Making Second Chances Work: Final Report from the Qualitative Evaluation of Adult Basic Skills Pathfinder Extension Activities

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Policy Studies Institute

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Acknowledgments

Contents

Executive Summary

This report describes a qualitative evaluation of basic skills extension activities offered in pathfinder areas during 2002. It is based on depth interviews with learners, teachers and employers involved in a range of courses. Five types of course were covered in the evaluation:

- Residential
- Fixed rate replacement
- Intensive
- Highly structured
- Financial incentives

In addition, the research provides a case study of experiences of work with employers, use of ICT and work with other agencies.

Feedback from learners and teachers who had taken part in the courses was extremely positive. Most of the learners who took part had left education early and with few qualifications. Many had negative experiences of formal education which created barriers to tackling their basic skills needs, and some had additional issues such as physical or mental disability.

Learners had chosen to take part for a variety of motivations, but particularly in order to improve their work prospects and to support their children's education. While most had few explicit expectations at the outset, learners reported greatly increased confidence and skills, and an improvement in their overall personal effectiveness. The degree of individual attention provided by teachers was highly valued.

Few learners had any negative comments to make; most simply wished that their courses had been longer. Some expressed a desire for more differentiated provision, in terms of ability range.

Teachers welcomed the innovative forms of provision they were able to offer. Residential courses were highly valued as offering a period of intensive study away from domestic and other commitments. They were also seen as offering additional benefits in terms of developing team-working and social skills. Fixed rate replacement courses, by compensating employers for time learners spent away from work, offered a chance to engage those with basic skills needs who are in employment, and may find it difficult to access traditional provision. Intensive and highly structured courses offered the possibility of making rapid progress, although some teachers felt that long days were difficult for those returning to study after a long break.

Courses were set up and run to a tight timetable, which had placed heavy demands on some teachers. They emphasised the value of planning and course

design in delivering effective provision. Integrating ICT into basic skills courses had often necessitated additional planning, and teachers working with employers were also seen to require highly-developed skills.

The employers who had been involved tended to be larger or unionised; while some had run fixed-rate replacement courses, others had been happy to subsidise courses themselves. They included a local authority, a national supermarket chain, a commercial company providing employment for disabled people, a meat processing factory and a low-cost clothing chain. Several factors appeared to influence their enthusiasm for taking part:

- Overall ethos in relation to training and development
- Existing relationships with provider
- Organisational restructuring and the need for an adaptable workforce
- Trades Union awareness of basic skills issues

Employers who took part spoke highly of the benefits, describing improvements in productivity, staff morale, team-working, and an overall increase in the flexibility and adaptability of staff. The main issues and problems related to the timing of courses and the logistics of ensuring staff cover. Some workers were not released to attend, and shift workers tended to be excluded. There was also a need to ensure that the content of the courses reflected the needs of both employers and participants.

Two pathfinder areas had a specific remit to include ICT in their extension activities, and other areas had also used ICT in innovative ways. The case study highlighted learners' enthusiasm for basic skills, and the specific benefits which it can offer as a learning tool. Computers were also seen to have become so much a part of everyday life that IT competence potentially ranks alongside numeracy and literacy as a basic skill. Effective use of ICT was seen to require a strategic deployment of resources, including the development of compatible systems across areas, training packages and access to technical support.

Providers also worked in innovative ways with a range of collaborators. In a number of cases these provided a service to groups, such as local authority care workers, disabled people in employment, and disabled people attending a daycentre, who would not normally have access to basic skills provision.

The report highlights the importance of careful design and planning in delivering effective provision, and the need for a range of courses to meet the varying needs of different client groups. The development of follow-on provision, so that early gains are not lost, was seen as important, as was a secure funding base. Some teachers felt that there was a need for improved publicity strategies, to avoid the long-standing stigma associated with basic skills needs. Work-based courses were seen as having particular potential, reaching a group which does not have access to much traditional provision, but there was also seen to be a need for

proactive marketing to employers.

Chapter 1: Design, delivery and evaluation of the pathfinder extension activities

1.1 Background

The importance of basic skills in terms of economic and other life outcomes has been thoroughly established in research (Dearden *et al.*, 2000). A person lacking basic skills has relatively poor life chances even compared to someone without any formal educational qualifications but having basic skills of literacy and/or numeracy. The disadvantages of basic skills deficits extend beyond employment and earnings to increased health risks and risks of imprisonment. Research on the changing nature of work (e.g., Zuboff, 1988; Gallie et al., 1998) helps to show why this has come about. The manual and machine-based jobs of the industrial era have rapidly declined, to be replaced by jobs involving cognitive and information-processing skills. In addition, the majority of jobs in the modern service economy are 'people jobs' where social and communication-based skills predominate. Individuals who lack basic literacy, language and number skills are accordingly at a far greater disadvantage now than in the recent past.

Another crucial change, which has been strongly emphasised in government initiatives, is the progressive replacement of initial education and transition training, provided on a 'once-only' basis, by lifelong learning. The Training in Britain survey (Rigg, 1989) showed that the people having greatest access to continuing education and training opportunities were those who had already achieved a relatively high level of basic education. Those with the lowest initial attainments were also the least likely to be sent on employer-provided training or to seek continuing learning opportunities on their own. This conclusion has been confirmed repeatedly in subsequent research. A certain minimum of basic skills is needed to get onto the ladder of lifelong learning. Yet, without a continual renewal and enhancement of skills, individuals in a world of rapidly changing technology and service demands risk losing their grasp on employment and all that goes with it. Once they lose employment, basic skills may further deteriorate or atrophy, leading to long-term exclusion from employment. Many economists have seen in this 'skill decay' a fundamental cause of persistent high unemployment in Europe.

The links between skills and economic well being are now widely accepted and understood. Alongside this understanding, there is also a need to perceive the wider importance of skills for psychological well being and social inclusion. A powerful concept integrating competences with motivation is that of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977): the self-confidence and self-esteem which come from belief in one's own capacities and the resulting exercise of those capacities. Arguably,

lack of basic skills may constitute a severe obstacle to developing self-efficacy. Yet, the self-efficacy concept indicates that even a small gain in confidence through learning and doing can help to break out of the vicious circle as one successful step increases the confidence for another.   This insight underlies the 'distance travelled' concept which has been applied in New Deals and elsewhere, and is highly relevant to Basic Skills programmes.

1.2 Design of the initiative

Following the publication of the Moser report in 1999, the DfEE published its national strategy for adult basic skills (DfEE, 2001), and established pathfinder areas in which new approaches to teaching and learning were to be piloted. The pathfinder extension activities specified basic skills courses to be offered in a variety of contrasting formats, following guidelines.   The key requirements for the courses covered by this report are set out in table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Essential features of the extension activities

Extension activities	Essential features of provision by the pathfinder projects			
	No. of hours of contact time	No. of days or weeks	Content	Continuation activity and additional features
Residentials	Up to 20	Up to 3 days	*Either* literacy or numeracy	Integration of course into existing mainstream provision. Total contact time, including residential at least 60 hours.
Fixed replacement costs for employers	60 (5 hours per day)	Up to 13 paid days; Up to 13 weeks	Literacy and/or numeracy	Courses to take place during the working day. Employers paid fixed daily rate intended to offset their costs. Integration of learners into existing mainstream provision after course. Employers may decide to support continuation activity from their own resources.
Intensive	60	Up to 4 weeks	*Either* literacy or numeracy	Integration of learners into existing mainstream provision after course.
Highly structured	40 to 60	Up to 20 weeks, (minimum of 3 hours per week)	Tightly prescribed programme of literacy *or* numeracy	Once provision complete, learners to make choice of next steps.
Financial incentives for learners	40 to 60	Up to 15 weeks	Literacy and/or numeracy	£5 per two hour session; £25 for preparing for and taking the national test; £75 for passing the National Test at level 1 or level 2. One activity included learners integrated into existing mainstream provision. Employees may engage in continuation activity from within their own resources.

Extension activities were offered across nine geographical areas:
- Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership
- Tyne and Wear Local Learning and Skills Council
- Leeds Learning Partnership
- Nottinghamshire Basic Skills Partnership
- Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership
- Cambridgeshire Learning Partnership
- Thanet Basic Skills Project
- Gloucestershire Basic Skills Partnership
- Hackney, Islington, Newham & Tower Hamlets Colleges Consortium

While residential courses and working with other agencies were activities offered in all areas, other activities were offered across a selection of areas only. Learners were to be drawn from the priority groups set out within *Skills for Life*. These groups include:
- Unemployed people and benefit claimants
- Prisoners and those supervised in the community
- Public sector employees
- Low-skilled people in employment
- Other groups at risk of social exclusion

1.3. Research aims

The evaluation of the pathfinder extension activities required two distinct kinds of information:
- A description of the conduct and progress of the initiative, the characteristics and aspirations of the participants, and their experiences and perceptions in taking the courses and afterwards.
- An assessment of the difference made by the initiatives in terms of outcomes which would not otherwise have been achieved.

These aspects are addressed by both a quantitative evaluation which compares participants and non-participants, and the progress of participants over time (White et al, 2003) and by a qualitative evaluation, which is the subject of this report. The qualitative research aimed:
- to describe the range of characteristics and aspirations amongst course participants, and explore their experiences of taking part
- to make a detailed comparison of how the different pathfinder extension activities have worked, in order to provide information on best practice
- to identify the outcomes for participants
- to assess the advantages and disadvantages for employers
- to explore the contribution of ICT
- to identify implications for policy and practice in basic skills training

11

1.4. Methodology

Depth interviews with course participants were used to explore experiential and perceptual aspects of their lives with a potential influence on their participation in basic skills learning. These included experiences of school and other forms of education and training, current and previous labour market experiences, motivations for taking part in the extension activities, expectations and experiences of the course, and the perceived benefits of participation (the topic guide is reproduced at appendix 1). Interviews with teachers explored the aims of the courses, issues of recruitment and retention, and the extent to which it proved possible to attract intended target groups. Teachers were asked to reflect on particular elements of the provision which had been successful or less so, and the ways in which courses had developed as they progressed. They were also asked to evaluate the impact on individuals and the changes they had witnessed as people progressed through the course. The topic guide is reproduced at appendix 2. All interviews were taped (with informants' permission) and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis was conducted using the NVivo qualitative research software, which facilitates the generation of coding concepts, and provides a range of techniques for searching the data and generating explanatory models. NVivo provides the facility to interlink the various research resources, and it facilitates the production of an analysis 'audit-trail' for later re-interrogation. The analysis used grounded theory methods in which the analyst reviews the data; compares and contrasts the perceptions, accounts or experiences of respondents; searches for patterns or connections and builds explanatory models.

It was agreed that we would sample five extension activities:

- Residential
- Intensive
- Highly structured prescriptive
- Fixed rate replacement
- Financial incentives for learners

Providers of the sampled extension activities were predominantly further education colleges, but one course was provided by an adult education service (intensive 1). Other agencies participated in the delivery of two of the residential courses.

There are a range of individual characteristics that may influence outcomes and experiences of basic skills provision. These include gender, age, ethnicity, and the presence of ESOL needs in addition to basic skills needs. The sample was therefore designed to recruit from across these categories and to cover a range of courses and areas. Interviews with 23 learners and 10 teachers were carried out across most of the nine areas, excluding Gloucestershire, Tyne and Wear

and Cambridgeshire. Two learners and one teacher were interviewed for each type of course. Residential courses were given greater weight in the sample, as these have been run in all pathfinder areas. Table 1.2 outlines the types of courses across which the ten teacher interviews were drawn. It also indicates how the teacher interviews will be referred to throughout this report. For reasons of confidentiality all interviewees are presented anonymously using pseudonyms for individual agencies and employers. Table 1.3 gives a breakdown of the learners' characteristics.

Table 1.2: Types of courses taught by the ten teachers interviewed and course and teacher identification (ID)

Type of course and course ID	Teacher interview ID
Residential Residential 1 Residential 2 Residential 3	**Residential** Teacher 1, residential course Teacher 2, residential course Teacher 3, residential course
Fixed replacement costs for employers FRC 1 FRC 2	**Fixed replacement costs for employers** Teacher 1, FRC Teacher 2, FRC
Intensive Intensive 1 Intensive 2	**Intensive** Teacher 1, intensive Teacher 2, intensive
Highly structured Highly structured 1 Highly structured 2	**Highly structured** Teacher 1, highly structured Teacher 2, highly structured
Financial incentives for learners Financial incentives	**Financial incentives for learners** Teacher, financial incentives

Table 1.3: Characteristics of 23 learners interviewed

Gender	
Male	9
Female	14
Age	
16-19	3
20-29	9
30-39	7
40-49	2
50-59	2
Ethnicity (self-defined)	
White	17
Black British	1
Spanish	1
Turkish	1
Bangladeshi	2
Mixed race	1
ESOL needs	
Yes	3
No	20
Type of course attended	
Residential	9
Highly structured	4
Intensive	4
Fixed rate replacement	4
Financial incentives for learners	2
Area	
Hackney, Islington, Newham & Tower Hamlets Colleges Consortium	4
Thanet Basic Skills Project	4
Nottinghamshire Basic Skills Partnership	7
Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership	4
Leeds Learning Partnership	2
Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership	2

In addition, case studies of three particular aspects of the pathfinder extension activities were carried out. These were:
- Working with other agencies
- Working with employers
- Using ICT

These involved interviews with providers, employers and agencies, and also incorporated relevant material from teacher and participant interviews. Information from the case studies is reported in chapters five, six and seven.

The next chapter explores the structure of the courses in more detail, for instance the number of hours and days offered on each course. The number of enrolments and completions on each course is not described in this report, but is being explored as part of the quantitative evaluation.

Chapter 2: Course aims, structure, recruitment and publicity

2.1 Introduction

Having described the essential features of the courses in the first chapter, this chapter takes a closer look at course aims, structure, recruitment and publicity. As was to be expected, there were variations in course structure by extension activity, but also some interesting differences in the way in which different providers structured similar courses. Learners' and teachers' experiences of recruitment and publicity for the extension activities also offer some useful insights into the issues arising.

2.2 Course aims and structure
Residential courses

Residential courses were seen as differing from mainstream, traditional basic skills courses. The courses aimed to take learners into new contexts and ask them to apply and develop the skills they had been acquiring on their on-going courses via new ways of learning. Residential 3 focussed on numeracy, but the other two residential courses were much broader in their content, for example using drama and outdoor activities. Table 2.1 outlines the main aspects of course structure and take-up across the various courses covered during the fieldwork. As stipulated, all the residentials were integrated into the programmes of learners on longer, on-going basic skills, family numeracy and life skills courses. Course length ranged from two to four days, residential 2 working slightly outside of the guidelines (see chapter 1, table 1.3). The number of learners on the courses varied, as did learner - teacher ratios. The smallest group size was in residential 3, with five participants and their five children and the largest was in residential 2 with 16 -18 participants. Even where larger numbers were involved on the courses, teachers commonly divided the learners into smaller groups and brought in staff from other agencies to run specific activities. Two of the providers had a very specific target group. Residential 1 worked with young people with difficulties, for example those who had been involved in truancy, theft, vandalism and drugs, who were attending a twenty-six week life skills course. Residential 3 involved mothers taking a family numeracy course at the school attended by their children. Where reported, entry levels across the courses appeared very varied and interviewees occasionally indicated that this had been stipulated in the guidelines that they had been given in commencing the extension activities.

Fixed rate replacement costs for employers

The main aim of FRRC 1 was to help people become more effective in the workplace but also to recognise and address personal needs. Similarly, while

FRRC 2 aimed to achieve level 1 literacy and numeracy and focussed on skill acquisition related to both areas it was also concerned with employability and communication/interpersonal skills. One course sampled here was working with public sector employees (FRRC 1) while the other was working with private sector employees (FRRC2). FRRC1 was spread across six weeks, with two full days of classroom time per week (84 hours). In contrast FRRC 2 was condensed into four weeks, requiring two and a half days of classroom time and a substantial amount of homework (60 hours). This more 'intense' delivery approach at FRRC 2, departing from the guidelines, was due to a combination of the employer's seasonal needs and the pathfinder timescale The contrast in learner numbers, fourteen in FRRC 1 and five in FRRC 2 was to do with low take-up in the latter, rather than design. Learner composition seemed to reflect the overall composition of the workforce, being male dominated in FRRC 1 and female dominated in FRRC 2.

Intensive

Intensive 1 covered literacy and numeracy with a focus on the development of confidence through the strengthening of basic skills. Intensive 2 set out with the aim of improving functional literacy in people's everyday lives. The intensive courses had very contrasting formats and learner numbers. The format of intensive 2 appeared more intensive. Intensive 1 ran for six weeks and involved seventy-eight hours, thirteen hours across three days per week. It involved ten learners and three teachers contributing to a range of activities. As we saw in table 1.3, the guidelines for intensive courses stipulated sixty hours of teaching for up to four weeks, so intensive 1 departed from what had been signalled to represent an intensive format. In comparison, intensive 2 worked more firmly within the guidelines, running for two weeks, learners working 9am to 3pm Monday to Friday, sixty hours. This course involved twenty-two learners and one teacher.   All course participants on intensive 1 were public sector employees. The learners on intensive 2 were more mixed, although this was a feature of the target group.

