure employment, sustain employment and progress in employment;
- the Skills Funding Agency scopes the size of need and potential demand for English, maths and vocational skills provision from JCP customers, Work Programme participants and other learners within the community to identify whether this demand can be matched by current provider capacity and funding;
- BIS commissions research into approaches that build learner confidence and motivation at the point of referral, during their initial interview and during their provision induction;
- BIS commissions a pilot research programme to determine the benefits for different groups of unemployed learners of intensive provision of more than 15 GLH per week;
- Jobcentre Plus finds a means of sharing the job outcome data in their possession for

those customers who secure employment during or following participation in skills provision; and

- BIS commissions research into how unemployed learners can continue to develop their English and maths skills once they find employment.

We recommend to learning providers that:

- they work in partnership with referral agents and other learning providers in their locality to ensure provision is available that meets the needs of unemployed learners with learning difficulties and disabilities;
- they consider using self-assessment units of QCF Employability Skills qualifications as part of their initial and diagnostic assessment process, to help learners identify their motivations and strengths and to cover the costs of assessing learners' English and maths skills;
- they strengthen links and referral routes from English and maths provision into labour market led vocational skills provision, such as sector-based work academies, so that this becomes a more common progression route for learners completing English and/or maths provision at Level 1 or 2; and
- they work together with their local Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers to enable unemployed learners to complete their learning programmes and progress into further learning once they are referred to the Work Programme.

Introduction

The proportion of unemployed adults with English and maths needs which act as a barrier to employment

Although there have been few published statistics on the prevalence of English and maths skills needs amongst unemployed adults, the CBI identified that:

“Basic skills needs among benefit claimants are more than double the national average. Nearly two fifths (38 per cent) of claimants lack functional literacy skills and 45 per cent lack functional numeracy skills.”⁵

An even larger proportion of the people who, on becoming long-term unemployed, get referred to the Work Programme, are likely to have literacy skills below Level 1 and numeracy skills below Entry Level 3. This is because many people with higher level skills find employment prior to being considered long-term unemployed and being referred to the Work Programme.

The deteriorating labour market position of people with English and maths needs

Long-term decline in labour market entry opportunities for people with low skills coupled with increased competition between job applicants since the economic downturn, as reported by the CBI⁶ and The Work Foundation,⁷ has meant that people with English and maths needs now find it very difficult to enter employment. A Learning and Skills Network survey of employers' attitudes to recruiting young people revealed that:

“Very few employers appear to be prepared to give a young candidate an entry-level job unless they have the basics... Literacy, communication skills, numeracy and enthusiasm are the most important employability skills in the view of respondents, and a lack of them in a candidate is a ‘deal-breaker’ for many employers.”⁸

All these factors have led the Institute for Fiscal Studies to report that:

“The data suggest that it is low-skilled, low-educated and younger workers whose labour market prospects have suffered most as the UK entered recession in 2008.”⁹

5 CBI (2009) *Jobs for the future*.

6 CBI (2011) *Mapping the route to growth*.

7 The Work Foundation (2011) *The hour glass and the escalator*.

8 Learning and Skills Network (2008) *Employability skills explored*.

9 Institute for Fiscal Studies (2009) *Living standards during previous recessions*.

In its updated skills strategy, the government starkly acknowledged the importance of English and maths skills provision for unemployed adults, by stating:

“If people are not able to achieve basic levels of English or maths, then they will struggle to find work of any kind in today’s demanding labour market.”¹⁰

English and maths skills are important when people seek work because:

- specific English and maths skills can be listed as essential requirements within person specifications for jobs in many sectors;
- English skills enable people to complete job applications and communicate more effectively during interviews; and
- the possession of skills boosts an individual’s confidence and motivation, thereby enabling them to perform better at interview.

The impact of literacy skills on employment has been known for some time, with the Department for Education and Employment reporting that:

“Level 1 literacy skills are associated with up to a ten percentage point higher probability of being in employment.”¹¹

Maths skills also influence whether an individual is likely to be employed, with the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) reporting that, compared with those with good numeracy, men and women with poor numeracy were more than twice as likely to be unemployed.¹²

The government’s response

Prior to *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills* (2013) the government had announced, within its further education and skills reform plan, its intention to:

- prioritise young adults and unemployed adults who lack English and maths skills; and
- establish effective and timely screening by Jobcentre Plus advisers of the English and maths needs of relevant benefit claimants.¹³

This built on its commitment in the skills strategy to continue to fully fund adult basic skills provision through the Adult Skills Budget.¹⁴ *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills* (2013) reiterates this commitment to maintain:

¹⁰ BIS (2013) *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills*.

¹¹ The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (2001) *Research Report 250*.

¹² NRDC (2009) *Adult numeracy: A review of the research*.

¹³ BIS (2011) *New challenges, new chances*.

¹⁴ BIS (2010) *Skills for sustainable growth*.

“... entitlements to fully funded English and maths provision that will support progression to the standard of a good GCSE for all adult learners.”

Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills (2013) was able to report that £234 million was spent in the 2011/12 academic year by colleges and training providers on learners in receipt of Jobseeker’s Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance. However, in response to issues revealed in several reports^{15,16} *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills* acknowledged that:

“The system is not always effective and sometimes acts as a barrier to people getting the education and training they need.”

To address some of the systemic issues, *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills* introduced a new framework for skills for unemployed adults aimed at improving the overall effectiveness and responsiveness of the system.

To specifically support the future development of English and maths provision for unemployed adults, BIS commissioned NIACE to undertake research into helpful approaches to the provision of English and maths for unemployed adults.

The research involved undertaking:

- desk research and a series of interviews with a range of stakeholders including the DWP, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and groups representing employers such as the CBI and the Federation of Small Businesses to gather their views on the English and maths competences that should be achieved through the provision of English and maths for unemployed adults;
- a survey of 100 providers of English and maths for unemployed adults to identify their current and changing practice in light of recent policy changes;
- in-depth research interviews with 25 of the learning providers surveyed to gather details of helpful approaches;
- in-depth interviews with five Jobcentre Plus managers; and
- a thematic analysis of the findings and the publication of this report based on those findings.

The report begins by describing how providers are working in partnership to engage unemployed adults. Sections then follow describing:

15 DWP (2013) *Employment, partnerships and skills*.

16 Ofsted (2012) *Skills for employment*.

- initial and diagnostic assessment;
- the provision landscape;
- building and maintaining motivation; and
- supporting progression and capturing learner destinations.

The report ends with a conclusion which includes several recommendations to support the future development of English and maths provision.

The report is primarily aimed at policy-makers and funders such as local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and Work Programme providers, but it will also be of interest to learning providers and referral agencies.

Working in partnership to engage unemployed adults

The numbers of unemployed people referred to learning providers

Recently published statistics revealed that:

- in 2011/12 there was a six per cent increase in benefit claimants starting further education training in comparison with the previous year; and
- 195,000 of these referrals started Level 1 and Entry Level Skills for Life provision and 74,000 started Level 2 Skills for Life provision.¹⁷

Our survey revealed that 94 per cent of the 100 learning provider survey respondents received referrals from Jobcentre Plus, 41 per cent received referrals from Work Programme providers, 36 per cent received referrals from local authorities and 32 per cent received referrals from housing associations. Many providers said that the volume of referrals for English and maths from all these sources was increasing. Increasing referrals from housing associations and local authorities were thought to result from their increased support to help service users into employment in response to recent welfare reforms.

Some providers said that they had also received increased volumes of self referrals, which they put down to increasing peer-to-peer recommendation amongst unemployed adults and statements in the media emphasising the importance of GCSE English and maths.

Screening for English and maths skills needs at JCP

Jobcentre Plus aims to provide an initial screen for skills gaps at the first point of contact for all new customers. However, time pressures at the initial interview mean that many JCP customers are not screened until their second interview or later.

JCP advisers are able to choose from a variety of means to screen claimants; most choose to use the 'light touch' process which involves asking a customer questions about their skills levels and observing their ability to read, converse and complete forms. Alternatively, JCP advisers can use the *Fast Track* assessment tool, which takes six to eight minutes and involves asking the customer a series of questions about their skills. The other option is to use the more in-depth Customer Assessment Tool, which identifies

¹⁷ BIS (2013) *Further Education for Benefit Claimants*.

circumstances that make job search and/or finding sustained employment difficult. Where a skills need is suspected but remains unclear despite screening, JCP advisers can refer a customer to the National Careers Service, which is now co-located in most Job Centres.

In response to JCP advisers saying that they found screening quite difficult, some learning providers said that they had provided their local JCP offices with a set of screening questions.

Some providers said they received a very narrow profile of referrals from JCP; for example, they often reported only receiving referrals of people up to Entry Level 3 with an occasional learner at Level 1. This may be due to the use of observational screening at JCP through which lower level skills needs are readily apparent but Level 1 and Level 2 skills needs are harder to detect. There will be an opportunity to address screening issues within the development of the new approach to skills screening and assessment announced in *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills* as part of the new framework for skills for unemployed adults.

The JCP adviser's choice of provider

Following the identification of an English or maths skills need, JCP advisers can refer a customer to a learning provider listed on their online district provision tool. In addition to sending details of their provision to JCP to update the tool, providers raised and maintained awareness of their provision amongst frontline JCP advisers by:

- arranging visits through which JCP advisers could meet staff and learners and sometimes observe lessons;
- providing bulletins incorporating case studies and success stories;
- providing information sessions at JCP; and
- attending JCP internal meetings.

These efforts often paid off, as stated by one provider:

“Occasionally we are invited to attend an adviser team meeting at JCP and we see an increase in referrals shortly after this.”

