

# EUROPEAN AGENDA FOR ADULT LEARNING

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## Basic Skills and Social Inclusion

### The Basic Skills 'challenge'

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is a survey of adult skills, including literacy and numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments, led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The 2012 survey included 166,000 adults aged 16-65 in 24 countries. The UK was represented by England and Northern Ireland; 8,892 adults were surveyed.

The findings show that 16.4 per cent of adults (5.8 million) in England and Northern Ireland score at the lowest level of proficiency in literacy (below Level 1) and 24.1 per cent of adults (8.5 million) score at that level in numeracy<sup>1</sup>. While the survey shows that adults in England and Northern Ireland score around the EU average, young people (aged 16-24) in England perform below the EU average and worse than the overall population<sup>2</sup>. The PIAAC data also highlights other social inequalities that need addressing, for example the gap between the skill levels of employed people and unemployed people is particularly pronounced in England and Northern Ireland.

The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a survey of the educational achievement of 15 year old pupils, found that the UK performs around the average in mathematics and reading, compared with the 34 participating OECD countries<sup>3</sup>. This is despite the fact that the UK has a higher GDP and spends more on education than the average in OECD countries, as well as higher levels of tertiary education. The results also show that the UK's performance has not changed since the 2006 and 2009 surveys. Similarly to the inequalities identified through PIAAC, the PISA survey found that socio-economically disadvantaged students in the UK are less likely to succeed at school than their more advantaged peers. Reducing the number of young people with low basic skills is one of the key focuses of the 2014 European Semester country-specific recommendations on growth and jobs for the UK<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> OECD (2013) *Survey of Adult Skills first results: England and Northern Ireland (UK) Country Note*.

<sup>2</sup> EU Commission (2014) *Education and Training Monitor 2014: United Kingdom*.

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2013) *Results from PISA 2012: United Kingdom Country Note*.

<sup>4</sup> EU Commission (2014) *Education and Training Monitor 2014: United Kingdom*.

## The policy response in England

The need for the education and training sector to improve literacy and numeracy skills, particularly of young people, is considered to be urgent and is a Government imperative. In response to both OECD international surveys, the latest Skills Funding Statement asserted that 'we must improve the quality of provision and ensure that it embraces all who should benefit, so that everyone who needs to can improve their English and maths to at least GCSE A\*-C'<sup>5</sup>. In order to help achieve this, English and maths provision is now embedded in many of the Government's major programmes, including Traineeships and Apprenticeships. Since September 2014, all learners aged 16-19 who did not achieve A\*-C GCSEs in English and maths at school must continue to studying these subjects as a condition of funding, applicable to providers in receipt of funding from the Education Funding Agency<sup>6</sup>.

Driving up standards in maths and English is a key ambition for the Government and to support this reformed GCSE qualifications will be available to be taught in schools and colleges from September 2015. The new GCSEs have been developed to be more academically stretching and the examinations will be linear (content will not be divided into modules), with no internal assessment. A recent call for evidence on the how these qualifications can be successfully implemented in post-16 education concluded that while the sector broadly welcomed the Government's ambition to promote GCSEs as the national standard of maths and English qualification, stakeholders will need to support to do this<sup>7</sup>. Specifically, stakeholders called for flexibility in the implementation and delivery of the qualifications, as well as Government's continued support for providers in raising the standards of teaching.

## A practice-based response: Towards a Citizens' Curriculum

Drawing on research in embedded basic skills (Casey, 2006) and the recommendations of the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (Schuller and Watson, 2009) NIACE wishes to strengthen the understanding amongst adult learning stakeholders and policy makers that a 'Citizen's Curriculum' (literacy, numeracy and ESOL, digital, civic, health and financial capabilities), delivered as a set of inter-related capabilities, will provide greater motivation and participation for those learning in families, communities and the workplace. It will be fundamental in providing a framework of learning that people can choose from to acquire a diverse range of capabilities which have a potentially transformational impact on their personal and family lives, local communities and the workplace. NIACE believes that the

<sup>5</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014) *Skills Funding Statement 2013-16*, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding>

<sup>7</sup> Robey, C. Jones, E. and Stevenson, A. (2014) *New English and maths GCSEs in Post-16 Education and Skills: Findings of the call for evidence on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and the Department for Education*. NIACE.

benefits would be seen not just for employability, but for encouraging greater motivation, leading to increased civic participation, and developing greater resilience for those not in formal learning situations to cope with social change.

In 2014, NIACE completed a 6 month Citizens' Curriculum scoping study funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The study found strong support for such an approach amongst providers, practitioners and other stakeholders. Three underlying principles for a life skills / citizens' curriculum for adult learning were identified:

- An holistic approach to provision for adult learners interpreted through the local context
- Learner involvement in determining the curriculum to meet their needs and interests
- An interlinked combination of literacy, numeracy, language (English for Speakers of Other Languages), financial, health, digital and civic capabilities

Within our BIS core funding this year, we have agreed to undertake further work on this agenda, with a particular focus on engaging learners from disadvantaged groups, supporting providers to adopt a Citizens' Curriculum approach and create progression pathways to Functional Skills/ GCSE qualifications. Accordingly, we are now working with 14 providers, including ACL, FE and community organisations to develop and pilot approaches to the delivery of a Citizens' Curriculum. Particular areas of focus include provision for homeless / vulnerably housed adults, learners in offender learning, ex-offenders, migrants, disadvantaged young adults and family learning contexts.

## Questions to the Forum

- Are Forum members aware of policy and practice-based responses to PIAAC at a local or regional level?
- Forum members are asked to consider how basic skills provision supports better social inclusion in their own settings? Contributions of examples or case studies would be welcome.
- Are forum members aware of any provision, projects or other initiatives taking a similar approach to the Citizens' Curriculum?