Highly structured

Highly structured 1 integrated literacy and numeracy into previous provision in the area of employability.   The course aimed to develop literacy and numeracy skills so that people might gain sustainable employment. The course ran for thirty hours across two weeks, so this course was also tailoring the guidelines to meet learner needs. Two courses had been run, one with ten participants and another with eight.   All learners were 18 - 24 year olds on a New Deal programme, both men and women and from a mix of ethnic groups. The benefit status of the course participants had led to the course hours being shortened so that participants were not working in excess of sixteen hours per week. It was not altogether clear from the interview to what extent this was a 'tightly prescribed' approach (see table 1.3).

Highly Structured Course 2 integrated literacy and numeracy provision and was intended to provide basic skills support to learners on existing vocational courses at a FE college. For a variety of reasons, mainly relating to the attendance requirements of the courses learners were already attending, this course had not proved attractive to this target group. The participants were all learners with learning disabilities, who were already attending the college, but were not undertaking vocational courses. They were a small group, of 7 learners, and attended one day a week for 15 weeks, for the whole day. For most, entry levels were below level 1.

Financial incentives for learners

Financial incentives had been integrated into a numeracy course, preparing people for GCSE but recognising that some learners might have motivations for doing the course other than working towards attaining a GCSE. Learners on this course attended for ten weeks, undertaking forty hours of classroom study across one and a half terms, working in accordance with guidelines. There were around seven learners; roughly all at an entry 3-level 1 standard.

Table 2.1: Aspects of course structure and course take-up

Course ID	Course hours & length	No. of teachers	No. of learners recruited	Learner composition	Entry level
Residential 1	3 days	2+	10-14	Young people (under 18) with difficulties, white, men and women	Very varied Entry 1 to level 2
Residential 2	4 days	4	16 -18	Most mid twenties to thirties, very mixed ethnicity, more women	Level 1 and 2
Residential 3	2 days - weekend	1	5	Mid twenties to thirties, all women and mothers	Entry level 2 & 3
FRRC 1	6 weeks/84 hours 2 days per week	2	14	Public sector employees. Mid twenties to thirties, mostly men	Level 1 to 3
FRRC 2	4 weeks/60 hours 2.5 days per week	1	5	Private sector employees. Ages ranged from early twenties to seventies, all white, mostly women	Entry level 2/3 in many areas
Intensive 1	6 weeks/78 hours 13 hours across 3 days per week	3	10	Public sector employees, mix of ethnic groups, more men than women	-
Intensive 2	2 weeks/ 9am to 3pm	1	22	Mixed. Group included a teacher and retired surgeon	-
Highly structured 1	2 weeks/30 hours	1	8	All 18 - 24 year olds on New Deal, mix of ethnic groups, more men than women	-
Highly structured 2	15 weeks/10-4	1	6	All learning disabilities, wide age range (20s to 60s), mostly women	Entry level 1?
Financial incentives	10 weeks/40 hours/1.5 terms	1	7	Mix of ages, almost all white, men and women	Entry 3 level 1 Largely learners wanting to go to GCSE

2.3 Recruitment and publicity

Learners' experiences

Learners had often been told about courses by teachers on existing courses, and many recalled seeing posters, or being sent or given leaflets. Participants on courses held in work hours (fixed rate replacement courses and one intensive course) had heard of them from their line managers or union representatives. The family residential course had reached its target group by placing notices in schools, and a head teacher had also approached some parents personally. Learners remembered personalised approaches as a key way in which they had found out about courses:

> *Well we just, we went to like an introduction first, you know, just a coffee and a chat and [the teacher] explained a few things about what it would be about. I'd say just the chance to help [my son] with some of his numeracy skills, you know basic skills for me as well.* (Residential learner)

As the following chapter will examine in more detail, learners identified a number of motivations for tackling their basic skill needs. These included:
- helping their children
- making up for negative school experiences and poor qualifications
- to be able to go onto another academic or vocational course
- to improve job prospects
- to be able to deal with everyday things such as budgeting, reading or writing letters.

Teachers' experiences

Learner motivations and the marketing of courses

The various learner motivations for doing the courses were reflected in what teachers had to say about what learners found appealing about the courses. The way in which courses were marketed also related to these different motivations. For instance, the family residential course run in one area had an obvious appeal to people whose primary motivation was to help their children. There would appear to be additional scope to build on the awareness of individual motivation in this way when designing and marketing basic skills courses.

The role of some factors is rather ambiguous. The chief example of this is the provision of financial incentives for learners, notable by its absence from the list of learner motivations briefly outlined above. The teacher interviewed for this extension activity felt that for some learners the provision of incentives had not make any difference while for others it either was, or had seemingly become, important:

.I have learners who say yes it has made a difference to them, quite surprisingly so…   Once the money's sort of coming in they'll be as soon as they see you 'I haven't got last weeks money yet' and like really getting into the fact that they're getting this money coming in for learning (Teacher, financial incentives)

This teacher also described a learner who he felt would not admit that she did the course for the money but had changed her lifestyle and hours of attendance in order to qualify for financial incentives.   For her it has been a source of empowerment:

The money to her has given her a feeling of independence and her own money she's earned rather than just benefits.   But again it depends on the learner 'cause it is such a varied mix of learners (Teacher, financial incentives)

Continuing the 'financial incentives' theme Teacher FRRC 1 said that while all the participants welcomed the chance to brush up on their skills, not one of them would have done the course if it they had not been given paid time off work.   The funding of this extension activity was then also potentially empowering:

I think that they welcome the chance to brush up skills that they've not used for a long, long time, and one of the questions again on our feedback was 'If you hadn't been given paid time off work, would you have come?' And fourteen people said 'No, we wouldn't have come' (Teacher FRRC1)

Publicity

The courses were advertised in many different ways. The following are the methods used by most providers:

- Flyers/leaflets
- Word of mouth
- Recommendation by supervisors/team leaders at work
- Articles in the internal publications of the employer
- Talk by current teacher to potential learners or managers
- Showing pictures of the residential location (by current teacher)
- Listing in college brochures
- Personal letters to learners on other courses
- Marketing with employment services

Among these, 'word of mouth' (and the element of personal contact that goes with it) was viewed by teachers as the most effective way of attracting participants.

In the beginning we had to rely very heavily on both the leaflets and the supervisors, as the courses took place then people who had been on them were our very best advocates because they would go back and they would say to their immediate colleagues look, you know, this was really

21

> *something. (Teacher 1 Intensive)*

Where written materials were used, it was seen as important that these were appropriate to the provision being offered. Some courses, like the one below, had experienced problems where publicity materials had misled learners, leading to the recruitment of people who were interested in a different kind of course altogether, and had subsequently modified the materials produced:

> *So these four computers were there, the pictures are the computers with numbers on the screens and people didn't read, 'This will help you work out your bills, decorate a room', all they saw was computer screens and that is why when we did this one we didn't put the computer in there.' (Teacher 2 intensive)*

The timing of the publicity was also highlighted as important so that people could make appropriate personal arrangements so that they could attend the course:

> *And by the time you know we'd got the information out and sometimes if people - I mean it does take some time a long time to organise things like that - and some people couldn't go because they couldn't get childcare. (Teacher 2 residential)*

Deterrents to participation

It was clear from the interviews with teachers that the requirement to attend for a specified number of hours had deterred some potential learners. Learners with existing educational, family or work commitments dominated here. Some deterrents were extension activity specific. On financial incentives for learners, benefit issues were described as a 'deep problem' creating a barrier to participation. This was particularly evident for recipients of Job Seekers Allowance but also for people in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit. One potential learner did not participate because of embarrassment about her skills deficits:

Target group and main course participants

As discussed in chapter 1, pathfinder extension activities were aimed at unemployed people and other benefits claimants, public sector workers, low-skilled people in employment, prisoners and those supervised in the community, and other groups at risk of social exclusion. Within these categories, providers identified specific target groups, although, for a variety of reasons, these did not always eventually constitute the majority of participants.

Teacher reports of target group and main course participants are given in table 2.2. The recruitment difficulties experienced by intensive 2 have been discussed. One or two other courses also experienced difficulty in reaching their target groups. For example, fathers had declined to participate on the course from which residential 3 recruited its participants; so all the learners were mothers.

Eight mothers were invited to go on the course, but three declined. Their teacher felt this was due to pressure from their partners.

Other teachers indicated that take-up had not been what it might have been. For example, the financial incentives course could not recruit enough learners to put on a full course due to benefit barriers and has re-recruited as people have dropped out. On-going recruitment was constrained by the timing of the pathfinder.   While FRRC 1 had recruited to its capacity of fourteen places, the five participants on FRRC 2 rendered take-up at only 50%. Highly structured 1 had averaged around eight learners for its courses, but had a formal capacity of twelve.

While highly structured 1 was formally open to everybody and had been trying to tap into college waiting lists for New Deal courses, recruitment and publicity efforts were centred on participants in existing courses for young people on the New Deal programme; its employability unit clients.

Gender composition of the courses was discussed in section 2.1. On the whole the ethnic mix of the courses seemed to reflect the diversity in the community. Only one or two teachers reported that the ethnic mix of the learners recruited was not representative of the population base. Again on the financial incentives course the pathfinder timescale and guidelines appeared to have constrained the extent of outreach work that could be undertaken

Table 2.2: Course target group and main course participants

Type of course and course identification	Basic skills needs target group	Main course participants
Residential		
Residential 1	Young people with difficulties	Young people with difficulties
Residential 2	People on level 1 and level 2 courses	People on level 1 and level 2 courses
Residential 3	*Parents with young children*	*Mothers with young children*
Fixed replacement costs for employers		
FRRC 1	Employees	Employees
FRRC 2	Employees	Employees
Intensive		
Intensive 1	Employees	Employees
Intensive 2	*People wanting to improve numeracy skills*	*People wanting to improve IT skills*
Highly structured		
Highly structured 1	*Anyone wanting to improve their basic skills*	*Unemployed on New Deal*
Highly structured 2	*People already attending college and with basic skills needs*	*People with learning disabilities*
Financial incentives for learners		
Financial incentives	Employed people, income support recipients (because of guidelines)	Employed people, income support recipients

Chapter 3: Learners' experiences

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses learners' experiences of the courses they took part in. It begins by discussing their educational and employment backgrounds, before going on to discuss their motivations for taking part, the aspects of the courses which they found most helpful, their suggestions for change, and the impact courses had on learners.

3.2 Learners' educational and training backgrounds

Most of the learners interviewed had left school at the age of 15 or 16; those who had stayed on until 18 tended to be those with physical or learning disabilities, who had gone to college at age 16. Although some learners had obtained GCEs/GCSEs, most had left school without qualifications. Many of those interviewed had problematic experiences of school, some of which were obviously related to basic skills issues, and which could have implications for their current motivations and preferred learning styles.

Many of the people we interviewed said that they had disliked or 'hated' school or particular subjects, such as Maths. Luisi, who had been educated overseas, described being hit by teachers and told constantly that she was stupid, which had left her with low self-esteem and negative views of her abilities. Several people commented that they had not been motivated to learn as teenagers. Jade said '*I didn't really go there willing to learn*', while Jill reflected on the effects of peer pressure at that age:

> *When you're 15 and 16, and you see your friends having a laugh, you just want to have a laugh with them… I mean, I'm not proud of it, but when I was 16 I didn't care.*

Clive had missed a large amount of schooling because of multiple operations for a disfiguring condition. Other learners had also been absent for lengthy periods. A few said that they had played truant, but more commonly they appeared to have used minor illnesses as a reason not to attend, and this was something in which some parents appeared to have colluded. Steve explained the damaging effects this could have:

> *Well, the more time you took off school, the less you wanted to go back, because by the time you did go back you was behind with everything, you'd feel the idiot of the class and it'd make you not want to come the next day, so you wouldn't come the next day. So you get behind in more and more things.*

Several learners mentioned problems with bullying at school. For most, it appeared to be a transient phase, which they had been able to cope with, but for others it was a prolonged and damaging experience. Martin, who is disabled, was bullied when attending a mainstream school. He seems to accept this as inevitable and appeared to have received little support from teachers. Martin described this time as having a very negative effect on his self-confidence, and viewed the two years he had later spent at a specialist school for disabled people as an essential step in recovering his equilibrium. Rachel described being bullied throughout her school career; she felt that her parents, who were both employed in demanding jobs, were unavailable to help her either with this, or with her dyslexia, which was recognised fairly early:

> In fact, they knew something was wrong with my reading when I was in infant school because I can remember… there used to be a building there, and I used to have to go there for reading lessons five times a week. But my mother never went with me.

Others, like Clare, felt that they had not received the help they needed from teachers in order to get the most from their education:

> It weren't the fact that I didn't want to learn, because I did, but it were like the kids that were clever seem to get all the attention and the ones that weren't were like pushed to [the] back… So like I never ever caught up, and I struggled through every school I ever went to.

Nina also commented that there had been far less attention paid to pupils who needed extra help when she was growing up, compared with now. Overall, most of the learners felt that they had got very little from their many years of compulsory education.

Some learners had done work-related training courses in the past, such as NVQ and City and Guilds qualifications and courses in particular issues such as food hygiene, lifting and handling and so on. A few people had previously attended basic skills courses. The comments of those who had dropped out of previous provision are indicative of some factors which may undermine the initial motivation to participate. For Martin, a key element that had been lacking in the earlier basic skills course he had attended was feeling comfortable with the other learners:

> I don't mind being around youngsters and that, but there weren't a lot of people in there of my age, and they couldn't relate to what I'd done or I couldn't relate to what they'd done, and the conversation would go flat before it had even started. So I thought I'll move on and come here and be around people my own age.

Steve, who had to make a considerable to effort to attend, given his employment commitments, found that his enthusiasm waned rapidly when he did not enjoy the course, and was not allowed to prioritise his own learning goals:

> The teacher and the group, it wasn't fun… There wasn't many people

there and the teacher was giving me things what I wasn't really bothered about, and I thought, and I told him, I says 'I don't wanna do this I wanna to do that, I already know what I'm doing here', and he said 'Do this first' and I thought 'Oh I ain't having this', I thought '[doing things] that I don't even enjoy.'

3.3 Learners' experiences of employment

Of the 23 learners interviewed, nine were doing some form of paid work. Most were working full-time. Six of them were attending courses in work hours, most of them on fixed-rate replacement costs, and the others on an intensive course arranged by a local authority employer. Two learners were doing two jobs, and working very long hours as a result. As discussed in the previous chapter, employment commitments were a key issue affecting access to basic skills training and the profile of learners is likely to reflect the particular ways in which provision is offered.

Most of the learners interviewed were working in catering, retail, and leisure services. Other types of work learners had done in the past included factory work, driving, building trades, cleaning and care work. Although one or two were unhappy in their jobs, and were hoping to move on in the near future, the majority expressed satisfaction with their work and had no immediate plans to change jobs after completing their basic skills courses.

A number of learners were involved in caring for their children full-time. Several had plans to return to work once their children went to school, and for some participants, the basic skills course formed part of an overall strategy for a return to the labour market, as Karen explained:

I've got a beautiful daughter, me son's off to school at the moment, you know what I mean, me husband's just recovering from cancer, so we're like at a stage where, we're like at the beginning of us lives again, so I'm just trying to get in there… basically getting to school is what I need for a good job… cause like, on social I'm like on £200 a week, so you need a bloody good job to be coming off better than that, you know.

Some disabled participants, like Martin, did not consider paid work to be a realistic option for them:

Because of my physical disability I'm a bit limited to what I can do - I mean as far as the job thing's concerned I'm sure that a job is off my menu at the moment.

By contrast, Heather, who had learning disabilities, was doing voluntary work in a shop, and had been doing this for some years. She was hoping to obtain paid work in a large supermarket which had recently opened nearby, and hoped that the basic skills course would make her more attractive as an employee.

3.4 Learners' experiences of taking part in the extension activities

Access issues

Almost all the learners interviewed reported finding the courses easy and convenient to attend in terms of location, transport and the time of classes. They were also offered free of charge. For some learners, existing commitments meant that they would not have been able to access basic skills provision in the absence of the particular extension activities they were offered. This was particularly apparent in relation to fixed rate replacement courses. Other courses available in work time had similar benefits for learners. For instance, Steve, who was attending an intensive course, had given up previous courses, as they were incompatible with his working hours:

> *Well I did a course like this before at the [name] centre in [local area] but then I got two jobs. It was very hard to go back to it, so I thought this was an opportunity to go back into it and see if there is any opportunity to do something on a weekend basis … 'cause of work I never had the time to go, but this is actually in working hours so I thought this is ideal, so I'll still be able to work and come to this one.*

Similarly, for learners with childcare commitments, the availability of classes with crèches or where their children could attend alongside them, was a key factor enabling them to take part.

However, as the previous chapter discussed, it was clear from interviews with teachers that some potential learners had been deterred from participation by the requirement to attend for a specified number of hours, particularly where they had existing educational, family or work commitments. This suggests that it may be important to tailor the attendance requirements for courses to meet the needs of particular target groups.