Some providers said that JCP advisers were aware that they were particularly good at supporting certain types of learner. However, this could backfire for these providers if such learner types were more costly to support and all other learners were referred elsewhere, as described by one provider:

“JCP only refer the lowest level learners to us. Learners closer to the labour market with higher skills are referred to other providers. JCP are aware that we will work on a one-to-one basis with learners to give intensive support and will not turn learners away, hence the nature of our referrals being Pre-Entry Level or Entry Level 1, the majority also having additional needs. This is a massive struggle for us as it affects our funding and outcomes.”

The referral process at JCP

Recent changes, brought about as a result of a ‘lean review’, have eliminated some documentation and streamlined the referral process. Providers said to us that these changes had been helpful.

Although there is some variation in the approach taken by different JCP offices, many JCP advisers now simply make a phone call to book an initial interview for a customer with a learning provider, giving the customer’s National Insurance number, date of birth and telephone contact details. The provider records the customer’s details on a group tracking form and, on the day of the initial interview, the provider records on the form whether the customer has attended. The tracking form is sent back to JCP on a regular – often weekly – basis.

Initial interview attendance tracking is vital for referrals made under Skills Conditionality arrangements, i.e. where a claimant with a major skills barrier to employment is mandated to attend an initial appointment and to start provision. In our survey, 40 per cent of providers said that at least 50 per cent of their referrals for English and maths were made under Skills Conditionality arrangements.

In addition to sending back the tracking form, several providers gave referral agents access to their management information systems enabling them to see the outcome of their referral in real time.

Many providers arranged for there to be a single point of contact to whom all referrals are made from JCP. This was the case even when provision is available at several venues through the same provider, as one provider described:

“Although the referral comes into a central point, assessments and classes are available across the borough, so the first appointment is made at a centre close to where the learner lives.”

JCP often reciprocated by providing a single point of contact at the District Office and further single points of contact at each of the District’s Job Centres.

A surprisingly large number of providers told us that their single point of contact was co-located in JCP offices. Co-location enabled providers to raise awareness of both JCP advisers and unemployed adults of the positive impact of addressing English and maths

needs. This built learners' motivation to attend a subsequent first appointment at the provider venue. The following provider description is typical:

“We have established a presence through a member of our community team who spends half a day each week in each of the three main JCP offices. This has resulted in stable levels of referrals and has brought in significantly more learners from this source than was seen before, with only a 20 per cent drop-out between referral and first appointment attendance. This has also led to strong working relationships between JCP advisers and our co-located staff.”

Through co-location, some providers were able to undertake the initial interview at JCP, as described by one provider:

“Staff visit JCP to speak directly to advisers about provision and have a regular presence in Job Centres at a specific desk, where individual appointments and initial assessments are carried out. This facilitates a good flow of referrals and keeps the college in the advisers' minds. There have been instances where referrals have not been appropriate for provision and this has been discussed with the JCP advisers who have accepted the college's opinion.”

Demand management within providers

To maximise conversion rates and meet JCP's expectation that learners start and complete provision in the shortest possible time, most providers were keen to minimise waiting times. Every provider said that at least a week elapsed between a referral being made and the customer starting on provision. This was helpful to learners who often had to make adjustments to their routines to ensure they were available to participate. Just five providers said that new referrals have to wait more than four weeks to begin their discrete English or maths provision in comparison with 61 providers that said learners could start sooner than this. Staff capacity and room capacity constraints appeared to be the issues resulting in longer waiting times, as described by one provider:

“The college is able to just about meet demand but cannot expand any further due to accommodation.”

Some providers were worried about the possibility of large volumes of JCP referrals displacing other learners, as one provider said:

“We are very conscious of the need to include 'traditional' adult and community learning learners, including part-time and low-paid employees who need access to English and maths provision to progress further to a more sustainable career. The risk is, we could fill all our places with JCP learners and not have provision available for others.”

Other providers said that their problem was not coping with ongoing large volumes of referrals but peaks and troughs in referral numbers. Some providers resorted to using a waiting list during peaks whereas others tried to manage the peaks by:

- trying to anticipate demand and planning accordingly;
- using agency staff and staff on zero hours contracts;
- pulling in tutors from other departments when necessary; and
- varying class sizes and infilling into other groups.

To tackle troughs in referral numbers, providers:

- undertook extra marketing as necessary;
- continually let referral agents know how much spare capacity they had; and
- sought feedback from JCP as to why they were not referring.

Case study on referral process effective practice

Joint working between Leicestershire and Northamptonshire Jobcentre Plus and Leicester College

To support its customers, Leicestershire and Northamptonshire district Jobcentre Plus is keen to refer people with English and maths skills needs to locally available provision ranging from Entry Level to Level 2. Some customers with English and maths needs are identified when their adviser asks about their barriers to employment. If the customer says English or maths is a barrier, their adviser refers them directly to a learning provider. If their adviser is aware that the customer is finding it difficult to return to work but the customer cannot say what their barriers are, the adviser refers them to a full skills assessment with a National Careers Service adviser.

When English and maths skills needs are apparent, the JCP adviser will match the customer's skills need with one of the provision listings on the District Provision Tool database. To make a referral, the adviser phones the learning provider's named contact to book a customer in for an initial assessment and issues a letter to the customer that incorporates the appointment details. In addition, the adviser will normally take the opportunity to book a start date for the provision so that they can give the customer the letter for their provision start. If the initial assessment reveals a need that is different to that anticipated, the provision start date may need to be amended – but, as this only happens infrequently, it is well worth booking a provisional start date in advance.

Advisers are limited to sharing the customer's name, contact details and their likely skills need when making a referral. The adviser encourages customers to reveal additional issues and needs to the provider themselves. In some cases, the customer will write down the information and ask their adviser to send it to the provider; however, whenever possible, the adviser will encourage the customer to make a phone call to the provider themselves.

Providers let the adviser know if the customer has attended their initial interview by completing the weekly tracking sheet. Skills Conditionality arrangements, through which customers can be mandated to attend skills provision, have made a huge difference in the numbers of Leicester and Leicestershire JCP customers starting English and maths provision. There was a 131 per cent increase in starts from April 2012 to September 2012 and there has been a further steady increase ever since. However, not all customers are motivated to address their English or maths needs, despite Skills Conditionality. About 25 per cent of customers choose to end their benefit claim rather than take part in skills provision. In response to disability advisers identifying that a lack of confidence was a major barrier for some long-term unemployed Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

customers, advisers have the option of referring customers to a four-week 'motivational routeway'. The district office endeavours to get a balance of 70 per cent ESA and 30 per cent Jobseeker's Allowance customers within each motivational routeway cohort as the routeway provider says this mix is better than ESA customers alone.

Because JCP has targets relating to customers leaving benefits within 13 and 26 weeks, providers are asked to offer provision of eight to ten weeks in duration so that it fits within the 13-week target. This leaves just three weeks to complete the referral and initial interview process. Providers have responded well to this requirement, the average time taken for a customer to start in Leicester being two weeks following referral, and initial assessment often taking place within one week. Longer, but not excessive, waits are accepted in the county as the JCP district office recognises that it will take longer for providers to receive the minimum number of referrals they need to make a group viable.

Once a customer has begun skills provision, their JCP adviser will carry out a review with the customer at four and eight weeks into the course. Tim George, a member of the Partnership and Operational Support Team for the Leicestershire and Northamptonshire district office said:

“Feedback from customers about provision delivery is always positive. Customers often comment on how different their provision is from being at school. As well as addressing vital skills needs, the provision helps people adopt more helpful routines and introduces them to learning as adults, new environments and new people. At their reviews, customers are visibly more confident and professional in their approach and often remark how their network of people they know has increased. All this contributes to them finding it easier to find employment.”

As well as providing a template description of its provision for the JCP District Provision Tool, Leicester College:

- visits local JCP offices to give presentations on their provision at adviser team meetings and briefings;
- sends a monthly bulletin by email to referral agency managers; and
- hosts visits and open days for JCP advisers at its provision venues.

Ian Lewis, the Employment and Skills Manager at Leicester College stated:

“Meeting with colleagues from JCP to raise adviser awareness of our provision really works. We find that it is the JCP advisers who have visited our provision venues that refer the most learners. We believe this is in part due to their existing enthusiasm that made them want to visit, but also due to the inspiration that they gain on meeting the staff and learners and seeing the provision being delivered. Some of these advisers have supplied us with their email addresses, which has enabled us to build on our relationship. A virtuous circle arises through which advisers gain more knowledge of how we can help them as they make more referrals. In addition, we find we get a big rise in the number of referrals immediately after we have given a presentation within JCP adviser meetings.”

Leicester College Principal, Verity Hancock, commented:

“Employability is top of our agenda. Learners are not just coming to us for qualifications – they want to improve their career prospects. Through our work with Jobcentre Plus and our links with other agencies and employers we have been able to develop a range of ways of supporting learners, enhancing their skills and improving their employability so that they maximise their chances of getting a job.”

All referrals are received by telephone at Leicester College’s Bede Island Centre. This acts as the gateway for all the college’s provision for unemployed adults. The telephone call is made in the presence of the learner at the Job Centre, ensuring that the initial interview is booked for a date and time that is convenient for them.

The initial interview takes the form of an information, advice and guidance interview. The careers adviser:

- confirms the learner’s aspirations;
- gives details of the skills provision that would be helpful to realise these aspirations; and
- discusses whether there are any barriers to the learner entering the sector they have chosen.

This is immediately followed by an online initial assessment overseen by a qualified Skills for Life tutor who discusses the assessment results with the learner. This process provides the opportunity for a careers adviser to introduce the learner to vocational options and the role of English and maths towards these. This is very motivating for learners who otherwise may find it hard to see the relevance of English and maths to their intention to return to employment.

The careers adviser puts the information on each learner they refer into the appropriate group profile and this profile is passed to the tutor to support their diagnostic assessment process. The initial tutor interview is arranged within five days and learners usually commence their skills provision two days later.