Motivations for tackling basic skills

The majority of learners interviewed were already enrolled on some kind of course, although not necessarily related to basic skills, before taking part in pathfinder initiatives, the exception being participants on fixed rate replacement courses, who were often returning to learning after an extended period. Learners described a variety of motivations for deciding to participate in basic skills courses. Some had simply decided that this was the right time to deal with basic skills needs which had been longstanding issues in their lives. Clive said, 'I'm slow at doing things and I wanted to learn a different way of doing them' while Rachel, talking about the teachers at school, said that they *had 'written her off as dyslexic' and she wanted to 'prove them wrong'.*

Some people specifically mentioned issues connected with employment. Pete said that he wanted 'to improve my skills, and to try and further myself in my job position' while Karen expressed a desire to break out of a cycle of low-paid, unsatisfying work, saying, 'all me life all I've done is dead-end jobs and that's why I needed to come here'. For Steve, a key motivation for participation was so that he could leave a job which he had done for 20 years, since he left school, and no longer enjoyed, while for Luisi, tackling basic skills was part of a more general desire to change direction:

> *My feeling was like, you know, that I really was stuck. I was stuck in my personal life, my personal situation. And so my feeling was 'That's it. I'm going to do this because this is something that may help me'.*

Other people had been recommended to participate by a teacher on another course. Fozia and Ismail both spoke English as a second language, and had been guided to courses which were aimed at meeting their particular needs. Andrew, who had learning difficulties, said that his teacher had presented the course he attended as a good way of meeting people and making friends.

Other course participants framed their motivations primarily in terms of possible benefits for their children, and presented their own needs as secondary. Jade's comments were typical of this group:

> *Well it was advertised as family numeracy so I thought it would be a good chance to like help my son with his numeracy and maybe do a bit for me as well.*

While some of these were participants on a family residential course, which was obviously designed to appeal to such motivations, similar sentiments were also expressed by participants on other types of courses.

At the other end of the spectrum, some learners had joined courses despite not being highly motivated as individuals. Carl said 'I didn't have anything else to do', and Jill's response was similar:

> *I didn't actually put my name down. It was because somebody dropped out and they needed to make the numbers up, to be honest!*

These individuals had nonetheless benefited from attending. Although the pathfinder extension activities generally were not aimed at New Deal participants, we also interviewed one person who claimed that their attendance was compulsory and undertaken only to avoid benefit sanctions.

Expectations of the courses

At the outset, some learners reported feeling 'nervous' or 'excited' about their courses. Learners who had negative experiences at school, or who found it difficult having to meet new people, were more likely to describe themselves as nervous, and tended to worry about how they would get on with the teacher and

29

with other learners, and whether they would be able to keep up with the pace of work.

Most learners, however, seemed to have few expectations of their courses at the outset. Some of them, like Luisi, stressed that this could be a positive advantage:

> *I mean first of all because I didn't have no expectations. I think that was a good thing in a way. I didn't go there with a preconceived idea of what was going to happen and what was going on. I just heard from the other learners, the first residential they went, all the activities they did, but I didn't have no expectations whatsoever. I just went, just to see what happens.*

For those who had experienced nervousness in advance, one or two sessions of the course were generally enough to dispel any anxieties, and most people felt that the courses had more than lived up to their expectations.

What worked well?

It was clear that teachers played a key role in helping learners to feel relaxed and comfortable on the courses. Many learners referred to the courses in terms of 'fun', 'excitement', 'enjoyment' and 'interest', and as something which they looked forward to or remembered with pleasure, unlike their compulsory attendance at school. Several people described 'missing' their course, not wanting it to end, or wishing they could do it again. Few learners referred to the distinctive features of their particular course in identifying the aspects which helped them the most. While the design of courses was influential in determining access, their benefits related to features which were found across the range of provision.

Many contrasted their experiences on the course with previous negative experiences at school or college. Being taught in small groups was something which was of obvious benefit to people in terms of having access to support from the teacher, and also made it easier to make friends and develop social skills. Jade said:

> *You had one-to-one tuition… at school you can't get any… the teachers can't come to you and it was… I thought, 'No.' First of all I thought, 'It's going to be big, it's going to be massive, it's going to be school, loads of pupils there already doing maths, I'm going to be struggling'. That was my worst fear. But when I found out it was only six of us, in a small classroom, it was great.*

It was clear that learners had blossomed as a result of the individual attention and encouragement they had received, and this was something which they greatly valued. Carl said of his teachers, 'they kind of build the spirit up', while Karen commented of the change in her self-perception:

You feel like somebody here, you know what I mean, whereas I didn't feel like I were nobody.

Peer support and team-work were important aspects of helping learners to develop confidence, and also helped to build skills in working co-operatively, as Rita described:

> *Everyone's encouraged to help each other out… Instead of, like, 'No, I'm doing it by myself' and it's just me and you're thinking about yourself. You think about everyone in here… Before I wouldn't have done that really, but coming on this, I've learnt to look after other people and look after myself better.*

On some courses, competitions had been used to foster the development of team spirit, and these were something learners described as both useful and enjoyable.

Computers, and the use of IT generally, appeared to be of benefit to many learners, and these activities were particularly valued by learners as they were seen to have a positive impact on employability. Steve expressed a widely held view, 'It's all computers, nowadays, isn't it really?'. Many of the learners were using computers, or particular skills, such as searching the Internet or using a spreadsheet, for the first time. Some learners also referred to ways in which computers suited their preferred learning styles. Issues relating to the use of ICT are explored in more detail in chapter 6.

Residential courses were undertaken with learners who were already attending other courses, and some of the comments they made related as much to the weekly classes, as to the residential. The distinctive advantages offered by the residential courses included team-building activities and a chance to consolidate work done in the classroom setting. For the mothers who attended the family residential, the freedom from domestic chores that this provided also appeared to have been quite an important aspect of the course:

> *There was no other distractions around, you know... We didn't have to cook [for] ourselves, we didn't have to clean up after ourselves very much.*

Negative experiences and suggestions for change

Only two learners expressed negative feelings about their course as a whole. These included one person who had taken part only to avoid benefit sanctions and one who was part of a disaffected group with issues around school attendance and offending behaviour, and had felt that the teachers treated them like small children. Most learners were very positive about the courses, and some could not identify any aspect that they were unhappy with. Other learners were able to suggest ways in which the course might be modified to make it more effective. This section discusses some of these issues; they also inform the discussion of policy development in chapter 9.

An issue raised by a number of participants (and by some teachers) was that

learning activities could be experienced as quite intense and tiring, particularly where someone was returning to study after a gap of many years. This issue arose in relation to all the courses, and not only the intensive and residential courses, where the design of the activity necessitated a certain degree of time pressure. Generally learners preferred a short session of a few hours, rather than a whole day. This was not always within the control of providers. One highly structured course run over a whole day was felt by both teachers and learners to be less than optimal, but it was offered in this way due to the constraints of timetabling. Strategies that helped learners to cope with this included varying the teaching room and type of activity, and having a lot of breaks.

One issue mentioned by a number of learners was the wide range of ability in groups, and a desire for more differentiated forms of provision. Although teachers had done their best to accommodate individual needs, some people felt that they had made less progress than they would have liked, and attributed this to the level at which their course was pitched.

Several people on residential courses said that they would have liked the course to be slightly longer. In some cases, people specified how they would have liked to spend the additional time; some expressed the desire for more 'free' or 'fun' time, while others would have liked to try additional activities, rather than having to choose between options. Participants on several other courses also said that they could have benefited from longer courses and that it would be useful to have 'follow-on' provision, as the progress made might otherwise not be sustained.

On the residential courses, an unsatisfactory venue had the potential to undermine the whole enterprise. Physical comfort (such as the cleanliness of rooms, and the quality and quantity of food) was important. One non-residential course, which was run in a school, also had to cope with a less than ideal environment, as there was a lot of noise and disruption from the children, and learners would have preferred an alternative venue, but realised that this was probably not possible.

Some learners said that they would have liked the sense of achievement they felt to be recognised by the issue of a certificate at the end of the course, and this was done on some courses.

3.5 The impact of the course on participants

A key issue in terms of the qualitative evaluation of the extension activities was that learners were interviewed during or very soon after their participation, and will not be interviewed again. This limits our observations to the short-term changes observed. However, these indicate some important areas for the evaluation as a whole, including improvements in self-confidence and personal

effectiveness, enhanced employability and an increased interest in and capacity for helping children with school work.

Increased confidence and personal effectiveness

A greatly increased level of confidence in many areas of life was the main perceived benefit of participation, and it was emphasised by both learners and teachers. Paulette was typical of many, saying: '*Once you've got the confidence you can do anything*'.

Learners also described a number of everyday activities which had become easier for them as a result of participation in the courses. These included being able to work out calculations, such as percentage reductions or conversions from pounds to euros when shopping, and weights and measurements for recipes. Some learners described an improved ability to budget resulting from their increased numeracy skills. One learner had learnt to tell the time, and another, who had previously struggled to tell left and right apart, had observed a great improvement in this area, while several people noted an improved ability to read timetables and work out routes. Another learner had felt inspired by the course to apply for her driving licence and was now looking forward to learning to drive. Some of the classroom activities had helped people to grasp things which they had struggled with all their lives. Improved confidence could also help people to assert themselves and make their voice heard. One woman described how she had successfully complained and obtained a refund in respect of poor service, and said that this was something she would not previously have felt able to do, while another said that before the course she would not have had the confidence to be interviewed for this research.

For some participants, the course also offered an opportunity for a general broadening of their horizons, which is likely to increase confidence and overall personal effectiveness. This appeared to be particularly true of residential courses, which offered opportunities to experience different environments and try out new activities. Martin had enjoyed staying in a luxury hotel, socialising with other learners and using the leisure facilities provided. Luisi, who said that she and her children had not previously travelled outside the London area, had attended a residential course in the North of England, and was now planning to take her children on holiday to different parts of the UK.

Impact on employability

Some learners who were in employment described particular tasks which had become easier for them as a result of their participation in the courses. For instance Pete and Jill, who both worked in shops, explained that they now felt more confident carrying out stock-taking and calculating discounts and special offers, even though computerised systems generally did much of this automatically. Leanne, who needed to complete handover reports at the end of

shifts in the care home where she worked, commented that this was much easier and less intimidating than it had been before the course. In addition to mentioning specific tasks, learners also mentioned 'soft skills' which were also likely to improve their chances of getting work and their performance at work, such as increased confidence, self discipline, team working, organisation and planning, communication skills and general familiarity with IT.

Rita described a general improvement in self discipline and motivation. She had previously been out of the routine of getting up and out of the house by a certain time, but was now reluctant to miss attending:

> *I hate having time off or something like that… I'll get up, even if I'm ill, I will get up and come. Because I don't like to miss it, it's a really good thing to do.*

For Deniz the most noticeable benefit of the course was an improvement in communication and team work skills:

> *I wasn't that self-confident before I went on that course… I was quite a shy person to work in a team. I mean, to communicate with people. It's better now.*

Team work skills appeared to be particularly enhanced by group work activities which broke down barriers between participants, and enabled the development of peer support. These included both classroom work and activities such as rock climbing, caving, raft building, night walks and abseiling offered on residential courses, which helped build trust. Jill said that she now felt much more able to ask for help, and contrasted this with her earlier experiences at school:

Generally, however, learners who were employed tended to feel that the courses had not made a major difference to their current jobs. This was often because they had chosen types of work which were able to accommodate their existing level of literacy and numeracy skills, and so did not place great demands on them in this respect.

> *Courses were viewed as more important in opening up prospects for it got pointed out to me that 'Don't be afraid to ask.' After doing the course I realised that there's a lot of people that don't know that much, that need help. When I was at school I used to think… I was embarrassed, so I never did ask the question if I wasn't sure. But I don't mind asking now. I think if somebody does want to laugh at me because I don't know it, then they're the one with the problem, not me.*

Anna was planning to train as a nursery nurse, while Pete was looking for promotion within his existing workplace, and saw his increased skills as a passport to this:

> *I want to step up now to supervisor duties which is more responsibility for*

*me, because I would be more responsible for my staff, rather than the
building itself. So: be able to work on a computer, work reception, on the
tills, I'd be writing more then as well, when you're supervisor, because
you've got to write hand-over notes for people coming in, so they can read
them.*

Most of the learners who were not employed at the time of the interview also felt
that the courses had improved their prospects of finding work. Karen said that in
the past she would only have felt able to apply for 'dead-end jobs' but was now
considering a much wider range of employment. Clare felt that the help she had
received in preparing a CV would make it easier to apply for jobs. Several
people commented that the course had made them feel much more confident
about dealing with job interviews.

*The whole thing builds your confidence up. You can actually go for an
interview now. You can hold your head up high, but before it was like, 'Oh
no, I'm not going, I'm not going!'… I'd go in to the interview and just go,
"Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And, "Oh, yes I'll give you a job tonight."
Things like that. So it's really helped me along… I've done things here
that I probably wouldn't have done at school or at any other time, so it's a
really big help to come on this. (Rita)*

One of the most obvious ways in which the courses appeared to have made a
difference to learners was in influencing the desire and intention to take part in
further study. Almost all the learners we interviewed said that they planned to
take additional courses in the near future. Some people simply had a rather
vague idea of wanting to do more study, while others had definite ideas for the
courses they planned to do. For most, this involved taking additional basic skills
or IT courses, courses for leisure interest (such as aromatherapy, massage and
photography), GCSEs and A levels. For a few, the course had given them the
incentive to pursue even more ambitious goals. Deniz, who had ESOL needs,
had decided that the best way forward was to study for a law degree, and
participation on the course had helped him to have the confidence that this was
something to which he could realistically aspire.

Effects on participation in children's education

As discussed above, wanting to be more effective in helping children with their
schoolwork was a key motivation for some learners and a number of them said
that their courses had successfully fulfilled this aim. Anna was one of several
people who expressed increased confidence in this area:

*Instead of saying ' Wait for your Dad to come to help you with your
homework', I'll have a go and help them myself.*

Pete saw his improved Maths and English as something which would be of long-
term benefit to his child, as well as helping him to improve his work prospects:

I've got a young daughter who is four, so I will help her in the future, as

well as now.

In addition to being able to give their children practical help with their work, participants also described a change in their attitudes, and reported feeling more motivated to encourage their children, checking that they have done their work and making sure that they attend school regularly. Leanne contrasted her attitude with that of her own parents, who had allowed her to play truant, and taken little interest in her progress at school:

> *I say 'have you done your homework?', and they'll say 'Yes' and I'll look through it, even [though] sometimes I can't even understand it…   I make sure that they do things like that, and if they say they don't want to go to school, I'll look into it, I'll say 'Well why?' and I just won't go 'Oh, OK then.'*

Clare expressed an increased level of confidence in dealing with the school more generally; she was more able than before to judge how well her son was progressing in his work, and found it much easier to write letters, for instance to explain an absence from school. These changes in parents' attitudes and behaviours in relation to their children's education are likely to have important positive effects over the longer term, and should help to avoid some of the educational issues which have affected participants themselves.

Chapter 4: Teachers' experiences of the courses

4.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on teacher experiences and perceptions to take a closer look at the content and successful features of the courses. It explores what teachers had to say about changes that they observed in learners during the course and discusses their perceptions of the problems learners encountered. Teacher views of ways in which the courses might be improved are considered in chapters eight and nine.

4.2 Ways of working

There was evidence that a variety of strategies and ways of working were developed on the basic skills courses. As discussed in chapter 3, a unifying feature in the backgrounds of the learners interviewed is that they felt they had benefited little from their time in compulsory education, albeit for a variety of reasons. When speaking about their experiences of the basic skills courses, they often contrasted their positive recent learning experience with more negative experiences of school. The way in which the basic skills courses met the individual needs of learners, the type of classroom activities they undertook and the quality of teacher-learner interactions were all themes that emerged in the development of new ways of learning. Across all the extension activities a variety of classroom activities were being used to aid the learning process. This included keeping the process of developing literacy and numeracy skills firmly embedded in the use of application in every day life and the use of group work, computers, drama and outdoor activities.

For the most part providers seemed to have given a lot of thought to the kinds of 'classroom' activities that were appropriate for different learners.

Teachers were encouraged to speak to these themes and when they did so these ways of working were presented as integrally linked to positive changes occurring in the learners through the course. Finding ways to meet individual needs was directly or indirectly a common thread running through teacher comments.

Meeting individual needs

Teachers were asked about the scope for tailoring the course to the individual needs of learners. From this avenue of questioning it emerged that several teachers had drawn on training needs analysis, which often included the development of individual learning plans. This was the case for all teachers working with employees and/or with a focus on employability. Shortly before

the courses were due to start, or at the start, teachers met with learners to explore their backgrounds, experiences of school, qualifications and literacy and numeracy skill sets. Both the teachers running fixed replacement costs for employers courses reported that they had undertaken training needs analysis, as did an intensive teacher working with employees. The other teacher indicating that she had gone through this process did so in the context of a focus on employability in the highly structured course involving New Deal participants. These teachers commonly reported that training needs analysis marked a process of on-going dialogue, the building up of a rapport between teacher and learner and a sense of ownership of learning plans amongst the learners:

> *Every learner has an individual plan…we discuss their past history in terms of what they've done since they left school, really a potted history, in terms of experience, skills and qualifications. We try to make it as positive as possible and often learners don't value the skills that they've got.' (Teacher 1, FRRC)*

One or two of these teachers mentioned that individual learning goals were being reviewed on a daily or mid-course basis. The teacher on intensive 1 emphasised flexibility as a particularly important part of the process of providing individual support. For example, learners were able to work on the same kind of task, but pitched at a level that reflected their individual needs. Having two teachers in the room allowed individuals to receive one-to-one attention.

In similar vein, teachers across three different kinds of extension activities signalled the importance in motivational terms of allowing learners to have a say in what they learn:

> *..before we went, the week before, I asked them what sort of areas they would like to concentrate on, unanimously it was multiplication; they wanted to learn their tables and they then said they wanted to do one or two other bits and pieces, and that's why the Saturday night went on so long, because they wanted to cover so much ground (Teacher 3, residential)*

Such comments also indicate a potentially important role for learner-teacher interactions in meeting individual needs. One teacher clearly articulated how part of the process of building up a rapport with the learners can involve allowing them to feel ownership of this learning process. If learners want to work on their literacy and 'avoid' numeracy, teachers felt it was best to give them space to decide when it is time to, as they put it, 'bite the bullet'.

Constraints on tailoring courses to meet individual needs emerged. The most common constraint signalled by teachers was, unsurprisingly, the size of the group being taught, but none of the teachers reported oversized classes. As we have seen, some teachers had run courses below capacity and these smaller classes allowed them to develop closer working relationships with their learners. The following quote illustrates how it can also help teachers to give sufficient

individual attention, so preventing people feeling that they have been left behind:

> *we can't really go for classes of more than twelve and that is for one teacher impossible anyway when you've got different levels and people doing different things, started at different areas. (Teacher, financial incentives).*

Group work

While tailoring classes to individual needs was felt to be important, there was also often a role for group work, but conducted in a way sensitive to individual abilities. It was felt to be important to avoid setting anyone up for embarrassment or failure. Group work was used as an aid to learning, a mechanism for encouraging mutual support and also because of the practicalities of having at least some of the learners in a class with similar needs. This theme emerged from teachers across different kinds of extension activity. Teacher 1, FRRC got a learner who found spelling very difficult to express her ideas while a fellow learner wrote those ideas down. They typed up her ideas and working in this way boosted the confidence of both learners. A second example comes from residential 3. While the mothers and children participating in this family learning course worked separately for much of the time, the teacher also organised exercises that allowed them to come together. They made games using shapes, number and colour and undertook a map reading exercise on a visit to a zoo. Other new developmental tools that were incorporated into courses, in particular residential courses, also used group exercises to foster co-operative working and personal development (see section 4.2.5).

Using computers

Computers were being used in a variety of ways by both of the teachers on intensive courses and on residential 1 and highly structured 1. IT was not presented as an integral feature of these extension activities. Rather it was described as being used to keep the learning process more practical and interesting and to facilitate group work. Teacher 2 intensive noted how in one exercise learners went to a shop and in small groups compared prices, worked out portions and percentages, did multiplication and division. Working on computers seemed to make the learners more willing to participate. Issues relating to the use of ICT are discussed in detail in chapter 6.

Keeping it real: embedding basic skills courses in everyday life

One or two teachers mentioned the importance of keeping the course relevant to people's everyday lives; meeting individual needs on a practical level. Here not only was it important to address the practical ways to develop literacy and numeracy, but also to focus on making the learning experience very different from negative memories of school days that exert a continued influence on learners' attitudes to learning:

> *Stick a sum in front of them, school flashes back and they freeze up, but ask them to work out some money, no problem, and it's that that is the focus of what we're working on. It is practical based all the time and that's why we will be flexible if there's something, if a learner wants to work out something on their bank balance bring it in, we'll work it out as long as it's not too confidential (Teacher, financial incentives).*

This approach was qualified to meet the needs of a particular group on residential 3 who did not want to focus solely on the way that maths might be used in everyday life. The learners wanted to work on maths in a more abstract way: working on 'pure' maths as well as 'applied' maths. Their teacher felt that it was important to accommodate what she described as their 'ideal of maths'. She emphasised that going along with what the learners wanted to do helped to build up their confidence. To do this she needed to keep her delivery of the subject matter simple and accessible, even if not grounded in everyday life.

Experimenting with new developmental tools

Some of the teachers had drawn on ways of learning not commonly found in traditional basic skills courses, and had worked with other agencies to facilitate this. The main examples of this occurred across the residential courses. The team activities undertaken on the residential courses for young people with difficulties were seen as making an important contribution to personal development, encouraging self-discovery of qualities that had hitherto remained hidden. Once again the empowering potential of basic skills courses emerges. In the following quote a teacher explains at some length how the context of basic skills development is important, even though it is not explicitly recognised in the national curriculum:

> *pride, confidence, being able to push yourself, being aware that you can actually do more than you think that you can do…. Trust is a big one. It's not the kind of things that you can link to the national curriculum and basic skills, but it's the kind of things that need to be in place if you're going to improve basic skills. They need to feel confident, they need to feel pride; they need to feel that they can fail and it will be okay, they need to know that there is support out there. All these things are basic skill [related] but they are not in the national curriculum. (Teacher 1, residential)*

One of the residential courses had integrated drama, photography, felt-making, presentations, the production of newsletters and booklets into course activities. Drama was used so that people could see that learning can be applied to fun as well as hard work and also as a tool for encouraging the learners to feel more confident about themselves and their skills. The over-riding emphasis was on producing tangible outcomes for the learners and the teacher enthusiastically described positive results. Learners who previously would not have spoken up in class were reported as participating in the process of making up a play, building on their experiences and performing it in front of the rest of the class.

On the third residential sampled, while mothers were working on their numeracy skills with their teacher, their children were doing the same with their head teacher. The trip to the zoo allowed numeracy, as well as map reading, to be incorporated into a 'fun' setting, helping to facilitate family learning.

4.3 Successful features of the courses

All teachers were asked what they felt to be the most successful feature of the course. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly teachers did not always directly (or indeed indirectly) describe the distinctive features of particular extension activities when talking about the most successful features of the courses, as the sections below discuss.

Residential courses

Residential courses were distinctive compared with the other extension activities, providing 'time-out' to study by offering the opportunity to withdraw from everyday settings and pressures. All teachers for this extension activity emphasised the value of people being able to withdraw from their everyday commitments and environment to focus on their literacy, numeracy and personal development. Many of the learners on residential 2 were parents, some of them working, all of them having to juggle commitments to attend their usual basic skills classes. On the residential they were seen as having gained from being away from their children for a short while, having a period of time for themselves, to get on with their own reading and writing, to sit and think. On residential 3 learners were also perceived to benefit by taking their children to a residential course with crèche provision as part of the process of 'family learning', geared in part to addressing the behavioural difficulties of children. Usually their mothers were in a setting filled with distractions, an open classroom in their children's school. Away from this setting, they were able to cover a lot more ground than usual. For residential 1, taking young people out of their normal environment, allowing them to take part in activities that they would not usually do, was something that teachers viewed as enabling. Integrating basic skills into a real activity was seen as helping to facilitate a growth in personal development.

Residential courses were also felt to have expanded the boundaries of traditional basic skills provision by integrating personal development and basic skills development. All the residential courses experimented with new ways of learning and these were universally judged to have been extremely successful. These innovations tended to involve collaboration with specialist staff from other agencies. Again teacher 1 residential was particularly struck by how the personal development of young people could be enhanced by outdoor activities, which in turn could be used to aid basic skills development. To reiterate an earlier point, there were advantages arising from basic skills teachers being closely involved in this process and helping the residential group to 'gel' (though

41

this teacher also felt that there might be scope for outdoor activity specialists to draw out basic skills applications of the outdoor activities).

There was also satisfaction with the use of drama activities, facilitated by the drama teacher on residential 2, again not a common feature of traditional basic skills classes or within the expertise of traditional teachers. Again, this was enabling:

> *...they talked about what they'd learnt from doing it 'cause some of the activities they did in the drama were about sort of understanding themselves and so on and it sort of gave them insights I think, which they valued.. And it's the sort of thing, you know, we never have a chance to do at college, we don't have the time to sort of explore things in that way 'cause you're working in a much more academic way. I think it was very successful. (Teacher 2, residential)*

This teacher also expressed appreciation of having 'proper funding' to organise this kind of course, a theme that is addressed in chapter 9.

Fixed rate replacement costs for employers

Neither of the teachers on this extension activity mentioned fixed rate replacement costs as the most successful feature of the course, but their comments nevertheless revealed an appreciation of the value of financial incentives for employers. One teacher noted that such financial support was a crucial feature of the course as employers would not be interested in accommodating basic skills courses without it. Another teacher stressed that the learners very much appreciated having *paid* time to do the course. These issues are further explored in chapter 5.

Other issues emerged in the more direct teacher comments on the most successful features of the courses. One teacher emphasised the way in which the course had addressed long-standing learner anxieties about their abilities, often located in negative experiences of school. Learners were seen as having been empowered by having the opportunity to have an objective assessment of their skills.

Teachers on these courses reiterated the value of workers being able to take 'time out' to study. For both of the FRRC courses sampled, learners went to a local provider. Teacher 2 FRRC felt particularly pleased with the speed of progress that learners made during what was described as an 'intensive' course, as compared to a college course spread over a longer period of time:

> *It's been good that it's been intensive. I've noticed a difference. I've not taught so intensively before. I'm used to learners coming to college maybe doing two hours a week or three hours a week over the course of an academic year, and I have found that the learners are learning a lot*

more quickly by doing an intensive course (Teacher 2, FRRC)

Intensive

The value of time out for more intensive study was also noted in relation to the extension activities designated as intensive. Teacher 2 intensive noted the value of learners learning on a daily basis rather than once a week for one or two hours. Learner satisfaction of the experience was also felt to be linked to having a nice venue and a nice lunch every day.   A further theme was the interconnected nature of growth in personal and competence development:

> *..it's their skills, their basic skills - they have made excellent progression because of this self-confidence and self-esteem and they are now taking their lives in their own hands and being responsible for further learning (Teacher 1, intensive)*

There is an issue of what is the appropriate 'balance' of intensity.   This is considered in chapter 8, which discusses teacher suggestions for improving the courses.

Highly structured

Teacher 1, highly structured, had little to say about the distinctive structural features of this course. Rather, when asked about the most successful feature of the course she mentioned IT as a different way of learning that substantially enhanced the learners' enthusiasm for exercises set in class. Similarly, Teacher 2, highly structured, similarly felt that the main benefit of the particular course he taught was the small size of the group, which enabled him to provide a much greater degree of personal attention to learners, rather than anything distinctive about the 'highly structured ' nature of the provision.

Financial incentives for learners

The benefits of having more intensive time for study also came to the fore in discussing the benefits of these courses. Financial incentives were *indirectly* referred to as the most successful feature of this extension activity. While the time constraints of the Pathfinder had a downside, for this extension activity in terms of the length and intensity of the classes the teacher particularly welcomed the learners attending classes for more than two hours per week when they had been out of the education system for some time. The requirement to attend for four hours per week to qualify for financial incentives for learners was felt to be beneficial in this respect. This again hints at the importance of finding the right balance of learning intensity. The following quote from this teacher illustrates this point well:

> *I think it's very good, more than two hours a week, I think… a learner who's been out of education for a long time they need to be coming more*

*than two hours [each week], you want you know can you imagine school
kids going two hours a week they're not going to learn anything 'til, four
hours minimum really, that's been good about it, it's enabled us to help the
learners, to talk them into it* (Teacher, financial incentives).

4.4 Changes in the learners

Some of the successful features of the courses reported in the previous section
reveal that personal development and confidence development often went hand
in hand.   All teachers, across all the extension activities reported positive
changes in their learners through the courses. As the following sections discuss,
some of the factors contributing to the changes were course and client group
specific.

Growing confidence

There were widespread reports of the courses having a positive impact on the
self-efficacy of the participants, particularly in terms of growing confidence.
Changes did not happen overnight and sometimes derived from learners gaining
a better feel for their existing skills base and a sense of their potential.   Often
teacher comments mirrored what learners had to say about how they had
personally benefited from the courses. Teacher 1, intensive said, 'they come
shy, nervous, they leave glowing with confidence'. Part of this story was about
learners being surprised at their abilities, something that may not have happened
without this kind of basic skills intervention:

> *The single greatest benefit that all of these employees derived was an
> objective perspective on where they were at… Their ability was almost
> invariably greater than they had anticipated it would be (Teacher 2,
> FRRC).*

Intertwined with their growing self-confidence all teachers reported positive
changes in learner competence. Teacher 1 highly structured reported how she
could see people's ability improving as they progressed through the course.
Greater confidence in their reading skills came to the fore. This quote from
teacher 1 residential captures this sense of progress and potential for further
change:

> *One gentleman wrote "I've never done this before, I never thought I could,
> I can - it's good". All the way through it comes from them, the progress….
> They have become more literate and numerate and confident in their
> communication skills* (Teacher 1, intensive)

The theme of growing confidence was also evident in extension specific themes.
As noted above, residential courses were integrated into lengthier courses and
there were positive spill-over effects into the regular classroom and future
learning plans. For example teacher 2, residential, was impressed with the

44

feelings of success and increased self-esteem and confidence that came through on the course and had witnessed how learners brought this back into the classroom afterwards.

It was not only learners who were surprised at the level and development of their abilities. Courses working with employees commented that managers had noticed 'a tangible change' in employees who had participated. This issue is explored in greater depth in chapter 5.

Social interaction and co-operative learning

Teachers also identified ways that positive changes in learners' confidence and self-assurance had the potential to spill over into their everyday and working lives, dealing with customers and meeting new people. Teacher 2 residential reported how learners had learnt to be more comfortable with strangers. The learners had come to the course with anxieties that their efforts were not good enough. In essence, through the course they became more self-assured and less anxious. Teacher comments also revealed a growth in camaraderie and understanding of the value of co-operative learning and mutual support amongst the learners. For example, teacher 2 intensive noted how the learners had come together as a group. Finding that they shared difficulties in terms of literacy and communication 'they worked *together* to improve upon these areas'. As discussed below, not all learners had this positive experience.

The contribution of studying outside the class-room

On some courses, homework was an important feature, not least because the way in which the pathfinder timescale had truncated the learning schedule made it a necessity in some cases. The willingness of learners to work at home also signalled their commitment to making time to learn. Teachers felt it important to acknowledge the contribution to learners' progress made by their willingness to do work outside the class. The need for learners to work at home was most acute on FRRC 2 and financial incentives for learners. The financial incentives teacher noted how having to attend classes more frequently and working towards a test meant that learners tended to take work home. Teacher FRRC 2 stressed the link between learner willingness to work at home and their progress through the course:

> *There was real skill development. It was tangible. It was very intensive…a lot of what they achieved…they achieved outside of the course, because they insisted upon taking work away'.* (Teacher 2, FRRC)

The value of 'soft' outcomes and importance of being realistic

Many teacher comments on changes in the learners, and the earlier discussion of successful features of the course, are underpinned by a sense that 'softer'

outcomes should be valued in measuring 'distance travelled' on the course, some more explicitly than others. One of the strongest examples of the value attached to growth in personal development was related by teacher 1 financial incentives. He described a learner having difficulty with her maths who was learning very quickly. He stressed that she had had a lot of absence from school, as a result of ill-health, and had consequently missed a lot of education. The teacher was struck by how her confidence had grown through the course and receiving financial incentives was a positive thing for her. While this learner continued to have difficulty with her times tables, her teacher emphasised that she was the greatest success story that he had encountered during the pilot, 'whether she passes the test or not'.

The importance of being realistic about what could be achieved in the course was mentioned most often in relation to the residential courses. Residential teachers tended to note that basic skills competency had not changed significantly and that this was not really to be expected in the space of a three or four day residential. However, other benefits had been gained. For example, people were motivated to study of their own volition beyond the structured programme:

> *With the reading and writing part of it we weren't really expecting leaps in four days. When we were there on the residential many of them just decided to write of their own volition without anybody forcing them to do anything they'd go off to their rooms and they'd write. (Teacher 2, residential)*

Residential 3 was a qualified exception to this theme. When learners started the residential they were, on average, at entry level two to three in many areas of the curriculum. After their weekend residential, their teacher felt that they were working at entry level three to level one in many areas. Indeed she reported that they were ready for the national test at an earlier stage than might have been the case without the residential.

4.5 Difficulties learners encountered during the courses

Teachers reported that learners had experienced a mixture of course-related and non-course-related problems. The latter tended to be more prominent.

Course related problems

In the area of course-related problems several teachers raised issues related to the time pressures on courses, notably teachers involved with both fixed rate replacement costs for employers. FRRC teacher 2 reported that one learner's learning of numeracy was made more difficult by the intensive nature of the course. The learner would sometimes get quite upset by the need to make

progress quickly. The teacher described a need to handle this quite sensitively so that the learner did not feel like a failure. Here it should be emphasised that this problem may not have arisen if the pathfinder timescale, in conjunction with employer production demands, had not led to a truncation and intensification of the course structure. It should also be noted that other factors might be at play in at what is at heart an issue of the 'intensity' of courses. Issues of time pressures arose even when courses were less truncated. FRRC Teacher 1 indicated that many learners found it difficult to engage in six-hour classes, because they had not studied for several years.