At the outset, Leicester College worked to create an informal agreement with JCP, in part to demonstrate their commitment to JCP customers but also to help establish and formalise expectations of college staff. As well as meeting with JCP whenever staff wish to make a change or introduce something new, the college's Employment and Skills Manager is also invited to the JCP advisers' quarterly team meeting and often meets with JCP employer engagement team to discuss forthcoming sector based work academies and their joint response to local employers making large-scale redundancies. On a more strategic level, members of the college's senior leadership team and senior managers from Leicestershire and Northamptonshire JCP meet quarterly to ensure that local and national priorities continue to be met.

Leicester College only receives a few referrals of people at Entry Level 1 and Entry Level 2 from JCP. More people are referred at these levels from the Work Programme, which supports longer term unemployed people. In addition to discrete provision from Entry Level 1 to Level 2 delivered through its Skills for Life department, Leicester College has recently piloted offering support for unemployed learners with learning difficulties and disabilities through its Continuing Studies Curriculum Area. In addition to the English and maths provision outlined above, Leicester College also provides support in the areas/sectors of job application support, interview skills, confidence building, IT skills, health and social care, retail, neighbourhood improvement, business administration, customer service and contact centres. Provision is changed whenever necessary to ensure that it reflects the changing needs of the local labour market and JCP customers. In addition, the college works with individual employers; for instance, in partnership with Leicester City Council (Housing) and JCP, the college runs a highly successful neighbourhood improvement programme which provides both training opportunities and employment.

On completion of their programme, the college remains in close contact with learners and provides ongoing support partly through three work clubs facilitated by the college.

Case study on referral process effective practice **Joint working between Scunthorpe Jobcentre Plus and SouthBank Training**

Scunthorpe Jobcentre Plus, one of the Jobcentre Plus offices within the North East, Yorkshire and Humber district, is keen to help customers to address their English and maths skills needs, as Claire, a skills adviser at Scunthorpe Jobcentre Plus, explained:

“Our customers not only increasingly need English and maths skills when in work but also need English skills to complete online job applications. A basic level of English is necessary to even access the new universal job match tool that we require them to use.”

Most of the Jobseeker’s Allowance and some Employment and Support Allowance (Work-Related Activity Group) claimants in Scunthorpe are undertaking a form of training or work experience. Many are undertaking English or maths provision.

Jobcentre Plus advisers tend to use a ‘light touch’ form of screening early in an individual’s benefit claim. The advisers find that supporting customers to self identify their skills needs results in them being more motivated to address those needs. Advisers do this by describing how the demands of the labour market have changed and then asking the customer whether they feel they have the skills required by employers. A customer with skills needs will often say that they feel they may not have all the skills employers now want and it is then obvious to them that it is worthwhile visiting a skills provider to discuss how they might be able to help. Even though the referral to skills provision will still be made under Skills Conditionality arrangements, customers tend to show much greater commitment if they have already reached the decision to attend themselves. On selecting a suitable provider from the district provision tool, the adviser will telephone to book an initial appointment for the customer and then give the customer a letter incorporating the details of the appointment. If helpful, the provider can speak to the customer over the phone as the initial appointment is being booked.

Scunthorpe Jobcentre Plus currently uses four different providers for English and maths skills provision. This gives customers some choice and means that travel issues are minimised. The learning providers all offer provision that is split into modules so a certificate can be obtained for each part completed – and some offer ‘roll on roll off’ provision. Most providers can start a customer within two weeks. To begin supporting customers as quickly as possible and to support their initial assessment process, one provider arranges for customers to join a two-week employability skills course whilst they are waiting to join their English, maths or vocational skills provision.

As well as receiving details of provision through the district provision tool and through providers' flyers and bulletins, Claire visits each provider every two months. Advisers are encouraged to visit provision venues and provider staff regularly visit the Job Centre. Provider managers are occasionally invited to the 9am advisers' meeting. Thereby, advisers are kept well informed about the provision available and can describe it in detail to customers.

Claire said of the impact of the provision:

“The primary beneficial outcome from participation in English and maths provision is that customers move closer to the labour market by acquiring skills that employers require. Customers also gain confidence through succeeding within the provision, meeting new people and having new experiences. The majority of customers who don't find work during their English and maths provision progress onto vocational skills and/or IT training to improve their labour market position even further.”

SouthBank Training, based in Scunthorpe, books referrals from Scunthorpe Jobcentre Plus through their single point of contact into a weekly pre-designated half-day initial interview session. On average, five to seven learners are referred each week with a variety of skills needs. SouthBank Training has an open door policy and, as a result, other unemployed learners self refer and are given interview slots in the same half-day session as the learners referred by Jobcentre Plus. The initial interview and assessment is generic, which is helpful as sometimes the learner's level and entry requirements of skills provision they would like to undertake do not match. The half-day initial interview session is always arranged when adult provision sessions are running so that new learners get to meet current learners and the tutor. This helps quell the natural apprehension felt by people newly referred.

Some of the customers referred will have met some of the SouthBank Training staff during the 'Achieve More' information sessions that SouthBank Training provides at Scunthorpe Jobcentre Plus. These are inspiring for both Jobcentre Plus customers and advisers.

SouthBank Training provides discrete English and maths provision from Entry Level 3 to Level 2. Occasionally they receive referrals of learners at Pre-Entry and Entry Level 1 or 2, in which case with Jobcentre Plus's approval they refer them to an alternative provider. Although Jobcentre Plus can only supply the learners' National Insurance number, date of birth and contact details, the initial interview provides an opportunity to find out everything else needed. Using the initial interview to gather all the information required also eliminates the risk of

misunderstandings that might occur if they depended on additional information sent by referral agents.

Because provision is available on a 'roll on roll off' basis, learners always start their provision within two weeks. Entry Level 3 to Level 2 Functional Skills provision in maths and English takes place on two days per week from 9am to 3pm on both days. Initially provision was for a maximum of 20 weeks; however, the restriction on duration has since been removed by Jobcentre Plus. The recent availability of on-demand exams for Functional Skills has overcome a major difficulty which was the waiting time for the exam. Learners can now book in for an exam in the morning and sit it in the afternoon. Only the ICT Functional Skills exams still have to be ordered in advance, which results in a 12-day lead-in time plus a six-week wait for the results.

Eileen Richardson, Operations Manager at SouthBank Training, said:

“Unemployed people can be very isolated and, being unused to working with others, initially many learners prefer to work on their own. As time goes on they become more inclined to work in groups. They make friends and learn together and help each other. We ensure there is a non-judgemental atmosphere so that people can be themselves. Many learners value the benefits and experience of participating in learning and are keen to acquire further skills that will help them find work. We also provide a 'Job Club' to assist them to produce professional CVs, letters of application and to find and apply for job vacancies.”

A qualification success rate of 93 per cent was achieved for the period between August 2011 and June 2013. The impact of this success for the majority of clients is evidenced by their heightened self esteem and the development of confidence in their ability to move forward with their lives. Thirty per cent gained employment or became self employed, using their newly acquired skills. This figure, although low, is a reflection of the economic and employment situation with the local area.

Initial and diagnostic assessment

The purpose of initial and diagnostic assessment

Individual initial assessment of English and maths is vital to ensure that learners are offered skills provision at an appropriate level and have access to appropriate support to meet additional learning or other needs.

For these reasons, the Skills Funding Agency makes initial assessment a requirement for funding, as described in the Skills Funding Agency funding rules which require learning providers to:

- carry out a thorough initial assessment to determine the level at which the learner is currently working to identify which level they will enrol onto;
- carry out an appropriate diagnostic assessment to inform and structure a learner's Learning Agreement to use as a basis for a programme of study;
- deliver ongoing assessment; and
- record all outcomes in the Learning Agreement.¹⁸

Approaches taken to initial assessment

The Skills Funding Agency specifies how initial assessments are to be carried out, stating in the funding rules that providers must use up-to-date assessment tools, which:

- are based on the National Literacy and Numeracy Standards and Core Curriculum;
- place a learner's current skills levels within the National Qualifications Framework/ QCF levels; and
- are administered by suitably qualified individuals including, for the diagnostic assessment, a practitioner who will structure the learner's programme of study.¹⁹

Our survey revealed that the vast majority of the 100 provider respondents used two initial assessment tools: BksB and ForSkills. Where they felt existing tools did not meet their requirements, some providers developed their own in-house initial assessment tools or tailored the existing tools. Although it is only available to Level 1 and it does not

¹⁸ Skills Funding Agency (July 2013) *Funding rules, version 2.1*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

assess functionality, some providers resorted to the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) test for some or all of their learners due to some learners not being comfortable with, or able to use, online assessment tools, as described by one provider:

“Where learners progress from Workskills into English and maths, the standard BksB is used. If learners come in who are not comfortable with computers, the college offers the old BSA test if required.”

When providers offered a regular, pre-determined initial assessment slot each week into which referral agents could book all their new referrals for that week, providers tended to undertake initial assessment in a group setting. This was followed by a short one-to-one interview for each learner to discuss their individual needs and to enable them to disclose any additional learning needs or health and personal issues, for instance alcohol use, criminal records, etc. Providers said that this opportunity to disclose was an important element of their safeguarding measures.

When appointments were made on an individual basis for new referrals, providers often arranged for them to undertake their initial assessment within one of their ongoing classes or workshops, as described by one provider:

“The initial assessment appointments are within a class setting, but the service endeavours to get a support worker in to support the other learners if any referral is due to attend so the tutor can spend some one-to-one time with the new learner within the group setting.”