Non course related problems

Non course-related problems could affect participation and, again, were relatively more pronounced. One or two teachers mentioned that sometimes learners confided in them and asked for their advice, including on health and personal issues. Where learners had mental health needs there were issues of confidentiality that needed to be respected. Some of the problems encountered were related to learners being placed in a different setting, most notably in the residential courses. While, as discussed earlier in this chapter, courses could provide the opportunity for the fostering of positive learner interactions and co-operative working, the social characteristics and background of participating learners may be an important contributory factor to such benefits. For example, some of the young people involved in residential 1 found it very hard to be in a group. This was perhaps, implicitly, an issue of social skills. In this context, learner attitudes were sometimes negative and there were personality clashes amongst them that detracted from relationships during the course. The teacher felt that this affected the way that learners felt about this residential. In a subsequent residential, this problem did not surface.

Social skills were also raised as a theme by the teacher on residential 3. She said that participating parents and their children had to learn social skills, as well as working on their basic skills. They were all staying in a hotel and they were not used to eating out or having a room of their own. It was a new experience for the mothers and children, and required some adjustment. This teacher did not indicate any downside of this for people's performance during the course. In fact, as discussed above, this was the only residential in which tangible improvements in basic skills levels were reported by the end of the course.

Dropping out of the course

Teachers did not raise attendance as an issue of concern and did not tend to report large drop out rates once the course had got underway, but there were exceptions. For example, on the courses run by residential 1 some learners actually decided to leave prematurely after finding it difficult to get on with other learners. Most courses reported that one or two people had dropped out of the course. Embarrassment at not being able to read and write featured amongst

47

reasons given, but there were also non-course related reasons. These were varied and included illness, parents having problems with childcare, a disabled person who was very nervous about travelling on public transport, work pressures, trips abroad, and getting a job.

As Chapter two discussed some learners on intensive 2 found that the courses were not what they had been expecting. However, there were no reports of people finding that the courses were too easy. Initial assessments of learner abilities may have contributed to this.

4.6 The demands courses made on teachers

Many teachers found that the course pathfinder timescale placed extra demands on them to get courses up and running. For example, residential teachers had had to put in extra work to re-plan schemes of work. Beyond the practicalities of pilot initiatives, as innovations are made in basic skills courses the demands on teachers can also change. Some teachers were struck by the extra efforts required of them in the delivery of the extension activities. Extra work was generated for the teacher on financial incentives for learners related to the process of administering/processing financial incentives for his learners:

> *...a lot of paper work, and keeping a record of the learners' attendance, log sheet which enables them to get paid.. (Teacher financial incentives)*

Teachers on FRRC1 found that a course structure of six hours of contact time in a day was very tiring. One factor that can ease pressure on teachers is teacher learner ratios. These ratios in large part underpin the intensity and manageability of workloads. For example, teachers on FRRC1 felt that if they had more than fourteen learners it would have been difficult to cope. As things turned out they coped with having fourteen learners because many of them wanted to work on the same exercise and could work in pairs. This was fortuitous:

> *Fourteen was about the maximum! And we were lucky in that a lot of the learners did want to work on the same thing, so that we could pair people together, which made it a lot easier (FRRC1).*

A further demand made on teachers is in dealing with learners' personal difficulties. Teacher 2 intensive noted that learners 'unloaded' problems onto her and that generally teachers do not have the time or resources to deal with these. She felt strongly that it was important to make time to address personal problems and that this can be an important feature of successful teaching. Having said this, it was also clear from this teacher that it was important to contain this role, in order to allow teachers some respite from potential learner demands:

> *…we ate with them, we couldn't even get away from them, What we'd do in future is we would, we said if we did another, we would have lunch away from them. To give us a break because it's too much 'cause that*

was the time when they would unload stuff' (Teacher 2 intensive)

The knowledge base and background of the teachers was signalled as a factor pertinent to the quality of the learning process where innovative ways of learning were being tested out. This theme came across particularly strongly from teachers working with employees and young people with difficulties. Teachers on residential 1 got involved in the outdoor activities, for example abseiling. This meant that after the activities they could engage with the learners, discussing what had taken place, drawing on first hand knowledge.

Teacher 2 FRRC felt that she had to be very careful in selecting teachers for this extension activity, noting that traditional basic skills teachers are not necessarily the best ambassadors for workplace learning. This is because the provision of basic skills courses in the workplace poses challenges and requires particular skills that traditional teachers do not necessarily have. For example, in terms of the teaching delivery mode, employees have different needs compared to the FE learner. As she explained, the teaching of basic skills in the workplace requires teachers with an understanding of wider key skills issues such as 'the concepts of team building, and working with others and improving own learning'. Learners on FRRC 2 were being taught these skills even if they were not being formally credited with them on the course. Teacher 2 FRRC had had a long-standing brief of managing key skills, basic skills and additional learning support. As a consequence, the team of teachers that she led rarely worked in just one of these areas. They could teach literacy and numeracy and also transfer and contextualise these skills in workplace adult settings. The background and skills sets of the teachers working on FRRC 2 allowed them to do this, but historically basic skills teachers may not be skilled in these areas. Indeed teacher 2 FRRC did a lot of the teaching herself because her background gave her a good feel for the new demands being brought to bear on teachers

While on the whole teachers did not report any difficulties, in terms of their own skills sets, extra demands could be created by the need to integrate computers into teaching. Teacher 2 intensive noted that working with IT in teaching numeracy required teachers to change their scheme of work to meet learner needs. Only one of three teachers delivering the course was an IT expert. The teacher recalled that teaching the course was tiring, especially when they arrived for a class to find that software was not installed; and as they had a 'loud, vocal, difficult' group:

> *…You know, it was very, very exhausting. You had to continually think of different ways of, you know, keeping them occupied. I don't think, I don't know whether I would do it again. (Teacher 2 intensive)*

The need for teacher support in the delivery of ICT will be discussed in chapter 6.

Chapter 5: Employers' experiences of the Pathfinder

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the experiences of employers who co-operated in the provision of basic skills courses for their employees. Five case studies are explored here. They were chosen to represent a range of employer types, including public sector and commercial organisations and manual and service sector work. That three carried out the pathfinder approach with fixed replacement costs and two without it provides an additional point of comparison. Within these organisations, semi-structured depth interviews were conducted with key people involved in implementing the pathfinder approach. Interviewees ranged from training co-ordinators, Departmental managers, and Human Resources managers, to union representatives and learner advisors, and this reflected the diversity of contributions. Discussions with area co-ordinators who had responsibility for liaison with employers also informed the case studies.

The aim of the chapter is to explore what made these courses successful and where problems occurred. The chapter begins by providing a brief summary of the five organisations, the nature of their work and their staff profile before moving on to examine the different factors that led these organisations to participate in pathfinder projects. This is followed by an exploration of how practical issues of course design and the recruitment of learners were shaped by differing organisational needs and contexts. After discussing the benefits that these employers identified both for themselves and for their employees, some of the problems that arose during the implementation of the programme are examined. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of employees' and employers' future plans in relation to basic skills.

5.2 Case studies of five employers

As discussed in chapter 1, basic skills needs affect labour market performance, and employers may be expected to have an interest in improving the skills of their workforce. Fixed rate replacement courses were intended to provide an incentive for employers to allow staff to attend courses during work hours. They were available in three pathfinder areas. Some employers also offered training as part of pathfinder without this incentive.

While co-ordinators made efforts to engage a range of employers, the response from smaller and non-unionised employers was low, and in practice colleges tended to work with employers where there was an existing relationship, and in companies which were anxious to promote themselves as 'good employers' with a commitment to staff development and training. In order to set experiences of the courses in context the five employers chosen as case studies are described

briefly below.

Midcity council environmental and consumer services.

The case study is of the Environmental and Consumer Services directorate with 1,500 employees in catering, trading standards, cleaning, waste disposal, etc. The council has undergone a recent reorganisation leading to significant changes in staffing structures, job descriptions, and the allocation of staff between different directorates. The majority of these workers are on manual grades and in the catering and cleaning division the workforce is mostly part time (many work 4 hours a day or less). The workforce is almost all female and is ethnically mixed. For many this work constitutes a second job. Recently there has been an influx of younger workers and men in their fifties and sixties who have been made redundant from a nearby car factory.

ClothCo

This low cost clothing retail chain has two strands to its operation. The first is a network of retail stores, employing mainly part time staff, most of them women. The majority are on twelve hour contracts, but they often work more hours, since they are expected to provide cover if someone is sick and there is a continual demand for extra hours at busy times of the year. The other side of ClothCo's business is a distribution centre. This employs more men, but women still make up the majority of the workforce. Their working hours are organised in shifts. Most of the workforce was unqualified.

Employ-Able Ltd

This is a commercial organisation that provides employment for disabled people. The company has branches across the country although the case study was conducted in a branch in the Midlands. The work is mainly contracted assembly work ranging from putting together machine parts to packing components. The work takes place in Employ-Able's own factory premises which are fully accessible for disabled people. They have around 60 employees; a mixture of men and women with an average age of 49 who have learning difficulties and physical disabilities. Most have few or no formal qualifications and at least a third have worked for Employ-Able since they left school. The company also acts as an agency for disabled people, providing them with positions in industries such as hotel and catering.

FoodCo

This is a medium-sized food factory. The workforce at FoodCo numbers around 170, of all ages. Although traditionally male dominated, the gender balance in the workforce was described as equalising over time. The production process involves preparing, cooking, slicing and packing meat. Many of the workers start

as young people on the lowest grade and work their way up. The company was described as having a culture of internal promotion. Most staff are unqualified and many of the older people left school at 14.

Superstore

This is a Midlands branch of a large supermarket chain with branches all over the UK. The majority of the 300 staff work on the shopfloor, on the checkouts and food counters and in the warehouse monitoring and replenishing stock.   A smaller group work as administrators. The flexibility of the work, and the fact that most of the positions are part time, means that the majority of the workforce are women (particularly mothers) and learners.

5.3 Reasons for employer involvement in the Pathfinder

A number of key factors stood out as influencing employers' involvement in the pathfinder.   First, the company's ethos in relation to training and staff development appeared to affect the degree to which they were open to basic skills initiatives and their understanding of the potential outcomes of this type of training. Second, where there was an existing relationship of trust between an employer and a particular provider, suggestions for undertaking pathfinder basic skills by the provider were readily accepted and adopted. Third, organisational restructuring and an increased demand for an adaptable workforce appeared to reveal organisational basic skills needs that had previously been hidden and could open the door to the possibility of basic skills training provision. Finally, increasing emphasis on staff development and basic skills needs awareness within Trade Unions had produced individual union representatives with knowledge of basic skills issues who were keen to promote and organise provision.

Midcity council

At the council there was a strong commitment to staff development prior to the pathfinder. Staff routinely received training in both practical skills, for example, how to use particular machines and soft skills, such as dealing with conflict. Supervisors undertook City and Guilds exams and BICS. In addition, paid time off for training was widely available and there was a growing acknowledgement within the council that manual jobs required basic literacy and numeracy particularly for health and safety reasons. An area manager in the building cleaning division noted the need for employees to be able to read labels on chemical cleaners. More generally the demands for a multi-skilled workforce with maximum flexibility had highlighted a skills gap. The training co-ordinator for the directorate as a whole, explained that basic skills needs had been identified in the course of doing staff assessments which had also raised awareness of dyslexia issues.

Midcity's recognition of basic skills needs was initially supported and increased by the trade union which was promoting its own courses and had already run one for the council, although this course was said not to have been well attended. The directorate's strong commitment to basic skills provision meant that when the pathfinder opportunity was presented they were prepared to support their employees taking the course in work time. For this reason the pathfinder course was not fixed replacement costs but was defined as an intensive.

Employ-Able

This company had a particularly well developed ethos of staff development that appeared to operate at all levels of the organisation. It was chiefly generated by three proactive staff members who had been promoting basic skills in the organisation for several years. One of these was a senior manager, one the agency co-ordinator and the other was an administrator who had since become Employ-Able's training officer and learner representative. Employ-Able had been providing basic skills training for almost two years prior to the pathfinder and head office had recently increased its support for these activities. As the training officer noted:

> *I think it's actually down in some company directive that every employee is allowed a certain amount of time for training and education development, regardless of what work, you know.*

As at Midcity council there was an acknowledgement that basic skills were increasingly important for the workforce. The training officer pointed out that service and assembly work was replacing traditional machine work. This increased the need for basic literacy and numeracy. For example particular numbers of components had to be placed in bags and constructing circuit boards required the ability to read copious instructions. The organisation's previous involvement in basic skills training meant that they already had an excellent relationship with their local provider. When the pathfinder opportunity arose the provider had a clear idea of where and how the course would fit in with Employ-Able's existing provision. As at Midcity, this was not a fixed replacement cost course. Employ-Able were happy to give staff time off for training, as they had for previous courses.

ClothCo Ltd

The company provided some training and development and had a number of related support systems in place, including a steering group that monitored training courses and a learning resource room that was rather underused. The need for basic skills training had begun to be identified, although provision was not supported in the way that it was in Employ-Able and Midcity Council. The Human Resources manager described how ClothCo's work was based on customer service and working with cash and figures, both of which require some

basic skills. She noted that:

> *People need to feel comfortable seeing figures and be able to read spreadsheets. When one store phones another people need to be able to jot down a message and pass it on. This kind of action horrifies people. As a manager you tend to assume that people can do this, but many can't.*

The union learner representative at ClothCo noted that staff were asking their sons or daughters to fill in the interactive training booklet that they were expected to complete in order to qualify for promotion.

The pathfinder course was introduced to ClothCo through the union learner representative. She had some previous experience of basic skills provision and strong links with the local provider who had alerted her to opportunities provided by the pathfinder. She approached ClothCo for support for courses and the initial response from Human Resources was positive. However ClothCo's general managers had some anxieties about how FRRC worked, whether the course would be beneficial, whether they would lose the flexibility of their workforce and whether the suggested 12 week course was possible. It was felt that the numbers of employees released from the stores would cause operational problems. Managers would also not release staff if the activity was charged to the store's budget which would, in any case, increase individual hours, interfering with entitlement to sickness and holiday pay at a later date. The learner representative put considerable effort into convincing the managers of the benefits. She gave presentations on basic skills at staff meetings and, in consultation with the payroll department, came up with a solution to budget issues, enabling the project finally to go ahead.

FoodCo

The company's training and development had until recently consisted mainly of standard health and safety, food hygiene and manual handling courses which were crucial to their work. Although the company had a union representative and training co-ordinator both of whom had actively pushed for a basic skills course for several years, the Managing Director had been unsupportive of proposals. It was only when he was replaced by someone committed to the development of the workforce that it was possible to negotiate this kind of training provision. There was a company wide focus on developing a multi-skilled workforce, and recognition that increasing demands for documentation by retailers required improvements in skill levels. FoodCo had already run a two-hour a week course, staffed by Trades Union learner representatives, one hour of which was funded by the company and the other in the workers' own time. This arrangement had proved popular amongst the staff. It had been planned to extend provision in conjunction with a local college, but funding problems prevented this, and when another college suggested running the pathfinder initiative this was welcomed as a way to overcome these difficulties.

Superstore

This company had a very positive attitude to training and staff development with a job ladder in operation that enabled people progress in the organisation to specialisation and multi-skilling across departments. For the past year this had been managed in conjunction with a computer based learning (CBL) package in which staff worked through various stages of a company based training course. They worked on elements such as induction and health and safety on a PC in the company's resource room and could work at their own pace and in working hours. Superstore had no previous experience or knowledge of basic skills training. They were encouraged to take up the pathfinder course by their local provider. The college was actively recruiting large local employers having made work based basic skills provision one of the central strands to its own development aims. Superstore was approached about the course by the college at a busy time for the store and even with the offer of FRRC there was some resistance to running the course given the disruption this would cause to their staffing, their lack of knowledge about the content and value of the course and their lack of confidence about marketing it to their staff. However they were encouraged to take part by head office and the provider was able to re-arrange the course to a less busy time.

5.4. The recruitment, structure and content of the courses

The way in which courses were organised, structured and recruited, varied across the five employers. This was influenced by very different staffing structures, and business and management priorities that prevailed and also the particular stakeholders who had taken responsibility for managing the programme.

Recruitment and promotion of the courses

Recruitment methods in the five organisations ranged from advertising for volunteers using posters and leaflets through to management selection of individual staff members and some last minute persuasion of staff on the shop floor by union representatives and course teachers in order to fill vacant places.

For example the learner representative at ClothCo had encouraged managers to publicise the course to staff. However the response was very poor and it became clear that some managers were rather sceptical about the courses and had told staff that they were 'basic Maths and English'. Under pressure to meet the deadline the representative took matters into her own hands and began telephoning stores herself and talking to staff on a one to one basis. She promoted the ICT elements of the course and told staff it would help them improve their CVs. She succeeded in recruiting twenty four people in three days and sixteen of these (aged between 16 and 24) were enrolled on the pathfinder.

Importantly take up was by store managers, assistant store managers and people on youth training schemes as well as sales assistants.

Participants at FoodCo were also hand-picked by the union representative and training co-ordinator, prioritising those with greatest needs, but also drawing on other criteria such as including certain individuals because they were known to be 'good mixers' or because 'everyone knows them' (e.g. canteen staff). This was felt to be important to bridge a natural division in the workplace between the two sides of the production process. Numbers on the courses were limited by the available space, a boardroom which could accommodate only seven to eight people.

To take one more example, recruitment for the course at Employ-Able was far less problematic than for some of the other cases. The training coordinator described how the five people who undertook the pathfinder course were the only staff not to have been on any of the other basic skills courses offered by the company in the past. He explained that they were all at entry level one and the group most in need of taking the course. They were also the hardest to reach and the pathfinder funding made that possible.

Duration and hours

The duration and hours of the courses in each organisation were to a certain extent a product of negotiation between the provider and the employer. The guidelines set down by the Department for Education and Skills stated that courses were generally to run for up to 60 hours. For most companies this meant in practice running the course one six-hour day a week over a period of 12 weeks (MidCity's was run as an intensive course). Whilst this timetable was fine for Employ-Able where basic skills programmes were welcomed and staffing not seen as an issue, 12 weeks was too long for other organisations. For example the problem at ClothCo was that it was not operationally possible to have 16 people out of the stores on the same day. A creative solution was identified of running two courses in parallel, one six-hour day a week for eight weeks. The company had negotiated the course length down from 12 weeks to eight on the premise that any more would be too disruptive to the stores. As noted above at Superstore problems had occurred with organising the course during a busy period and the course was run intensively two and a half days a week over four weeks when that period came to an end. This was required by the constraints of the pathfinder timescale. FoodCo also found themselves constrained by time pressures. Two courses were run in succession. The first ran for ten weeks, the second for only six due to the funding period coming to an end. Each course ran as two parallel groups of seven, one day a week, because of the space problem.

Midcity provided the most flexible course offered by any of the case study organisations. It was not limited to one day a week but consisted of 13 hours a week of class time arranged over three days and run over a six week period.

The teacher and co-ordinator were anxious to make sure access issues had been taken into account and classes started after 9.30 and finished in time for people to pick up children from school. This was described as vital given the high proportion of part time staff and mothers in the workforce, who would have been unable to attend for a full six-hour day.

Course structure and content

The content of the courses also varied across the different organisations, ranging from those that were employer focused and used a high proportion of workplace documents, processes and contexts as learning resources, to courses where the primary focus was simply on meeting individual's immediate literacy and numeracy needs. The learner representative at ClothCo stressed the importance of meeting individual needs in Maths and English but provided the college with copies of the forms used in day to day business operations so that work related elements could be incorporated. There appeared to have been little dialogue between the provider and the organisation with regard to what the company needed. Partly this was another effect of the time pressures. At Midcity the training co-ordinator had involved managers at all levels in the process of course design. The emphasis was firmly on work relevance and using the forms that people had to complete in their day to day work as the basis for class work. The area manager had agreed with the teacher to keep a basket in her room into which any new forms or procedures were added so that these could be incorporated into the course. At FoodCo the emphasis was very much on benefits for individual learners, 'they were sitting here for their own better education, just for themselves.'

5.5 Benefits of the course for employers and employees

The response to the pathfinder courses was extremely positive in all five organisations. At ClothCo the feedback from the course was reported as being 'very positive and very enthusiastic'. At Midcity the catering and facilities officer noted that feedback from the courses was not only positive but 'overwhelming'. In her words: 'we run loads of courses, but none of them get a response like this one'.

All five employers were able to cite ways in which participating employees had changed and developed in a positive way. As these examples demonstrate the benefits for employers and employees tended to be interlocking. Midcity council's training co-ordinator said there had been noticeable improvements in confidence, ability, and morale. Staff were described as being happier at work, showing more commitment and doing their job better. The training co-ordinator at Employ-Able described how self-esteem had improved and employees walked around with big smiles on their faces. Midcity's area manager echoed this saying that people who have taken the course are 'far, far better employees', who take a

pride in their jobs. She described the change in some people who have been on the course as being 'like a total personality transplant' because they are so much more confident and outgoing in their relationships with other staff members and the public. Again all the cases reiterated this theme.

These changes in individuals had concrete effects in the workplace. Increased pride in the job meant better customer service, and there were reports of improvements in productivity, absenteeism and work relations.

Improved work relations

Courses contributed to improved staff relations. For example the area manager at Midcity described the case of an older man working for the library service who was known to have basic skills needs but who became defensive and angry with colleagues over issues such as paperwork, leading to ongoing management problems at that site.   After the course, a manager at the library asked 'What have you done with Tony?'   She described herself as thinking 'Oh no, what's he done now?' only to be told that he had changed from a sullen, suspicious member of the team, who did everything unwillingly to someone who did things with a smile, and conscientiously completed all the paperwork required of him. In addition to the changes in the individual concerned, colleagues were also described as being more understanding about his need for additional support. The Union representative at FoodCo also emphasised the team-building effects of the course, saying that it had brought together the company as a whole, 'now everybody knows everyone'.

Increased productivity and financial benefits

The new skills being gained were reported to have led to noticeable improvements in staff ability to follow organisational systems, practices and instructions. On a general level, managers noted that the increased morale reduced absenteeism and improved productivity. More specifically an area manager at Midcity described how once people began to read instructions properly they used vastly less of the cleaning fluids that needed to be diluted. Not only that but stock-taking and ordering improved as did chasing incomplete deliveries. The training co-ordinator at FoodCo reported that before the course, people had been taking away paperwork, rather than completing it promptly, and that this had been an area causing concern, because of the need for batches of food to be traced back to suppliers. This was something which was described as improving markedly once people had attended the course.

Improved staff career development

There were positive benefits for staff career development. As noted earlier, ClothCo's staff development booklet required basic literacy that was taken for granted.   Gaining literacy skills increased staff's ability to participate in the

promotion process by providing them with the tools to fill out the necessary forms correctly. One manager at Midcity explained that staff had gained 'a commitment to their own development' and that after taking the course 'horizons had opened up for them'. A number of people who had taken part in the first course had been promoted and she saw this as a positive thing for the organisation - 'we're able to grow our own'. The learner representative at ClothCo pointed out that the course gives staff who have shown potential the chance to move up.

> *Sometimes people have fantastic ideas. People who know the company, are familiar with the past and what has and has not worked, [they] can be upgraded and promoted internally.*

Increased staff adaptability and flexibility

Several employers noted that the new skills and confidence gained on the courses had made people more adaptable. They felt that this was particularly important in the face of rapid organisational change and the need for a flexible workforce that could provide cover and adapt to new technologies. The learner representative at ClothCo said the course had 'helped to enable people to adapt to change'. At Employ-Able one of their staff was now able to fill in the forms required in his job instead of asking staff to do it for him. Basic skills enabled people to be proactive and work more independently of their supervisors and this in turn meant that managers could employ a lighter touch and had more time for doing other work.

Positive attitudes to training

Several organisations noted how the course changed people's attitude to training and development. Managers at Midcity council indicated that people who had taken part were now much keener to take up other training opportunities. One described how individuals had become 'hungry for training' and many participants went on to do other training and education courses self funded or aided by the organisation. The learner representative at ClothCo said the question being asked at the moment was 'when do we do it all again?' People were asking to be kept posted on developments.

As chapter 3 revealed, there were also benefits beyond the workplace. Several participants reported that they were able to help their children with homework and this had boosted their self confidence.

5.6 Problems and issues

The pathfinder courses run by the five employers were all successful in terms of the outcomes for the employers and employees. The evaluations carried out by the teachers revealed that the learners on the courses were mostly very satisfied. However, as the previous sections have made clear, the courses were not

without their problems and some employers' experiences of particular elements of the Pathfinder were not entirely satisfactory.

Most of the problems seemed to arise in the early stages of getting the courses up and running and were often linked to the boundaries imposed by the pilot, rather than anything intrinsic to the courses themselves. Whilst the limits of the timeframe for implementing the project were not particularly problematic in situations where there was an existing relationship between providers and employers, they were not constructive for organisations such as ClothCo and Superstore that did not have existing structures in place and needed time to adapt their finely tuned staffing practices to accommodate the courses at short notice. Time was also needed to build up some awareness amongst managers and supervisors, as well as those on the shop floor, of what basic skills education was and how it would benefit the company and the staff.

One result of this was the difficulties recruiting people to the courses experienced in one or two cases. Another was that where management had little understanding of why basic skills were important this affected the degree to which staff were supported in their training and led to problems with managers preventing staff from training. These situations also put pressure on both Human Resources managers and the staff themselves who were torn between attending the course and responding to the needs of their managers.

A key issue for the three fixed-rate replacement cost employers was that the fundamental problems of releasing staff from the shop floor tended to outweigh the issue of ensuring equality of access to the courses. Those who went on the courses were those whose work hours could most easily be accommodated into a one day a week course structure. Those who worked shifts or were in departments where no cover could be arranged were excluded. At ClothCo one store manager went off sick and as a consequence three people based in that store who had volunteered could not participate. It was also impossible for those working in the distribution department at ClothCo to undertake the course because staff could not be given the same day off every week and these staff were therefore not given the chance to take part. Employ-Able had sent all of its shop floor workers on basic skills courses but had not extended the opportunity to those who were contracted to work for other organisations. This issue also highlights a need for more flexibility in course structure.

Other issues that came to light were not as fundamental but still raised some important questions. One of these was that of finding a balance between the needs of the organisation and the needs of the individual in relation to the course content. While employers were happy to see improvements in confidence and self-esteem, some would have preferred a course that was more immediately relevant to the work of the organisation. At Superstore where the course had a strong focus on level 1 literacy and numeracy targets, the benefits were not always as obvious to the managers as the benefits of the store's own computer

based learning programme. At ClothCo the learner representative and the Human Resources manager felt that the focus on individual needs that had formed the foundation of the course had been the right one. However they also argued that it was crucial for the employer to understand how they would benefit from this and to know that their priorities were also being taken into account in the course design.

A very different issue was that in several of the case studies ICT was used as an effective incentive or selling point for courses by both providers and employers. There was a clear demand for ICT skills and lacking these skills did not carry a stigma to the same degree as literacy problems, meaning people felt more comfortable about participating. However, in reality a 60 hour basic skills course did not provide adequate time for ICT issues to be tackled in any depth or in some case at all. The learner representative at ClothCo noted that one or two people felt a little bit let down coming out of the course not knowing how to use a personal computer. She added that lack of time was the underlying issue in not being able to deliver for them on this outcome.

A key concern at FoodCo was the issue of managing people's expectations and being able to meet basic skills needs in the future. Having enthused staff about the benefits of the course, they were keen to be able to offer it to the remaining hundred or so people who had not been able to take part, and were worried about the impact on morale if future funding did not materialise, saying:

> *Having taken five years to get the thing set up we would be extremely disappointed if we didn't get the money to carry on, and have to pack it in, not just for our own sakes but for the people downstairs who are desperate to get on the course… I don't want to just hit that brick wall and everything stop.*

5.7 Successful strategies and practices for basic skills provision by employers

The problems and issues discussed in the previous section are important factors to bear in mind when thinking about how in-work basic skills courses might be run in the future. However, these courses were on the whole organised and managed very successfully. The case studies highlighted many examples of good practice and effective strategies and these were shaped by two key elements: the organisational culture and the relationship between the provider and the employer.

A positive organisational culture

The most successful courses were, unsurprisingly, those that took place within organisations which had run basic skills courses in the past. Not only had they had a chance to learn by their previous mistakes in practical terms, but more importantly, they had gone some way to establishing an organisational culture in

which attending a basic skills course had been legitimated and carried little or no stigma. As the case studies made clear it was important that this basic skills friendly culture extended to all levels of the organisation from the staff right up to the senior management. One manager argued that if senior management were committed, but no attempt had been made to engage middle managers who work with staff on a daily basis, these courses would not succeed.

The examples of Employ-Able and Midcity council demonstrated the importance of support at all levels of the organisation. At Midcity council the support across the directorate had created a culture of training in which basic skills courses were accepted and promoted. Employ-Able was an employer with an ethos of basic skills training that meant running courses was a relatively unproblematic process; the company had no qualms about releasing staff from the shop floor for training.

Changing organisational culture in relation to an issue like perceptions of basic skills cannot be done overnight and this may account for the problems experienced by some of the case studies. One suggestion was to develop improved promotion materials to get employers involved. A manager at Superstore suggested a promotional video for Basic skills courses to show employers how useful they were and what the outcomes were likely to be:

> *I think perhaps more knowing what other organisations have been involved and what the benefits have been. Especially if it was a similar organisation, you'd be able to relate to that… like say for example if you had a video, what organisations have done, what they've got from it, actually seeing some learners in the middle of it, that sort of thing.*

However, the evidence from the case studies was that once organisations had run a basic skills course the process became considerably easier in the future. Supervisors and managers were happy to promote courses to their staff when they had seen some concrete results and staff were much keener to go on courses when these had been recommended by friends and colleagues. The training coordinator at Midcity council argued that people's fear and insecurity in relation to their basic skills needs could be overcome if they were given enough encouragement and support. What was important was to be persistent. She called it 'the drip drip' element of trying to engage people. EmployAble had a similar view. The fact that the last group to take the course were those that needed it most, illustrated how much encouragement people required to get involved. A manager at Midcity pointed out that many people had entered manual jobs largely because they did not need literacy and numeracy skills. She described people becoming distressed when the changing demands of the job meant that they were forced to confront basic skills issues which they had successfully concealed for many years.

> *I've had cooks on the phone in tears, because they're suddenly expected to do all this paperwork and they just can't.*

Creating and maintaining this culture was an ongoing process and at Midcity this

was achieved with a positive publicity campaign. Articles with photos and names of people attending the courses were included in the glossy council newsletter. Several of the case studies found that a formal presentation with certificates provided a way of legitimating the courses and giving participants a sense of the value that the organisation placed on their participation. Employ-Able's head office produced a newsletter that promoted basic skills courses and profiled branches where these are being run.

Relationship between employer and provider

Teachers were highly praised by employers, who were impressed with their flexibility in relation to organisational issues and the degree to which they were able to tailor courses to suit the group and the needs of the organisation. It was crucial that a dialogue had taken place between the employer and the provider in relation to the planning and the running of the course so that the employer felt some ownership of the course and that their interests were being taken into account. It also highlighted the benefits more clearly for them.

Again, one of the problems with the short timeframe for implementation was that it tended to curtail the degree of dialogue. Where there was an existing relationship between employer and provider this made the process of managing a course easier since the provider already had an idea of the employer's needs. Similarly, employers trusted that the provider would run a course that was appropriate to their needs.

One strategy that proved invaluable in all the case studies was that there was a liaison person, a Human Resources manager or learning representative on the employer side who could help to manage the course while it was running. At Midcity the training coordinator pointed out that the crucial 'fine tuning' of the courses at the beginning was only possible if there was someone to 'field problems'. She was in regular contact with the courses as they were being run, sitting in on classes and being around to deal with problems. At Employ-Able the training coordinator sat in on the classes and said this had been very helpful 'especially with the fact that some people have got special needs, and emotional special needs'.

It was also not accidental that the teachers on all these courses had been so well received by employers and employees. From the point of view of the provider, running basic skills courses in the work place demanded teachers with a particular range of experience and knowledge, and several noted that they had been strategic about who they recruited for these posts. One provider explained that it was important to think about which teachers were placed in companies. In her words:

> *We were very, very careful to choose people to ensure that they'd got the range of skills they needed in terms of delivery mode, in terms of recognising that they were employees as opposed to FE learners.*

63

5.8 Staff and employer plans to follow up pathfinder activities

Looking at the direction taken by employees and employers at the end of the courses highlighted the impact of these courses and the need for this type of provision to be designed with development strategies in mind. For the employees who had undertaken these courses one of the primary outcomes had been that they gained a real enthusiasm for training and for developing their skills. This momentum created demands that then needed to be met.

All five organisations recognised these needs to a certain extent and most envisaged developing their provision in the future. However ideas for development initiatives came from different levels of the organisations and took different forms. For example, the union representative and training co-ordinator at FoodCo who were worried about the issue of continuing provision, were keen to develop a learning resource for employees at the company. They envisaged this would take the form of a portakabin with computers that could then be used for a variety of courses. Their wider aim was that it could also be a resource for families of employees, for instance for children to do school projects if they do not have a computer at home. However they hoped to get funding from the Trades Union Congress for this and FoodCo itself had made no moves to support a continuation of basic skills provision.

At Midcity however, the provision of follow up courses was well under way. The training coordinator was running a course called 'better basics 2', that people were entitled to do six months after they had completed the first course. In addition to that she was developing one-day workshops for managers in areas such as listening skills and report writing. At Employ-Able they were in the process of developing a training resource room equipped with personal computers. The training co-ordinator had already taken a trainer's certificate and was hoping to establish Employ-Able as a certified provider so that they could run basic skills for their own staff when necessary and develop provision for others such as those employed as agency staff.

Good sign-posting of college courses by the teachers and training co-ordinators also provided an effective way to channel people's new found enthusiasm for training. Many went on to do courses at their local college, following advice from their teachers. For example the training coordinator at Midcity stated that as far as she knew almost every person who had been on the basic skills course was now pursuing additional training in his or her own time. At Superstore two of the five enrolled on the pathfinder had gone on to do further basic skills modules at their local college and one was planning to do a GCSE.

However, continuing the learning process outside work was not always unproblematic. At ClothCo three part-time store managers released from work to

participate in the course are running into barriers to doing further courses. One wants to do maths and English for two hours one evening per week. Others want to do two evenings per week. However, they have been told that they must leave work in order to take up these opportunities. The Pathfinder was crucial in allowing people time to study, a theme which will be returned to in chapter 9.