Several providers said that it was important to use the one-to-one interview to check any information provided by the referral agent, as the referral agent may have made an error or misunderstood the learner, or the learner’s aspirations may have changed since the referral interview. Although it needed checking, any information supplied by the referral agent was always gratefully received by learning providers as it provided a useful guide as to how they might proceed with the learner. In particular, providers said they valued any information regarding prior qualification attainment, prior recent assessment results and any previously disclosed issues because this could all change the approach the provider took to the initial assessment, for instance, as one provider explained:

“Initial assessment is dependent on the individual. Normally we use BksB but if we believe the learner may have learning difficulties and/or disabilities or is at a lower level, we don’t put them through this. We ask about their work experience, where they see themselves going and what they want from the employability course. We then assess their learning style and do various personality assessments within the induction.”

Providers said that some needs could not be identified during the initial assessment process as some initial assessment tools do not assess writing skills. In this case these

needs were revealed later during provision, as noted by one provider:

“Although some wider additional needs are identified during the initial assessment process, more information comes out when writing tasks are being completed.”

The nature of the needs commonly revealed amongst unemployed learners by initial and diagnostic assessment

Several providers said that additional learning needs and personal issues were more frequently encountered amongst unemployed adults than amongst their wider learner cohort. Because many unemployed adults have not taken part in learning for some time, additional learning needs such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and other specific learning difficulties and disabilities were often undiagnosed before entry to provision. This highlights the importance of effective initial assessment when working with unemployed learners, as one provider described:

“Our JCP learner group tends to have more learners with learning difficulties and disabilities and social needs, e.g. financial difficulties or housing issues, than the core learner group. As such, tutors delivering on the programme for JCP learners have been chosen and trained to have a high level of awareness in identifying and dealing with these needs. Taking these needs into account, tutors set appropriate goals and SMART targets, broken into small and realistic steps, providing stretch and challenge but that are still within their reach. A support worker is present in the group at all times to support the spread of abilities within the class. Paid for by Additional Learning Support funding, this double staffing model works well. The class size is usually eight on average, varying between six and 12. We see learners with mental health issues and social isolation who need support to engage with the group. Learners are able to access support from student services/pastoral care for issues such as money, debt, housing, etc.”

Some providers said that waiting times for the arrangement of Additional Learning Support made it difficult to organise before their short course provision came to an end, as stated by one provider:

“Awareness and response to specific learning difficulty and disability issues is embedded within teaching and learning in our English and maths provision. Additional Learning Support funding can be drawn upon for dyslexia (our Skills Funding Agency have authorised this, whereas other areas do not), but this is only accessed if a learner has been in provision for a while, is

attending well but not making the expected progress. However, even where they can be funded, the backlogs of learners waiting for support are big and the waiting time is too long for JCP learners to access it.’”

The development of the learning agreement

Further diagnostic assessment of needs was generally carried out by providers in the first couple of weeks during provision sessions. This involved a process of considering options and planning a coherent learning pathway, through which a learning agreement was established, which recorded:

- past attainment;
- current skills levels as revealed through initial assessment;
- the learner’s individual aspirations;
- learning objectives that will help secure the learner’s aspirations; and
- the series of small steps or stages through which learners can proceed to achieve their learning objectives.

Learning agreements sometimes termed individual learning plans (ILPs) or personal development plans (PDPs) are commonly used across adult learning; however, many providers supporting unemployed adults we spoke to tailored their standard ILP format to accommodate intensive, short course provision and to enable more frequent progress reviews, as explained by one provider:

“Each learner has a specific action plan which records everything they are doing on a daily basis. We call it a personal development plan. We use the plans to consider progress made each day. This is helpful for people who have been out of education for a long time as they can see the progress they are making and the relevance to them personally. A big course would be daunting to them.”

Providers said that lots of learners describe job aspirations for which they need particular competences or even English or maths qualifications. Several providers had adapted their ILPs to record employment goals and the steps required to achieve these goals, as described by one provider:

“Our ILP has been adapted this academic year to recognise employment-related targets across all of our provision and it is now used as a standard document for all learners, being fit for purpose to take account of wider skills needs rather than just English and maths. This new ILP is being further adapted for our programmes for the unemployed, and intensive staff training is taking place to support this, including tutor peer support and

mentoring. Our re-developed ILP carries through into teaching where every opportunity for contextualising content to skills and employment aims is taken. The practicality of Functional Skills qualifications supports this.”

As a guide to the employability skills issues that needed to be considered, some providers scrutinised employability skills qualification curricula and developed questions for their ILPs to reveal the learner’s possession of key employability skills and attributes. Some providers also developed their planning approaches to accommodate the ‘roll on roll off’ nature of their provision for unemployed adults, as stated by one provider:

“***For initial assessment and diagnostic assessment, we use BksB across all our provision for unemployed adults. A ‘Programme of Work’ has been developed instead of a standard Scheme of Work to recognise the roll on roll off nature of the provision. This informs the ILP, which enables the capture of individual goals. A specific tailored version of this, focusing on work interests/aims, is used for JCP learners. I’d describe this as a combination of an ILP and Record of Work, assessing where they’re at when they come to us and planning how long it will take to get there. One size doesn’t fit all, and we have tweaked versions for different client groups including JCP customers who are a really unique set of customers, ranging from incredibly motivated and keen to really difficult to engage. We don’t see this range on ‘normal’ provision.***”

Providers said that regular and frequent progress reviews against the objectives and timescales kept the learner on track and provided an opportunity to adjust the pace or direction. These reviews were motivating for the learners as they could reflect on what they had achieved. The frequency of reviews tended to be determined by the length of course, short courses having shorter intervals between reviews. Unit-based delivery lent itself to reviews upon unit completion, as described by one provider:

“***A one-and-a-half hour National Careers Service interview as part of the initial assessment process helps to inform the ILP which is started at the first appointment, then reviewed and added to at two weeks. Reviews are fortnightly, dependent on progression. If a unit of the course is completed within the first two weeks, a review will take place then.***”

However, resource constraints did have an impact on the frequency of reviews within some providers, these providers saying that reviews only once every four to six weeks were feasible, for example:

“***Reviews on the JCP programme happen at four weeks and at end of the programme at eight weeks. These happen within the class setting rather than on a one-to-one basis. This is the best approach we can take within the constraints of learner/staff time and funding.***”

A number of providers mentioned the difficulty of undertaking initial and diagnostic assessment when it was not explicitly funded:

“The biggest single problem with funding provision for unemployed adults is not being able to fund resources which aren’t directly related to guided learning hours. In English and maths we need to maintain quality in initial assessment but this can’t be funded. At the moment we are still keeping assessment and confidential interviews separate from class time, but it is very difficult. We also need to be able to develop links with others to deal with complex needs including mental health issues, learning difficulties and/or disabilities, housing, safeguarding concerns and social needs, to develop provision, and to deliver more information, advice and guidance – which all takes resources.”

Some providers dealt with this by using First Steps funding but they recognised that this would no longer be possible in 2013/14. Other providers offered an employability skills unit through which learners undertook a self assessment which contributed to the initial and diagnostic assessment and ILP process; for instance, one provider said:

“We use the self assessment elements within our QCF Employability Skills qualification as a way of helping people focus on their strengths and as a way of drawing down funding to support the amount of time it takes to assess learners’ English and maths skills. This unit helps build confidence which has been the biggest barrier for learners, alongside employability skills, and is creating a way of measuring distance travelled and evidencing success. The use of this unit with learners who are referred for vocational/employability skills is also helping learners to recognise that English and maths is one of their barriers, and they will then take up support in these areas alongside their vocational/employability skills programme. In this way, learners have progressed over time from Entry Level to Level 2.”

The provision landscape

The qualifications available in English and maths

English and maths qualifications in England are mapped to the adult literacy and adult numeracy core curriculum.²⁰ The core curriculum describes the content of what should be taught in adult literacy and numeracy programmes and is itself based on the national standards for adult literacy and numeracy. The national standards, originally developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in 2000, provide a map of the range of skills and capabilities that adults are expected to need in order to function and progress at work and in society. The standards for literacy cover the ability to speak, listen and respond; read and comprehend; and write to communicate. The standards for numeracy cover the ability to understand and use mathematical information, calculate and manipulate mathematical information, interpret results and communicate mathematical information.

In response to concerns that the Certificate in Adult Literacy qualifications, Certificate in Adult Numeracy qualifications and the Key Skills qualifications in Communications and Application of Number did not prepare learners for – or test – the application of skills, the Skills Funding Agency has now stopped funding these qualifications for new learners. The English and maths qualifications that the Skills Funding Agency currently funds for new learners are:

- GCSE qualifications in English and maths;
- Functional Skills qualifications in English and maths; and
- QCF qualifications in English and maths.

GCSE English and maths is examined at Level 2. Functional Skills and the QCF qualifications in English and maths are available at Entry Level 1, Entry Level 2, Entry Level 3, Level 1 and Level 2. Because all these qualifications are mapped to the adult literacy and adult numeracy core curriculum (2001), on achieving Level 2, learners should have the same skills regardless of the qualification undertaken. However, there are differences in how these skills are taught and assessed within each qualification which determines the purposes towards which learners are subsequently able to put their skills.

²⁰ DfES (2001 – reviewed and later revised 2006–7) *Adult literacy and adult numeracy core curriculum*.

GCSE qualifications in English and maths

GCSE qualifications are designed to provide learners with subject knowledge and understanding. Learners achieving GCSE grades A to C gain a Level 2 qualification. If learners achieve GCSE grades D to G, they are considered to have achieved a Level 1 qualification. GCSE courses are generally available to adults as part-time evening courses taken over two years with examinations at the end of the two-year period. They are not really suited to unemployed adults, who generally want the opportunity to undertake shorter, more intensive courses and to have the opportunity to have their new skills accredited as they acquire them so that they can demonstrate their achievement to employers. Therefore it was no surprise that none of the unemployed adults referred to the providers we interviewed was participating in GCSE courses. Interestingly, the providers did say that a small number of unemployed adults had self referred onto their part-time evening courses in GCSE English and maths. The providers explained that this was because a GCSE grade A to C in English or maths was an essential requirement for the learners' chosen careers. This illustrates the willingness of unemployed adults to make a long-term commitment to evening class provision when it is part of their long-term career aspiration and it may be helpful to research what makes this possible for them as individuals if we wish to support more people on Universal Credit to continue to undertake evening and weekend course English and maths provision alongside employment.