Chapter 6: ICT and Basic Skills

6.1 Introduction

Interviews were conducted in two pathfinder areas whose extension activities entailed a specific ICT remit. These case studies were carried out after the main interviews with teachers and learners, and set out to explore ICT issues in more detail. This fieldwork with pathfinder areas provided case study material on new technology's potential as a basic skills resource. This chapter draws together experiences from the two pathfinder areas with the broader material on the use of computers in extension activities, to illustrate the main issues involved in delivering basic skills provision through ICT. A third case study looks at the experience of a particular extension activity in the second pathfinder area in order to explore how ICT-delivered basic skills courses have operated at a day-to-day level.

6.2 Case Study 1: Midcity partnership: The main pathfinder area and pilot

Midcity ICT/Basic Skills partnership was just one aspect of a broader strategy to promote access to and use of ICT in the area, for example, in terms of extending computer use within local communities, and in promoting distance learning. Midcity Basic Skills Partnership was the main pilot area for ICT, and aimed to ensure that the organisations it worked with were well resourced in ICT knowledge and materials, and to support their provision of basic skills support. In particular it promoted access issues and ensured that maximum use was made of a high-quality ICT infrastructure.

Midcity's Basic Skills Partnership had been in existence for seven years, and was in the final year of its funding. Its co-ordinator stressed that this long-term development and funding has meant that the Partnership is in a radically different position from other pathfinder areas in terms of the integration of ICT into Basic Skills training. She felt that this kind of long-term commitment was vital, and an element often lacking in funding for ICT infrastructure and support, especially in terms of bringing it into use as a mainstream way of delivering basic skills.

A number of organisations were involved in the delivery of Basic Skills in Midcity, including FE colleges, the Youth Service, libraries and community organisations. In order to identify gaps in its ICT-developed Basic Skills provision, Midcity had implemented a process of consultation, which highlighted the patchy character of existing provision and concluded that the area lacked common standards. While Midcity felt that a diversity of provision was to be welcomed, it was noted that this could create problems for learners moving between different settings, for example, in terms of incompatible forms of software. The consultation process also revealed that staff were sometimes unaware of the resources available to

them and of how these might be used. In particular it was felt that there was a need for greater clarity and consistency in the use of assessment materials.

Technical support emerged from the consultation as an important issue, and it was noted that the limited skills and awareness of managers and practitioners could provide an obstacle to the development and success of ICT projects. It was also important that the updating of hardware was prioritised. Finally, the consultation identified that greater communication and collaboration should be made a central aim of the Partnership, in order to share learning experiences and establish greater consistency across the area.

This consultation was used to set a number of developmental objectives and quality standards for the Partnerships, providing a basis to its ICT agenda. They were also used to clarify and audit provider organisations' software requirements, and to support adult literacy, numeracy, ESOL and 'Learning Paths'. Midcity partnership also developed a troubleshooting guide to hardware for learners and staff.

One of the ways in which the Partnership had addressed its information needs was through establishing a link with another non-pathfinder area which provided advice on hardware and software, training in the use of ICT in basic skills provision, software awareness training, advice on creating a programme of activities, and basic skills awareness training for non-specialist staff. This area had also been fundamental in the development of a training manual based on Learn Direct support activities. Nearly all of the software used by the Partnership was of a standard commercial specification, although it had also developed some of its own. A key part of Midcity's work has been to identity a range of user-friendly and reliable software for the teaching of basic skills. One aspect of this was a CD-based tool which helped learners to identify the right software for their needs, which was available in local libraries. This was specially designed to provide answers to questions in everyday, 'non-techie' language.

The Partnership provided training in the use of basic skills software and had developed a training manual for use across local authority areas. In fact, in order to promote best practice, they adopted a policy of supplying software only with training. Thus if projects wanted software, they were required to attend a course, and allowed to take the software away with them at the end of this. The Partnership Coordinator felt that this helped avoid the problem of software sitting on a shelf gathering dust because no-one knew how to use it. The co-ordinator described a number of things they had tried in developing ICT activities, some of which had not worked out, and emphasised the value of this approach, particularly in the context of a pilot, 'it's important not to be afraid of failure, that's something I would say to people trying something new.'

6.3 Case Study 2: Innercity: A second pathfinder area invoking an ICT remit

Innercity Syndicate coordinated the work of ICT pathfinder projects in the Innercity area, having been awarded funding for highly structured courses. An important aspect of its work lay in raising the profile of ICT in learning activities, promoting the incorporation of ICT into Teaching Training programmes, and publicising its use of ICT to existing practitioners and in continuing professional development. A major resource developed to assist in this was a website providing professional development information for educational providers.

Reflecting the priority the Syndicate attached to high quality teaching, teacher training for ICT basic skills provision had been undertaken for the past two years in Innercity. The Coordinator reported that at first there had been some resistance to this from trainers, but after the first year they had become more supportive. Trainers undertook activities on the Internet to assess their suitability for learners, and performed an exercise that considered email as an evaluative tool. Capitalising on the fact that many teachers with an ESOL/ literacy background had already used IT extensively, the Syndicate encouraged these to become teacher trainers to help develop the teaching of IT for teachers. Several colleges in the Innercity area had received external funding for this sort of training, which they aimed to provide within the community.

As part of this ongoing commitment to high quality teaching, the Syndicate had recently won funds to establish a Professional Development Centre in Innercity. A central feature of this would be to provide support for staff development, with access to community organisations, and a series of workshops had already been piloted. It had been noted that the FE sector had not participated in these workshops, a response which the Syndicate Coordinator attributed to FE colleges being used to being paid for staff development, and that to address this issue colleges would need to look to their own funding sources.

The Syndicate prioritised 'blended learning', that is, integrated IT learning, and five programmes so far were taking up this remit. These included: a series of highly structured courses run in partnership with a voluntary organisation; a community-based employment project which used target skills, initial assessment, and latterly, Learn Direct courses; a local college which ran employability course using target skills and Learn Direct; an FE college which had developed its own package incorporating modular programmes and a community college which provided outreach in libraries and hospitals using Learn Direct and a CD-Rom. Most of the learners on these courses were entry-level and taught by basic skills teachers.

As in Midcity, the co-ordinator at Innercity noted that the Syndicate had benefited from the relative financial security of being a pathfinder area. She reflected that a great deal of advance preparation was required to run courses with integrated

IT learning, and that pathfinder status had enabled the organisation to provide the necessary support, which may be lacking for 'run of the mill' colleges.

The feedback from teachers in the Innercity area was that learners were responding positively to the use of ICT in basic skills courses. For example, at an employability courses at a local college, learners would sit at computers for extended periods performing grammar-based exercises in form of games, and they found these very motivational. Other teachers reported that some learners found it empowering to be able to use a computer in a 'safe' environment where their IT skills were not an issue.

6.4 Case Study 3: Computer Outreach: an example of an extension activity operating in Innercity.

Computer Outreach was a training centre operating in the Innercity area, which offered highly-structured ICT courses. We interviewed a teacher who taught on two such courses, which fell into the pathfinder's remit. The Pathfinder had used ICT to perform the initial assessments of these courses, and to help with diagnostic assessment. There had also been some use of ICT to assist with summative assessment.

The training centre had a broad remit of providing IT training to unemployed local people, in order to help them get back into work, and had been running for almost 20 years as a voluntary organisation with a diverse range of funders. A high proportion of local residents and users were disadvantaged by their communication skills, since they did not speak English as a first language.

Notably, the highly-structured ICT courses at Computer Outreach did not teach basic skills as a separate subject. All learners were undertaking IT courses and improving their English in order to perform better on these courses. Many learners had ESOL needs, and some were refugees and asylum seekers. Most were in their twenties, and about equal numbers of men and women attended the courses, all of which were free.

Computer Outreach's teacher reported that the learners participating in her two courses were very different. The first group were of mixed ability, with a strong contingent of ESOL learners with a high level of skills. These tended to take European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) or Internet technologies courses, which are demanding courses requiring a high level of language skill. In contrast, the second group consisted mainly of learners at English language level two or three, most of which were on Beginners into IT or Gateway to Internet courses. Most learners on these courses were well educated in their own language, which 'made them very easy to work with'. The teacher described them as being 'hungry for knowledge', having good study skills, and being highly motivated they were also willing to stay at the centre out of hours to continue

studying.

The two highly structured courses at Computer Outreach were geared towards helping learners improve their literacy and ran for 13 weeks for three hours per week, which the teacher felt was rather short. In almost every lesson, some delivery content was ICT. For example, there was a series of three lessons on tenses, and after the learners had done individual or group work, they moved on to exercises and quizzes using the computer. However, the teacher noted that at higher levels of ESOL it was difficult to implement the use of computers, since these required learners to use interpretative skills, which IT was less capable of meeting. She felt that there was a particular strength in being able to mix and match ICT and more traditional (paper-based) teaching methods in running these courses.

Although limits were not set on course numbers for the highly structured ICT courses at Computer Outreach, the teacher felt that the optimum number was about 10 to 12, although this depended upon what teachers could manage, the kind of support learners needed, and the type of lessons involved. However, she found that learners often brought friends along to classes, augmenting class sizes. As the first course had been new, the teacher had found it hard to drum up support. However, when she came to run the second course, word-of-mouth recruitment was so successful that 'we got inundated' with interested learners, and as a result the group had been 'a bit chaotic' and a few learners had dropped out because they had not felt they were getting enough attention.

6.5 Benefits of ICT- delivered basic skills courses

Learners, teachers and other involved in ICT delivery expressed a variety of views as to what ICT could offer that was distinctive. In the last 10 to 15 years, the potential of computers has expanded exponentially, and they have become a major feature of many people's work and home lives. People who are required to use computers at work have usually been offered at least some training, while those who are out of the labour market, or whose jobs do not require them to use computers, have often not acquired these skills. There was also evidence of learners requesting that work with computers be more integrated into their basic skills courses.

For many learners, using computers on basic skills courses represented their first 'exposure' and was important in overcoming the fear of using this technology. Paulette was typical of a number of learners:

> I could not do anything on a computer, and I had my first thing back from college and it says 'good use of IT skills'… it's really opened things up for me. I'm not scared of a computer any more.

Similarly, Teacher 1 Highly Structured described a group she felt had particularly

benefited from these courses, made up of female Bengali learners who had few English language or computer skills:

> *They felt they were surrounded by a world where everybody else used computers and talked about them … and they were excluded from that world.*

Midcity's Partnership Coordinator felt that an ease and familiarity with computers was empowering for people in their everyday lives, as well as in learning or employment situations. She gave the example of parents whose children are highly proficient in computers and who had previously avoided having anything to do with them, but who have a much clearer grasp of what is involved as a result of taking part in ICT-delivered basic skills course.

An important benefit was the capacity of basic skills courses delivered using ICT to build learners' self-confidence, as discussed in chapter 4. Several interviewees also felt that learning through computers played an important part in developing their life skills, opening up new opportunities to them. ICT skills were also seen as a key factor which was likely to improve job prospects. Learners often said that their growing computer literacy was the single most important thing to have come out of their participation in basic skills courses.

Teachers stressed the importance of ICT as a learning tool. Teacher 1 Highly Structured spoke of the enthusiasm her learners displayed for web-based exercises, and the value these added to the teaching process:

> *I had them doing verb tenses on one particular website and they did about 80 examples which I would've never been able to make them do on paper, so they really got through a lot that day.*

She felt that this took some of the preparation pressure off teachers, who could focus upon providing the hands-on support learners needed:

> *I mean it's really good to have IT in with it because that's, it breaks up the teaching method as well.*

She also thought that using computers to perform mathematical procedures such as multiplications, divisions, and percentages, provided a more immediate and engaging way of working on a subject which learners had previously found uninteresting:

> *'cause when it was just all put on paper in front of you, they didn't want to do that, so we did spreadsheets, and then we did the data basing, we did charts and graphs, and they did some wonderful pie charts.*

The co-ordinator at Midcity Partnership commented that learners like the immediacy of the learning process through computers. Ismail's experience supported this view:

> *In a maths test you have to do on computer, if it's right then you can, you know, end of the test, people will say is it wrong or right, then if it's wrong*

you can do again … you get three chances.

The same learner admitted to finding spelling laborious and difficult on paper, but 'easy' when performing the same tasks on computer.

Julie, who had never used a computer before, also made revealing comments in terms of the specific benefits of ICT in basic skills provision. She noted the importance of being able to 'work at your own pace', and contrasted this with her experience at school where learners were often forced to work at a faster rate than they could cope with. She admitted to being surprised how quickly she was progressing on the course - from having been unable to switch a computer on, to 'only like an hour that we started to go on to Internet.' This learner felt that the course had been a thoroughly good experience and was eager to return for more training. Such experiences provide evidence of the value of these courses in helping learners overcome negative experiences of education, and in developing an enthusiasm for and confidence in learning.

The co-ordinator at Midcity felt that most of the people she had come into contact with had really enjoyed learning via ICT, and that contrary to stereotypes about older people, 'computers engage people irrespective of age.' The teacher interviewed at Computer Outreach also felt that ICT courses were attractive to learners as they were seen as a modern and different way of learning. They allowed for flexible study, learners being able to work as when they liked to fit in with their other responsibilities, and the courses offered variety and stimulation. For example, her learners were able to undertake exercises at their own pace, 'they do like having the control of their own situation'. She felt that the medium was particularly well suited to the expectations of her largely young group of learners, 'they see that as a perfectly normal natural way of working … That's how you find things out,' and that it was stimulating because 'you aren't always listening to other people, or working with other people, or working with the teacher'. She believed that the benefits of the courses were illustrated by the fact that half of her learners taking highly structured ICT courses had moved on to other courses at the centre, while the others had progressed to college.

6.6 Different types of provision

The above case studies show some of the many ways in which providers were using ICT to deliver basic skills courses. They also illustrate the importance of ongoing development and flexibility to incorporate users' different needs, from those who had never used computers, through to those who were more interested in improving their existing skills, and incorporating different balances of numeracy/literacy needs. As the case study of Computer Outreach illustrates, sometimes learners had a whole range of support needs, including IT support, basic skills support, and language support. The teacher at Computer Outreach felt that group working was particularly useful for her ESOL learners, 'what they

enjoy most is group work,' since this enabled them to practice their language skills. Several teachers reiterated the value of group working for ICT basic skills course, since this provided a context for reciprocal support, and many learners found it less embarrassing to experiment amongst their peers than on a direct learner-teacher basis.

Some of the software used by learners on basic skills courses, included spreadsheets, databases, word-processing packages, and a range of software designed specifically for the pathfinder and basic skills provision. One teacher (Highly Structured 1) described how this specialist software promoted standardisation and assessment, and provided a good starting point for teachers, including modules in literacy and numeracy, as well as practical tests. For example, this teacher had given her learners exercises in form-filling, and felt that they had responded well to this structure, which also provided more applied benefits, 'obviously filling in forms, whether it's for work or for your personal life or whatever, its something that we all have to do.' Other ways in which learners had used computers included in plotting graphs, using Clip Art to design party invitations, letter-writing, working out percentages, ordering from catalogues, performing Internet searches, taking maths quizzes and spelling tests, sending emails, and updating cvs. Teachers often reflected that they encouraged learners to use computers to access information on the Internet which was likely to be of interest to them. For example, Teacher 2, Highly Structured, recounted how he had been able to engage an older woman who was initially dismissive of computers, by encouraging her to work with a friend finding out about soap operas and tv stars, 'she was definitely interested in that'.

Courses also included developing more basic computer skills, such as learning how to switch a computer on, finding one's way around it, developing keyboard skills, and using a mouse and icons. The teacher at Computer Outreach commented that sometimes this highlighted the need for cultural sensitivity, and gave an example of female Bengali learners who spoke no English and had no knowledge of computers, who found it difficult to grasp the concept of a password, 'that was where it was hard, when you were trying to get over quite sophisticated concepts in very, very simple language'. She felt that in such instances, more picture symbols would be helpful for learners.

A model of working developed by Midcity's Basic Skills Partnership was through organisations providing open access to computers (in some cases a single machine) for long periods of time. This was supplemented by teachers offering basic skills support, on an outreach basis, for 2-3 hours per week. These teachers worked in a low-key way, supplying hands-on support to learners. This had worked particularly successfully in several probation hostels, and provides an illustration of one way in which the balance between structured support and allowing learners to experiment and develop confidence alone, can be addressed.

Another model, developed by Midcity Partnership, was a learning package which council staff could access from their desktop machines. This provided short exercises, and enabled people to look up particular issues they found more difficult, such as the use of apostrophes, and to receive support as and when they needed it. Midcity's coordinator described this approach as offering 'bite-sized pieces' of learning in the workplace, something likely to be particularly useful for clients whose busy lives do not allow them time to attend more traditional basic skills courses. In this way, computers were able to offer instant (and crucially, private) feedback on basic skills issues. People were able to check the answer to questions and keep trying until they got it right. This helped build their confidence, and for some this approach was easier than working in a group, with all its attendant issues.

6.7 Issues arising from the ICT basic skills courses

Priorities

One of the issues raised by this chapter is whether computer literacy itself has become so vital to everyday life as to constitute a basic skill, which should be delivered as such, along with numeracy and literacy provision. Another point of view might be that ICT provides an important means by which basic skills courses can be provided, and that computer literacy will be a supplementary outcome, rather than a distinct aim of these courses.