Functional Skills qualifications in English and maths

Functional Skills qualifications in English and maths focus on helping learners acquire skills that underpin problem solving, instil confidence and heighten an individual's ability to learn. They enable adults to:

- apply knowledge and skills and respond appropriately to all sorts of real life contexts;
- have the mental agility to take on challenges in a range of new and often unforeseen settings;
- independently work out what to do; and
- recognise and expect that tasks may require persistence, thoughtfulness, struggle and reflection.

Functional Skills qualifications in English and maths are available at Entry Level 1, Entry Level 2, Entry Level 3, Level 1 and Level 2. English and maths Functional Skills are made up of three components at each level; e.g. for English these are Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening. Each of these components can be accredited at each level as a single component qualification in its own right. Many providers told us that they felt Functional Skills qualifications were an improvement on the National Certificates in

Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy, one saying:

“Functional skills are much more appropriate for adult life and employment and significantly better than the National Tests.”

Several providers said that employers liked them too; for instance:

“Functionality is important for unemployed adults seeking work. Employers understand what Functional Skills is about and appear to recognise the value of Functional Skills.”

Providers that delivered Apprenticeship Programmes said that the acquisition of Functional Skills qualifications was a helpful preparation for unemployed adults prior to progression into Apprenticeships.

Although supportive of Functional Skills, some providers did say that Functional Skills qualifications were more challenging for the learner and for the provider; for instance:

“We run Functional Skills qualifications at Level 1 and Level 2. We prefer them to National Tests as they are more challenging and realistic for learners. But they have led to longer programmes, with more intensive support required and lots of paper-based activities.”

Because many unemployed learners do not have computers at home, they may not be as IT literate or confident as other learners when participating in e-learning or undertaking e-based assessments. Most awarding organisations require Level 1 and Level 2 Functional Skills exams to be undertaken online but this caused difficulties, as described by one provider:

“The college has started delivering Functional Skills this year and has had some successes already. However, the eight-week testing window and computer-based testing did not meet the needs of the learners or the programme, and so the college changed awarding body to enable paper-based testing. Initially learners failed the writing part of the Functional Skills exam when on computer purely because of a lack of ICT confidence and skills. This was destroying for the learners.”

QCF qualifications in English and maths

QCF qualifications provide a very flexible route through which learners can acquire the core English and maths skills to enable them to eventually progress towards achieving an A- to C-grade GCSE or Level 2 Functional Skills English or maths qualification. Like Functional Skills qualifications, QCF qualifications are available at Entry Levels 1, 2 and 3 and Levels 1 and 2 and are further divided into skill components such as Reading,

Writing, and Speaking and Listening at each of these levels. However, the QCF qualifications offer additional flexibility, as each of these components is made up of one or more very small units that can be individually accredited. Each unit has a credit value, one credit being roughly equivalent to ten guided learning hours (GLH). Larger qualifications can be obtained through combining the credit values of these units according to the certain 'rules of combination' leading to Award qualifications (up to 12 credits), Certificate qualifications (between 13 and 36 credits) and Diploma qualifications (37 or more credits); for instance, the 60 GLH City & Guilds Level 1 'Award In English Skills – Speaking and Listening' qualification is made up of three individually accredited units:

- Speaking and listening – presenting information by speaking and listening (20 GLH and two credits)
- Speaking and listening – speaking and listening to obtain information (20 GLH and two credits)
- Speaking and listening – speaking and listening to take part in a discussion (20 GLH and two credits).

Through these very small QCF units, learners can gain recognition for their new skills as they acquire them. The very small size of these units enables them to be achieved during the time available, even within a very short course. Each unit is mapped to the adult literacy and adult numeracy core curriculum and has clear outcomes allowing for robust and rigorous assessment in each skills area. The breadth of units available at each level allows a learner's programme to be highly personalised to their needs. As the units sit on the QCF and a learner's registration is live for three years, learners have the ability to study flexibly at their own pace and to take breaks from their learning whenever necessary. This flexibility is very helpful to unemployed adults who may wish to acquire particular skills in a short space of time for a specific job vacancy and then to return to complete their qualification at a later date alongside work.

QCF qualifications are relatively new. The Skills Funding Agency only announced at the end of 2012 that from January 2013 they would approve all accredited QCF English and maths qualifications for funding across the Adult Skills Budget (including awards at Level 2) and would also make available units within the Rules of Combination of QCF English and maths qualifications across the Adult Skills Budget, with a view that the QCF English and maths qualifications will act as stepping stones towards Level 2 standard such as GCSE or Functional Skills qualifications.²¹ Until 2013/14, unit-based delivery was exempt from Qualification Success Rate measures. This removed the perceived risk to success rates from engaging learners that some providers believed might be less likely to be retained. As retention rates on skills provision for unemployed adults have held up and because the Skills Funding Agency feel it is important to monitor unit delivery success rates, they have now stated that:

²¹ Skills Funding Agency (2012) *English and maths in the Qualifications and Credit Framework: Extension of*

“In the academic year 2013/14, alongside the simplified funding methodology, we will include units in the success rate calculation where they are entered as the learning aim. If a full qualification is entered as the learning aim on the ILR and the learner achieves units but not the qualification, any units achieved will not contribute to the success rate for that qualification.”²²

Because our survey and research interviews took place from December 2012 to March 2013, only a small number of providers were using the QCF qualifications at that time. However, many other providers said they were exploring the potential of using the QCF qualifications with unemployed learners as a means of:

- boosting learner confidence through the accreditation of skills early in their programme;
- accrediting skills within employers', JCP's and Work Programme providers' preferred timescales;
- incorporating learners whose issues cause them to roll on and roll off; and
- supporting learners with uneven profiles to address their skills gaps and make a higher level Functional Skills qualification accessible.

Many providers were excited about the possibilities of supporting unemployed learners through QCF English and maths units and qualifications, as one provider said:

“We already use portfolios to enable learners to achieve in small chunks. We could use the QCF units alongside Functional Skills to recognise bite-size achievement.”

And, as another said:

“We welcome the introduction of QCF units, which we feel will be positive in supporting progression, especially between Entry Level 3/Level 1 and Level 1/Level 2.”

The use of QCF units in English and maths as embedded content

Some providers were using QCF units in English and maths as embedded content within employability skills, IT skills or short vocational skills courses for unemployed adults, as described by one provider:

²² Skills Funding Agency (2013) *Qualifications Information Guide 2013/14*.

“Our employability skills courses with embedded QCF units in English and maths are three days for four weeks or five days for two weeks. All the delivery takes place in our training centre. We have a specialist Functional Skills team and there is always a member of this team to give support with the QCF English and maths unit content within the employability session.”

Several providers combined QCF vocational skills units with QCF English and maths units to create a bespoke course for unemployed learners. For instance, learners might undertake a QCF maths Level 1 unit relating to converting fractions to percentages alongside retail skills units in:

- processing customer orders for goods in a retail environment;
- carrying out promotional campaigns in a retail environment; and
- assembling visual merchandising displays.

This mix-and-match approach was very helpful in addressing specific skills needs for particular job vacancies and was also very helpful within pre-employment skills provision such as sector based work academies. The breadth of choice of QCF English and maths units ensured that there was a unit for every possible skills need. Providers said that there were many influences on their choice of units; for instance, their dialogue with an employer, learner feedback, the demands of completing CVs and application forms and the content of the vocational skills units which sometimes required underpinning English or maths skills. The English and maths units chosen tended to be at the higher levels, i.e. between Entry Level 3 and Level 2, reflecting the higher levels required within occupational roles.

Although 56 of the 100 providers that responded to our survey said that they embedded English or maths content in vocational skills courses for unemployed adults, 23 said that this content was currently not accredited. Of these 23 providers, many felt that using QCF units was a means through which they could accredit the English and maths skills acquired by their learners, as one provider said:

“We can see how the units could be used in programmes like our Workskills model to accredit things like ‘communication skills’ to make the embedded model more overt and set up learners well for future progression to Functional Skills.”

A few providers said that there was sometimes just not enough time to help all the learners to become proficient in English and maths content embedded within vocational skills courses. When asked how they tried to overcome this, they said they either referred the learners to discrete English or maths provision, provided additional workshops, made e-learning available or allocated support tutors.

Many providers said they would like to incorporate more embedded English and maths content but time constraints did not allow for this. However, the three-year registration

of learners on QCF qualifications does enable learners to return to undertake further units at their own convenience.

The time required to complete qualifications

Individual learners vary considerably in the time it takes them to move up English or maths levels to eventually achieve Level 2. Typical completion times range from:

- 300 to 450 guided learning hours for Entry Level 1 to Level 2 English; and
- 300 to 450 guided learning hours for a learner to go from Entry Level 1 to Level 2 maths.²³

Awarding organisations give recommendations about the number of guided learning hours for their Functional Skills and QCF qualifications at each level; however, although these recommendations are useful in planning provision they are only a rough guide when considering how long an individual might need to achieve a particular level.

Several providers said to us that they felt the 45 GLH recommended by awarding organisations for each Functional Skills qualification level is too low for most learners. These providers were pleased that the Skills Funding Agency has recently doubled the funding for Functional Skills qualifications²⁴, in recognition that they are larger and more rigorous qualifications with greater demands for learners compared with the Key Skills qualifications they replaced.

It can take longer to complete Entry Level 1 and Entry Level 2 qualifications, during which learners are acquiring the foundations of the subject, than it takes to complete higher level qualifications. There can also be significant jumps between levels, as described by one provider:

“Provision is planned around 12-week blocks as an average length of time to achieve a level and stimulate progression and motivation for the next level. However, the step between Entry Level 3 and Level 1 Functional Skills is a challenge. After the Functional Skills test has been completed and we are awaiting results, a bridging programme builds up to the next level until results are known.”

Some providers said that a significant number of their unemployed learners at Pre-entry Level and Entry Level 1 had learning difficulties and disabilities. To support their learners with learning difficulties and disabilities, providers had to ensure that they offered the whole range of approaches and any reasonable adjustments required. To serve them better, some providers said that they were considering establishing provision specific to

²³ Some learners with learning difficulties and disabilities will take considerably longer and may find some abstract concepts, particularly in maths, particularly challenging.

²⁴ Skills Funding Agency (2012) *Funding rates for English and maths qualifications*.

unemployed adults with learning difficulties and disabilities, as described in the Leicester College case study (see pages 20–23).

Intensification of provision

Jobcentre Plus and other referral agents are keen for the unemployed adults they refer to be able to address their English and maths needs as quickly as possible. Therefore mainstream provision, which can be as little as two or three guided learning hours per week, may not meet JCP’s expectations.

In 2012, Ofsted identified that placing unemployed learners into mainstream provision was common practice, stating that:

“Just over half the providers referred participants with low level skills to their existing long-term literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision or they referred them to external providers.”²⁵

During our research in early 2013, we encountered a few providers that infilled unemployed adults into their standard community-wide English and maths provision. However, almost half of the providers we surveyed had recently intensified their mainstream provision or established more intensive provision specifically for unemployed learners.

Thirty-six of the 78 learning providers delivering discrete English or maths that responded to our survey said that they provided over 11 guided learning hours per week to unemployed learners. Of these, four providers provided over 16 GLH per week and three providers provided over 20 GLH per week. One provider gave the following description of their intensive provision:

“We offer a specific programme for unemployed learners of 16 hours a week, comprising eight hours of English and eight hours of maths. It has been found that individuals generally have skills needs in both English and maths, with only one person so far already having a Level 2 in one subject and below Level 2 skills needs in the other. In our core provision, classes are available only once or twice a week which would take a long time to achieve. An eight-week intensive programme helps motivation in achieving realistic goals within a tangible time period, gets them into a routine which is similar to a job and prepares them better for progression into work.”

Several providers said that they had initially had reservations about launching their intensive provision but the actual experience of running the provision had been very positive.

²⁵ Ofsted (2012) *Skills for employment*.

NIACE has recently evaluated pilot provision of intensive English and maths skills provision within offender settings. Within this pilot, learners undertook courses in maths and/or English at 15 GLH per course per week for three to four weeks. The learners opting to undertake maths and English at the same time were undertaking 30 GLH per week. NIACE reported significant improvements in learners' attitudes towards the value of learning and levels of confidence in their ability to learn. This was particularly evident in relation to maths.²⁶

During our research interviews, we informed providers working with unemployed adults of the evaluation findings and asked if there might be any scope for – or benefits gained from – offering intensive English and/or maths provision at 15 GLH or more for unemployed adults. Providers that had already decided to offer provision at this level of intensity were naturally positive about it. Providers not already offering provision of this intensity did not immediately rule it out but they did recommend that provision of 15 GLH or more per week first be piloted to take account of the very different context of provision for unemployed adults in comparison with that of offender settings. Some providers felt that provision in the region of 20 hours per week might be too much, as one said:

“Sixteen hours per week is fine. Motivation might suffer, especially for people who have not been in education for some time, if it was longer.”

One provider questioned whether there would be a proportionate increase in outcomes for learners:

“When delivering in the community we offer two hours per week over 19 weeks. JCP wanted a shorter duration and more hours per week and we have responded such that currently our provision for unemployed learners is between 11 and 15 hours per week. If we were to provide 20 to 25 hours, we would bring programmes together as we would see it as an opportunity to deliver a package. However, we would have doubts that increasing intensity to 30 hours per week would get a proportionate increase in outputs.”

Providers held differing views as to the suitability of intensive provision for learners with lower level needs, i.e. below Entry Level 2. Some providers felt that learners with below Entry Level 2 skills needs could cope with greater intensity if the curriculum and teaching methods used were diverse and engaging. Other providers felt a few hours per week is all that learners could manage when acquiring the foundations of English or maths. Some providers admitted that they would struggle to find the resources to offer more than a few hours per week at lower levels because of the costly one-to-one support and very small group sizes that are necessary in supporting learners at Entry Level 1 and 2.

26 Novitsky, J. and Jones, E. (2013) *Intensive English and maths provision in prisons: Evaluation report of the pilots*, Leicester: NIACE.

Several providers explained that they were hesitant about launching intensive provision at any level because it required a significant upfront commitment of staff and accommodation resources. For instance, one provider said:

“Short, intensive 15 GLH English and maths courses are due to start, but we need to recruit more tutors to deliver them and use external premises due to the centre’s capacity. On the whole, the profile of provision in the service is part time, and this fits with the availability of tutors who teach a range of part-time provision – timetabling more intensive courses is difficult.”

Providers also had to consider making changes to their delivery approaches, as one explained:

“The college offers a ‘fast-track’ English and maths discrete bespoke programme of six hours a day from 9.30am through until 4pm with half an hour for lunch. In total there are 12 sessions of six hours each, totalling 72 GLH. A full day of teaching also allows for a wider mix of teaching methods, with small group work, time on Target Skills on computers and time for one-to-one attention and didactic teaching where needed. Because you’ve got six hours, you have to use every trick in the book, otherwise the tutor would lose their voice and the learners would fall asleep very quickly. There is a regular review of progress at the end of each session because when you’ve only got 12 sessions to make a difference it is important to review and feedback each time.”

Naturally, those providers that experienced dramatic peaks and troughs in referral numbers were particularly cautious. They explained that a ‘chicken and egg’ scenario results, where the referral agent is disinclined to refer to provision it feels offers too few GLH per week but the provider dare not increase the GLH per week because they are worried they will not receive enough referrals to make it cost effective. Clearly a dialogue providing an opportunity for both the referral agent and provider to give assurances is required here.

Teaching and learning approaches

In 2011, BIS reported that:

“For adult numeracy, subject specific skills include knowing how to discuss common misconceptions, use higher order questions, use co-operative small group work, encourage reasoning, use technology and create connections between topics. Effective practice in numeracy builds on knowledge learners already have and overcomes their fear of maths, exposes and treats misconceptions as a subject for discussion, promotes reasoning and problem solving over ‘answer getting’, and makes creative use of ICT.”²⁷

27 BIS (2011) *Review of research and evaluation on improving adult literacy and numeracy skills*.

In relation to adult literacy, BIS reported that,

“Subject specific teaching skills include knowing how to teach phonics, oral reading fluency, comprehension and appreciation of what is read, and how to apply these and other skills to texts on both paper and screen. Effective practice in literacy builds on learners’ experience, and includes encouragement of fluent oral reading, reciprocal teaching, explicit comprehension strategies and adequate time for active reading in class.”

The NRDC identified that effective teaching and learning approaches for teaching writing included:

- learners spending time on the composition of texts of different kinds;
- meaningful contexts being provided for writing activities;
- time being given for discussion about writing and the writing task; and
- individual feedback and support being provided as learners engage in composition.²⁸

Apart from seizing every opportunity to contextualise learning to employment when supporting unemployed adults, the providers we interviewed used the same teaching and learning approaches to those listed above.

However, because providers were at the time of the interviews still getting to grips with Functional Skills, this had led to renewed interest in teaching and learning approaches to support problem solving. Despite being in the standards, spoken communication and writing skills, which are important in many employment contexts, were previously not tested within the Adult Certificate in English qualification at Levels 1 and 2. Testing of spoken communication and writing skills at all Functional Skills levels had therefore recently increased provider interest in effective teaching and learning approaches in these skill areas.

Contextualising the English and maths curricula and addressing other skills needs to support the transition of unemployed adults into work

In 2012, Ofsted identified that mainstream English and maths provision may not address all the needs of unemployed adults, stating that:

“Mainstream provision allowed for flexible enrolments and often provided good teaching and learning towards qualifications but it typically failed to provide intensive training in work related skills required for specific job roles.”²⁹

²⁸ NRDC (2007) *Effective teaching and learning: Writing*.

²⁹ Ofsted (2012) *Skills for employment: The impact of skills programmes for adults on achieving sustained employment*.

In addition to having recently intensified their provision, many providers responding to our survey said that they had increased their use of contextualisation to give learners the opportunity to apply their new English and maths skills within employment scenarios. Providers said that, as well as preparing learners effectively for employment, this made the provision seem more relevant to learners which, in turn, increased their levels of motivation.

Providers said that it was not difficult to identify opportunities to contextualise. As one provider noted:

“We have always had to contextualise. The internet provides lots of contexts. Learners provide their own contexts too.”

Some providers said that they sought to engage employers to identify the English and maths skills required in their sector. They did this through direct contact with an employer or through indirect contact via vocational skills colleagues and intermediary organisations such as awarding organisations and sector skills councils. Involvement of English and maths tutors with work-based provision was particularly helpful in supporting contextualisation, as described by one provider:

“Catherine is also responsible for Employer Engagement through English and Maths and has contacts with a range of employers. This helps to inform provision in terms of employer expectations and workplace needs – as the tutors delivering the JCP programme also deliver English and Maths in the workplace, this brings the two aspects closely together.”

In addition, providers sought to engage employers in the design of vocational skills provision containing embedded English and maths. Whenever possible, the providers involved employers in its delivery, especially where learners were being prepared for a particular employer’s job vacancies; for instance, within a sector based work academy. More rarely, employers were also involved in the delivery of discrete English and maths, as stated by one provider:

“Employers give industry talks. Employers also influence the curriculum. We always ask what they are looking for.”

Oral communication and writing skills are particularly important in the process of applying for work. Alongside their normal English sessions, many providers provided additional support with the written elements of actual job applications through English skills workshops. Learners also often had the opportunity to attend work clubs through which they could receive job search advice and support. At the time of our research interviews, few providers provided work experience opportunities for unemployed adults alongside English and maths skills provision. However, the combination of English, maths and work experience is now obligatory within traineeships.

Some providers embedded or bolted on employability skills provision to develop learners' wider employability skills, as described by one provider:

“‘Employability’ type short courses are offered at ten GLH. These can be done alongside, before or after a core English/maths programme.”

This was particularly helpful where learners had personal development needs or were relatively unfamiliar with workplace norms and etiquette.

Flexibility and personalisation

Providers often made their provision flexible to accommodate the different work-focused activities and circumstances of unemployed adults. Providers did this by:

- offering provision in a variety of venues, often close to learner's homes (one provider actually delivered provision within a Job Centre, albeit to very small groups of learners);
- offering a choice of days and class/workshop timings; and
- if necessary, and with their Jobcentre Plus adviser's permission if referred under Skills Conditionality arrangements, making it possible for learners to roll on and roll off provision.

Providers frequently explained that they lost learners when they had to be referred by JCP to the Work Programme, normally at nine months into their benefit claim if under 25 years old or one year into their benefit claim if over 25 years old. JCP advisers had a small degree of discretion to postpone referral to the Work Programme but this rarely exceeded a few weeks. Where JCP informed providers of the time available before each learner's referral to the Work Programme, they could take this into account in planning the learner's programme. Some providers tried to offer provision flexibly, through evening, weekend and distance learning, so that it could accommodate Work Programme activities. Others developed relationships with their local Work Programme providers and came to arrangements whereby the Work Programme provider did all it could to accommodate the training provision.

Alongside initial assessment and diagnostic assessment, several providers incorporated induction activities, through which learners could identify their preferred learning style. When planning sessions, these providers were able to take account of both the learner's preferred learning style as well as the outcome of their individual and diagnostic assessment.

Where providers offered QCF qualifications, the breadth of QCF units available at each level allowed tutors to select units that met the needs of the whole group or, indeed, individual learners. Small group work and individual work lent itself well to learners

working on different units or at different levels. Providers found it helpful to use blended learning approaches, i.e. a mixture of classroom-based and e-based approaches. This ensured enough variety, which was particularly important in the more intensive forms of provision. It also offered opportunities to personalise, as described by one provider:

“The use of Target Skills Gold in our bespoke programme has provided a greater range of teaching and learning methods, and supports individual learning styles.”

Some providers used a wide variety of e-learning packages, as explained by one provider:

“There are benefits to blended learning; it gives learners online interaction and it is more interesting so learners better retain what they have learnt. It also overcomes the pre-conceived ideas that mature learners have from past bad experience of learning. Workbooks can be boring; there’s no fun in them. We use the Tribal GoLearn system plus extra resources that we build in. Learners can email tutors for support and tutors can add extra resources to personalise. Learners use the internet and pen drives to do job search in the evenings. We also use GOLA and BBC Skillswise – it takes you from basics to higher levels. We use worksheets to consolidate and quizzes to reinforce learning. These are delivered in a session and are also done online. Online enables learners to print off a certificate to which they attach surprising importance; it boosts confidence and gives them recognition.”

The only reservations providers had about the use of e-learning was that the IT skills of some unemployed learners were not at a level at which they found e-learning accessible. Several providers pointed out that some unemployed learners did not have IT equipment at home and therefore for this reason, and because they felt their unemployed learners needed closer support, distance learning was unlikely to be very helpful, as described by one provider:

“We encourage learners to use e-learning English and maths resources as this helps learners to take responsibility for their learning which empowers and extends their learning. Distance learning would not work for many of our learners as they need close support.”

Workshops provided further opportunities to personalise provision, as mentioned by another provider:

“Every learner can access the maths workshop. There is a record card that links workshop and classroom delivery. Learners will often to ask to work on different things. Homework also provides opportunities to personalise.”

Building and maintaining motivation

In our survey, 53 providers said that the majority of their learners were well motivated and attending well, 31 providers said that the majority of their learners were not well motivated but still attending well and just 16 said that the majority of their learners were not well motivated and not attending well. Forty of the 100 providers said that at least half of their unemployed learners were referred under Skills Conditionality arrangements (i.e. mandated to attend by JCP). Providers with greater proportions of mandated learners did tend to report slightly lower levels of motivation. However, several providers said that levels of motivation were better than they expected and this had translated into better-than-anticipated retention rates.

To try to pinpoint what causes some unemployed learners to lack motivation, our survey asked providers several questions relating to expectancy value theory, which states that a learner's motivation is a function of how much they believe they will succeed (expectancy) and the value they place on that success. In response to questions that enquired whether learners valued their learning provision, the majority of providers said the majority of their learners were:

- clear about the role of English and/or maths in helping them achieve their employment goals; and
- aware of the wider benefits of addressing their English and maths needs.

However, a lower proportion of providers said that the majority of their learners believed in their ability to attain the level of English and/or maths they need to achieve their employment goals.

This alters how we might interpret the following statement by a provider:

“Behaviour in English and maths sessions has not been an issue, although retention has. There is a feeling that learners see their study as a temporary fill-in between jobs, rather than a course which will progress their skills. Mandated learners often show this approach more than non-mandated.”

Rather than assuming that these mandated unemployed learners do not appreciate the value of improving their English and maths skills, they may just lack confidence that they personally can achieve this improvement. Therefore it could be particularly helpful to try to build unemployed learner confidence at the point of referral, in their initial interview and during their induction.

Several providers reported that if a learner can be encouraged to persist in the first couple of weeks they were much more likely to be retained for the remainder of their course; for instance:

“The majority of Skills Conditionality learners are not motivated during the first few weeks, but once the relationship has been built and phone calls are made to follow them up, attendance improves. This is once the feeling of being forced to attend by JCP has been replaced by knowing the learning is supportive and will help them for the future.”

As relationships are built over time, the initial contact is always going to be the most challenging, as one provider described:

“Often mandated learners arrive in centre for their first appointment with a level of frustration that is evident through both verbal and non-verbal communication. There are occasions where it takes individuals an hour to enter the building after arriving whilst they try to calm down. The staff are used to this and maintain a friendly and welcoming attitude, which can be built on during the initial appointment and in class. It is made clear that the service is there to help and they are not ‘part of the system’.”

The stigma associated with being mandated to attend is potentially unhelpful and providers said it was better to seek to minimise its impact; for example:

“We won’t beat them with a big stick if they don’t turn up. We ring them and ask if there’s anything we can do to help. We get to know them over the first two weeks by doing the initial and diagnostic assessments and interviews, with a bit of English and/or maths work alongside; settling them down to make them realise it’s not like school. They are there as an equal to everyone else and no-one in the class knows they are mandated to come.”

A few providers said that placing unemployed learners in mixed groups with other learners helped build the motivation of the unemployed learners. However, other providers, some of whom had previously placed unemployed learners in mixed groups, felt that the risk of disruption from unemployed learners within mixed groups was too great and they were better able to address the specific needs of unemployed learners within groups exclusive to those learners.

Providers said they put a great deal of effort into encouraging and motivating their unemployed learners; for example, by:

- supplying success story case studies and course descriptions that explained the benefits of the provision in simple language for referral agents to use with customers at the point of referral;
- involving past successful learners and employers with current vacancies in delivery;
- being co-located within referral agency venues and having an initial interview or a brief conversation with a learner at the point of referral to welcome them and encourage them to attend their initial appointment;

- ensuring expectations are clear at the outset and reassuring learners that support is available if they struggle to meet these expectations;
- encouraging and building opportunities for peer support through group activities;
- recognising small achievements and using a variety of ways to review and record these achievements;
- making learning accessible and engaging through good teaching and learning;
- taking time to listen and show interest in each learner and personalising their learning objectives so that learners feels the content is very relevant and achievable for them;
- providing lunch, free tea and coffee and other small financial incentives and rewards such as cinema vouchers, as unemployed learners are often on extremely low incomes and such things can easily become out of reach;
- checking whether learners are incurring out-of-pocket expenses and liaising with referral agents to arrange for these costs to be covered if this happens;
- being sensitive to learner concerns and seeking learner feedback on what encourages them; and
- contextualising English and maths provision, linking it to vocational skills and apprenticeship provision and making very explicit links to job search throughout by providing job application workshops, job search support through work clubs and by displaying job vacancies.

Supporting progression and capturing learner destinations

Although a few providers said that they experienced retention issues and providers acknowledged that there were challenges associated with supporting unemployed learners, many reported that their learners were achieving well in English and maths; for example:

“In small groups, our tutors offer a very personalised approach and a strong rapport between learners and tutors develops. We believe this underpins our good retention rate at 90 per cent and pass rates in maths at 88 per cent and English at 92 per cent.”

Many providers felt that their English and maths provision was achieving a lot for a highly disadvantaged group of learners:

“The college feels that, considering the needs of the learners on the JCP programme, attendance and behaviour is very good and the majority progress into core part-time provision after completing the initial JCP programme which gets people really motivated.”

Following achievement of their initial English and maths learning aims, many learners progressed into higher level English and maths provision and some eventually progressed onto Level 2 provision:

“Many of our learners stay on with us, doing Entry Level 3 to start off with and achieving, then doing Level 1 and achieving, and then doing Level 2. So progression is good. JCP advisers are very happy with this. We have not had anyone pulled off by their JCP adviser, but people do leave when they get jobs.”

The majority of providers offered ongoing job search support provided in workshops and Work Clubs throughout the learners' English and maths provision. Sometimes, once learners reached Entry Level 3, but more commonly on reaching Level 1, it became viable for learners to progress into:

- vocational skills provision (this happened among 61 per cent of the providers surveyed);
- employability skills provision (among 54 per cent of the providers surveyed);
- other learning provision (among 64 per cent of the providers surveyed); and

- additional job search support on completing their skills provision (among 56 per cent of the providers surveyed).

Many providers were particularly keen to ensure that there were opportunities to progress from English and maths provision into vocational skills provision that was relevant to the local labour market, as one provider described:

“When learners complete, we look at progression opportunities with them. This may result in them accessing another ten-week programme in English or end up in them moving into vocational provision. JCP are OK with this.”

Providers said this was very motivating for the learners as they viewed their move into vocational skills provision as taking a major step towards their employment aims. Learners were sometimes given the option of continuing to develop their English and maths skills in parallel with vocational skills provision. In some providers, QCF English and maths units were embedded in vocational skills provision. Sometimes providers did not offer any or the full range of vocational skills provision themselves. In this case, they referred the learner to another provider that could offer the vocational provision required, as explained by one provider:

“Although we don’t offer full vocational qualifications, we offer vocational tasters and then refer learners to 12-week vocational provision at the local college.”

Having introduced the concept of lifelong learning and stressed the importance of continually updating skills for employment, providers brought progression opportunities to the notice of learners by:

- considering progression opportunities during an individual review or information, advice and guidance interview at the end of the learner’s English or maths provision;
- ensuring learners were aware of their eligibility for full funding and co-funding;
- making explicit links between English and maths provision and some forms of vocational skills provision;
- arranging for in-house employer engagement staff to regularly visit the group; and
- supporting learners to apply for Apprenticeships.

If learners chose not to progress into further learning and their Jobcentre Plus adviser felt their skills barrier to employment had been addressed, providers said they still encouraged learners to keep in touch and drop in if they ever wished to continue in learning in the future.

The majority of providers had no means of tracking the employment outcomes of learners once they completed or left their provision. However, several providers said that

they were in the process of developing a means to track longer term outcomes for learners more effectively. This is in line with the government's announcement in the *Skills Funding Statement, 2012–2015* that it intends to establish an appropriate system to capture information about job outcomes for unemployed learners in the months after their training finishes.³⁰

Some providers said they suspected that the Job Centre had more information on outcomes than they shared and they would be grateful if JCP could share this information, as one provider said when asked if their provision was helping learners to secure employment:

“This is hard to judge as we do not get information back from JCP as to who has found work. Some learners do not complete courses as they have found work and subsequently return to thank us for helping them acquire the skills to do so. If they had not visited us, we would never have known they found work.”

Another provider was frustrated at JCP's unwillingness to share their data, saying:

“Tracking destinations on leaving is very difficult and we would like JCP to share their information when someone enters a job. Job outcome data sharing amongst third sector partners is not an issue so why should it be with JCP?”

However, a few providers were already tracking outcomes with some success, one saying:

“We have effective attendance monitoring and destination tracking procedures, currently revealing that 60 per cent secure positive progression and 42 per cent secure job entry. We don't find tracking too difficult as learners appear happy to be contacted once they have left. In fact, many pop in the centre to say 'Hi'. We use this as an opportunity to motivate other learners, especially if the returning learner has got a job.”

When asked about the difference that gaining English and maths skills made in enabling unemployed learners to find work, providers said that their employed learners had told them participation in English and maths provision enabled them to:

- demonstrate to an employer they could use maths and English skills in a job role, e.g. when completing written documents and making calculations;
- evidence English and/or maths attainment to meet the entry requirements for particular job vacancies, including apprenticeships;
- better read and reply to job adverts;

³⁰ Skills Funding Agency (2012) *Skills funding statement, 2012–2015*.

- be more confident in working online and be better able to complete online applications;
- develop their interview skills;
- have greater confidence and self belief, which encouraged them to apply for more jobs and put in greater effort to secure these jobs as they felt they were more attainable; and
- establish a routine out of the home and away from family demands.

When learners progressed from English and maths into vocational skills provision, it was difficult to attribute the employment outcome to the English or maths provision even though the vocational skills provision would have been inaccessible without the underpinning skills acquired through the English and maths provision. As one provider explained:

“The 58 per cent of our learners who progress from sector based work academies into work would probably say it was the vocational input and mock interview that prepared them for work. Other learners in discrete English and maths provision who progress to employment would recognise the achievement of an English and maths qualification as a stepping stone into work. Some learners come to us as they require a Level 2 in English or maths to gain employment.”

To ensure that providers are not badly affected through the complete loss of the achievement element of their funding, the *Skills Funding Statement, 2012–2015* announced the continuation of job outcome payments where a learner leaves a course prior to the completion of their learning aim to take up paid work that is 16 hours or more a week and lasts for at least four weeks in a row. If undertaking full qualifications, these learners are also excluded from the qualification success rate calculations in addition to the normal exclusion of all learners registered for QCF units.

Providers said that they encouraged learners who found employment to continue their English and maths learning by:

- making them aware of flexible provision available in the evening and on Saturdays though which they could continue their learning alongside employment; and
- establishing e-learning platforms through which learners could submit homework and keep up if they missed sessions due to changing shift patterns.

Conclusion

The findings from this research study clearly indicate that many providers of English and maths provision for unemployed adults are evolving their provision to better meet the needs of unemployed adults through the development of:

- more intensive provision;
- more personalised provision;
- tailored assessments and individual learning plans;
- contextualised provision, sometimes developed through the involvement of employers;
- stronger links to employability skills and vocational skills provision through which learners can acquire further labour market relevant skills;
- job search support through work clubs; and
- more flexible provision that fits the availability of individuals when unemployed and is accessible to them when they find work.

Some recent developments have helped this process, including:

- job outcome payments, which compensate providers for the loss of the achievement element of their funding if a learner leaves their provision before completing their qualification;
- the development of QCF unit-based qualifications;
- increased flexibility and freedoms at JCP; and
- the streamlined referral process now used by JCP.

However, many systemic barriers still perturb providers; for example, the reluctance of JCP to share job outcome details and learners being asked to leave their provision on beginning the Work Programme.

In light of the report findings, we recommend to government that:

- BIS commissions research to identify the different English, maths and vocational skills levels needed to secure, sustain and progress in employment;
- the Skills Funding Agency scopes the size of need and potential demand for English, maths and vocational skills provision from JCP customers, Work Programme

participants and other learners within the community to identify if this demand can be matched by current provider capacity and funding;

- BIS commissions research into approaches that build learner confidence and motivation at the point of referral, during their initial interview and during their provision induction;
- BIS commissions a pilot research programme to determine the benefits for different groups of unemployed learners of intensive provision of more than 15 GLH per week;
- Jobcentre Plus finds a means to share the job outcome data in their possession for those customers who secure employment during or following participation in skills provision; and
- BIS commissions research into how unemployed learners can continue to develop their English and maths skills once they find employment.

We recommend to learning providers that:

- they work in partnership with referral agents and other learning providers in their locality to ensure provision is available that meets the needs of unemployed learners with learning difficulties and disabilities;
- they consider using self-assessment units of QCF Employability Skills qualifications as part of their initial and diagnostic assessment process, to help learners identify their motivations and strengths and to cover the costs of assessing learners' English and maths skills;
- they strengthen links and referral routes from English and maths provision into labour market led vocational skills provision, such as sector-based work academies, so that this becomes a more common progression route for learners completing English and/or maths provision at Level 1 or 2;
- they work together with their local Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers to enable unemployed adults to complete their learning programmes and progress into further learning once referred to the Work Programme.

Annex 1 English and maths Level descriptors

Within the learning and skills sector, an individual's English and maths skills needs are mapped against the following series of Level descriptors:

- **Entry Level 1** is the national school curriculum equivalent for attainment at age 5–7. Adults with skills below Entry Level 1 may not be able to write short messages to family or select floor numbers in lifts.
- **Entry Level 2** is the national school curriculum equivalent for attainment at age 7–9. Adults with skills below Entry Level 2 may not be able to describe a child's symptoms to a doctor or use a cash point to withdraw cash.
- **Entry Level 3** is the national school curriculum equivalent for attainment at age 9–11. Adults with skills below Entry Level 3 may not be able to understand price labels on pre-packaged food or pay household bills.
- **Level 1** is equivalent to GCSE grades D–G. Adults with skills below Level 1 may not be able to read bus or train timetables or check the pay and deductions on a wage slip.
- **Level 2** is equivalent to GCSE grades A*–C. Adults with skills below Level 2 may not be able to compare products and services for the best buy, or work out a household budget.

Annex 2 Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following learning providers for their support in this research:

Baldwin Training Centre, Blackpool Council Adult and Community Learning, Blackpool and Fylde College, Bradford College, Buckinghamshire Adult Learning, City and Islington College, Derby Adult Learning Service, Derby College, Exchange Group, Jarvis Training Management Ltd., Kirklees College, Leicester Adult Skills and Learning Service, Leicester College, North Lincolnshire Adult and Community Learning, New College Nottingham, North Notts College, Oaklands College, Regent College, Ruskin College, Redcar and Cleveland College, SouthBank Training Ltd., South Leicestershire College and Yeoville College.

We would also like to thank the following Jobcentre Plus districts for their support in this research:

Enfield Jobcentre Plus, Kilburn Jobcentre Plus, Leicester Jobcentre Plus, Liverpool Garston Jobcentre Plus and Manchester Middleton Jobcentre Plus.

We would also like to thank the following stakeholders for their support in this research:

The CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills

We would also like to thank the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Jobcentre Plus (JCP), the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) for their helpful feedback during the design of the research project and the creation of this report.

We would like to thank Jo Booth from Whirlow Hall Farm Trust, Sheffield for her support in undertaking some of the research interviews.

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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