A related issue is whether teachers should be delivering both IT and basic skills, or whether these are two different roles. Midcity's Partnership Coordinator felt that in the pilot area at least, the level at which computers were being used in basic skills courses was not specialist, was well within the grasp of most teachers, and that the role should therefore be a combined one. However, Innercity's Syndicate Coordinator suggested that caution was needed, since many numeracy teachers were maths teachers, who had a less sophisticated understanding of the needs of basic skills learners.

While most learners felt that ICT had huge potential to help improve their basic skills, and to deliver softer skills, Pete noted that the time spent familiarising himself with the computer had detracted from time he would have like to have spent concentrating on his literacy, and suggested that the course be separated into computer-based and non-computer based elements.

Demands on teachers

Midcity's Partnership Coordinator noted that with the trend towards most teachers having their own computers and remote access from home, those who do not may feel less able than before to admit to needing help implementing IT as a learning tool. In the context of the rapid development of IT technology and

software, it is important that demands upon teachers do not become overwhelming, and that appropriate support mechanisms are maintained (and publicised) to meet their ongoing computer training needs. In a similar vein, the teacher on Computer Outreach's highly structured courses reflected that time was a fundamental requirement of teaching 'really if you are doing the job properly', and that it was vital to ensure that teachers had sufficient time to work through every exercise themselves before these were undertaken by learners. One tactic she had employed to tackle the multitude of demands on teachers entailed by this sort of course, was to employ a second teacher in order to 'team-teach', money in the pathfinder being available for learning support. This enabled her to support a balance of group and individual work, although even with this extra help, 'we were flat-out'. She also felt that it had been necessary to set up these courses rather quickly, 'I didn't really have a lot of time to search around for ideas,' and that she would have liked to have devoted more time to developing 'symbolic or pictorial' methods of delivering information to learners.Innercity's Syndicate Coordinator stressed that it was important to provide training for teachers on how to use IT, and in particular, how to integrate it into the learning process. Correspondingly, the Syndicate attributed a high priority to staff development within their work.

Communicating good practice

Midcity's Partnership Coordinator noted that sometimes there were 'too many pilots and not enough implementation of good practice'. She heard a great deal about initiatives at conferences, but felt that sometimes things failed to be built upon, rather new initiatives would be launched, culminating in similar points being made, which failed to be integrated into mainstream practice. She argued that funding should support unspectacular, everyday good practice, and not always be tied to innovation.

Similarly the Innercity Syndicate was keen to communicate good practice in the development of ICT-based basic skills programmes, and was currently involved in a study with a research organisation which looked at how IT was being used, and aimed to use this to produce a good practice guide.

Ongoing investment

Relying upon ICT to deliver basic skills highlighted the need for continued investment to maintain the quality of these services. The quality of IT resources was raised as an issue by one or two teachers, including highly structured 1 who stated that the scale of computer resources limited the number of people who could be recruited to the course and Teacher 1 FRRC, who again raised issues largely beyond the course teachers' control. She reported that learners did not get as much out of the IT element of the course as they would like to have done because the computers were on order and arrived late. They also did not have internet access, which she felt would have made a big difference to them.

However, in the second of two courses delivered by this provider it had been possible to provide a dedicated IT session, with a specialist teacher.

Midcity's Partnership Coordinator noted the need for computer support services, which were often not funded, and indeed for software which needed to be continually updated. A constant problem of obsolescence in the computer industry also made it hard to set up affordable systems, especially in the voluntary sector, where funding tended to be less reliable. The Coordinator of the Innercity Syndicate also raised the need for committed technical support as an issue, stressing that where systems were inadequate, this could lead to frustration among learners who could subsequently drop out of courses.

Funding issues often prevented ICT delivery from being developed in more innovative ways. For example, Midcity Partnership had wanted to set up a website bulletin for people using basic skills software. They had been concerned to maintain quality control, and had wanted to ensure the answers given were appropriate, which required a moderator. However, funding for this had been a problem, and they had ultimately been unable to implement the resource.

Technical Problems

Midcity's Partnership Coordinator described a lack of standardisation or incompatibility of equipment as something that had proved a barrier to setting up shared initiatives. In the past, the Partnership had attempted to establish shared training with other areas through video-conferencing, but had run into difficulties upon finding that the three sets of equipment were incompatible. A key element in implementing an area wide-strategy in Midcity had been obtaining standardised hardware across the partnership organisations.

Teacher 1 Highly Structured noted that since some of the software she used for basic skills courses was relatively new, a few teething problems were still being experienced, although she was quick to emphasise that its benefits outweighed these difficulties.

The teacher at Computer Outreach reflected that it was necessary for teachers providing ICT courses to have a back-up lesson plan to cover times when the system crashed or learners were unable to obtain access to a particular website, and that this had proved disruptive in the past.

ICT basic skills materials

Innercity Syndicate's Coordinator reported mixed feedback from teachers on the materials developed for ICT basic skills provision. She noted that Learn Direct had initially been of poor quality, and that subsequently some practitioners had been put off using the software, despite new materials having been much improved. She also recounted that it had not been possible to run the Real

Player online at colleges, since its use involved putting a hole in the firewall, which constituted a security risk to college systems. The teacher at Computer Outreach in Innercity reiterated these problems with Learn Direct. There had been a period of two weeks during which time learners had been unable to access the website, and a lot of problems had occurred when they did access it, which slowed down learning. She also felt that some of the explanations used in the sites were 'very wordy', and ill-suited to the needs of basic skills learners. From her point of view, supervising a group of learners with ESOL needs, there were cultural insensitivities. For example, some learners were unwilling to perform exercises based upon gambling.

Target Skills also received a mixed reaction in Innercity. Numeracy teachers had responded more favourably, perhaps because their IT skills tended to be more advanced than those teaching literacy. Teachers gave very different verdicts on assessments of Target Skills, feeling they either did or did not map well onto the national curriculum. There had also been 'a lot of problems with the website' at Computer Outreach, 'lots and lots of times when I just couldn't use it.'

The teacher at Computer Outreach responded more favourably to BBC skills-wise. Although her groups had not used it extensively, it had the advantage of providing good explanations of *why* learners had got something wrong (although at times, this website too had been unavailable). For example, 'the BBC had some excellent parts on its site that was all about writing instructions.' Supervising a group of high-skill ESOL learners, she reflected that it was often difficult to obtain software that was sufficiently challenging.

Chapter 7: Working with other agencies

7.1 Introduction

Pathfinder projects were mandated to work with other agencies to promote awareness of and access to basic skills provision across a wider range of groups in local communities. At the time this research was undertaken an extensive good practice guide on working with other agencies was under preparation elsewhere for the Adult Basic Skills Evaluation (Godsmark, forthcoming)[1]. Godsmark's study covered a variety of agencies across different pathfinder areas, including voluntary sector organisations, housing associations, the Surestart programme and schools, trade unions, health and social care. There is no intention to replicate this work and this chapter should be seen as a complement to it. Its primary aim is to trace developments in one pathfinder area to illustrate the nature of innovations and some of the issues that have arisen. To this end, it provides an overview of collaboration with other agencies that had occurred in the area during the pathfinder project. It then takes a closer look at examples of collaborative efforts, presenting four case studies that illustrate some of the issues that have arisen. Particular issues of concern are the process of initiating projects and securing collaboration, stakeholder outcomes and follow-up and the demands made on providers and agencies.

7.2 An overview of developments in one pathfinder area

This section will map different routes taken to working with other agencies in the pathfinder area. Several providers have been actively involved in these processes, including both further education colleges and a not for profit training organisation. Providers have worked in partnership with a range of employers *who were not in receipt of fixed rate replacement costs,* and the health and social care sectors. One approach taken has been to build on existing links with other agencies. There has also been some movement into non traditional learning contexts. Each of these approaches will now be considered in turn.

Building on existing links

Working in partnership with other basic skills training organisations provides a means of tapping into existing links and networks with other agencies in the local community. The pathfinder project was aware that a not for profit training and consultancy organisation had been operating in the pathfinder area for the last decade and it sought to draw on its knowledge and experience and, implicitly,

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[1] Research carried out for the Department by Adele Godsmark, shortly to be published in the DfES publication 'Working with other agencies: Lessons from the Pathfinders'. Copies available from Prolog

avoid duplication of effort. Pressure of time was also influential in creating a focus on existing links.[2]

The organisation, henceforth described as TrainingCo, is a specialist in the provision of language and basic skills. It designs and delivers a range of courses that enable those disadvantaged within the labour market to develop their skills and secure qualifications and employment. Much of its work involves offering training to employers, and it has an ethos of creating partnerships with organisations and networks with similar aims. The pathfinder provided TrainingCo with funds to provide initial advice and guidance work on basic skills issues, which was used to carry out work with local private and public sector employers.

Movements into non-traditional learning contexts

New learners in non-traditional learning contexts were reached in a variety of ways. This involved collaboration with employers that TrainingCo had not previously worked with, the initial approach to employers being triggered by guidance from a local authority contact. One example was an employer with a manual worker who had been redeployed into an office job and needed to improve his literacy skills. A second example is the introduction of literacy classes at a supported employment workshop for disabled people, where the modernisation of the supported employment programme had been a catalyst for the consideration of employee skill sets. This will be discussed in more detail below. Not all the efforts to move into new learning contexts got off the ground. TrainingCo was approached by a voluntary organisation and asked to help deliver an Asian Self Development Programme targeted at Bangladeshi youth. The probation service were required to refer people onto the programme, but due to internal difficulties in the service, the programme did not start.

Not all new links with other agencies were being made via TrainingCo. For example, one of the colleges had established links with a social services day care centre to provide a basic skills course for disabled people attending the centre. On a somewhat different level, another college had drawn on the services of a drama teacher to support new ways of working with learners on a residential course. As teachers experiment with new ways of working, collaboration with other agencies can be fundamental to the exploration of the potential of a new learning tool.

7.3 Case studies of innovative collaboration

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[2] This theme of lack of time was reinforced at a workshop on working with other agencies run by Adele Godsmark for a literacy and numeracy conference organized by the pathfinder project. A key point arising out of the conference was that a lack of time had resulted in a shortfall of projects with government agencies in favour of already established links.

Experimentation with drama was an interesting development, but some of the most innovative collaborations appeared to be those that involved teachers working with social service care workers and disabled people both in and out of employment. The next section explores four case studies, with a focus on innovative developments in these areas. Our first case looks at the introduction of literacy classes for local authority social care employees and is based on an interview with TrainingCo. The introduction of literacy classes at the supported employment workshop for disabled people forms case study 2, drawing on interviews with TrainingCo and the training facilitator at the workshop, a support services manager. Case study 3 explores work by a further education college to extend basic skills provision to disabled people at a social services day care centre and draws on the experiences of the project manager at the college. The final case study concerns the experimentation with drama as a learning tool. A teacher's enthusiasm for this was described in chapter 4, but discussion here draws on an interview with the freelance teacher enlisted to work with the learners. The case study further reinforces the benefits of integrating basic skills and personal development training.

Case study 1 - working in partnership with social services and care workers

Establishing common agendas

A common agenda between the provider, TrainingCo, and local employer, a social services department, was described as easy to establish, since TrainingCo had been working with the department prior to the pathfinder. Its initial contact was with the training function. The department had made it very clear that it had a specific interest in collaborating, as it wanted to improve the writing skills of its residential care workers, because staff appraisals had revealed a need for improvements in note writing. Changing practices in the health care sector had also drawn greater attention to staff literacy gaps.

The new learners and their courses

Participants were drawn from five or six residential day care centres, where they worked shifts. They were mostly local women, many from a range of minority ethnic groups, including Indian, Pakistani and African. Most people had an English as second language background and some needed to improve their spoken as well as written language skills. While some women were approaching retirement others were hoping for an opportunity to progress into other areas of the labour market, and were in need of some further support in order to do so.

There was an initial assessment test involving some reading and writing. Each person was then interviewed individually about their work and personal circumstances, what they would like to do and achieve in the course and their special needs. Social services gave TrainingCo examples of areas of

employees' work that needed to be addressed. On the basis of these assessments and the input from their employer, TrainingCo designed a course training programme. Course content centred on literacy and the ability of care workers to write clear handover notes when their work shifts came to an end. For example, one exercise entailed one woman interviewing a colleague and using her responses to write a description of her.

Courses lasted for ten weeks, with weekly classes lasting two to two and a half hours. Classes took place in a number of residential day care centres. People were split into three groups of seven or eight people. In an ideal world TrainingCo would have wished to have grouped people at different language levels, but this was not possible because of shift work and TrainingCo had worked around these constraints.

Stakeholder outcomes and follow-up

At the start of the course, participants were described as not necessarily distinguishing between description of issues arising during the working day and action taken, or needing to be taken, to address them, when writing hand over notes, and their capacity to do so was developed. TrainingCo reported that there was very positive feedback from participants about how their skills had improved through the course. TrainingCo had funding to do further training with these care workers, but was unable to get it organised with their employer. It was not wholly clear why, but one contributory factor may have been that the employer appeared to view the courses as a one off exercise. TrainingCo was disappointed with this outcome, as it was clear that the social services care workers would have benefited from more support.

Case study 2 - working in partnership with a supported employment workshop: ProductsCo

Establishing common agendas

From the perspectives of both the provider and agency involved in this case study, and as in case study 1, common agendas were established with ease. While the modernisation of the supported employment programme had been a catalyst for the consideration of employee skills at ProductsCo, funding was crucial for getting some basic skills training initiated. As the ProductsCo interviewee said:

> *The thing that struck me about it was that it was free. That's what I liked.*
> (ProductsCo support services manager)

ProductsCo is part of a local authority housing department, providing supported employment for disabled people manufacturing a variety of products including garden benches and kitchen units. Disabled people with a variety of impairments

make up around half of the workforce. TrainingCo had a contact in the local authority regeneration department who had alerted them to the possibility of funding for workplace basic skills that could be used as match funding for the pathfinder. The council's strategic human resources department supported the initiative and as a result ProductsCo contacted TrainingCo to arrange an initial meeting.

There had recently been a work reorganisation at ProductsCo, stemming from the introduction of the new supported employment programme: "workstep". In this reorganisation some operatives had been promoted to supervisors and some supervisors to managers. Due to changing work practices people were being asked to undertake new tasks, for example to get involved in health and safety practices and disciplinary matters. ProductsCo were keenly aware, perhaps because of their current context, that someone can be doing a good job and be promoted to the next level without having the skills necessary in that post, for example report writing skills. Separate courses were set up for operatives, supervisors and managers. TrainingCo felt that supervisors and managers would be more receptive to the courses if they were called 'report writing' rather than basic skills and promoted the classes as such; an issue of the marketing of basic skills courses that will be discussed in chapter eight.

The new learners and their courses

After an initial interview with each of the six participants in the course for people on the shop floor, a 10 to 12 week basic skills course commenced. All the participants were disabled people, aged between 26 and 46, and were a mixture of men and women and ethnic groups. Participants also had different impairments, including sensory impairments and learning difficulties. They had a variety of reasons for wanting to do the course.

Course organisation was linked to working patterns and practices. ProductsCo worked to the principle that non work related courses should be undertaken in people's own time, which seemed to be related to financial pressures on the organisation. The workplace traditionally closed early on Friday afternoons and classes for the shop floor were held after closing, for two and a half to three hours. ProductsCo's management had no influence on the curriculum and did not seek this. Instead the course was focused on what people themselves wanted to learn. As classes were held on the premises, in the canteen, there was no need for people to make travel arrangements. People were described as feeling comfortable in this environment. As it was a large room, it also meant that people could break up into very small groups for more one to one tuition.

In addition to the course for people on the shop floor, one eight week course was held for supervisors and another for managers. Many of the participants were men and were reported to have asked their wives to write reports for them in the past. Supervisors and managers attended their courses during the working day

as the curriculum was job related. The content of these courses was dictated by ProductCo's management, and emphasised the skills needed by newly promoted members of staff: report writing, assessments, and an exploration of the way in which the written word differs from the spoken word. An aim of the course was to develop a corporate style of language for managers, working on vocabulary and presentation skills. Some technical staff wrote only in capital letters and this issue was also addressed.

Stakeholder outcomes and follow-up

ProductCo's support services manager indicated that learners from the shop floor did not report to her on a day- to-day basis. However, they sometimes gave her feedback on their progress.   She described how course participants became more confident, inferring that this must have had a constructive impact on people's jobs. She also observed a growth in people's self esteem, and an expansion in their horizons. Learner perceptions of learning appeared to have changed. After the course was over they were all eager to continue to study, as the following quotation from the manager conveys:

> *'All the learners are pestering me at the moment to say when are they coming back, can we have some more please'* (ProductsCo support services manager)

They wanted to increase their basic skills to enable them to have more job options in the future; they had caught 'the learning bug'. In contrast supervisors and managers were not so enthusiastic and it seemed that this was because they had to fit their courses in around their day jobs and they appeared to feel that the courses were a hindrance to their day-to-day tasks. The content of the courses, being directly related to work, may also have offered less personal benefits than those where learners were able to specify the content.

TrainingCo felt it was able to cater for all the needs of the participants on the operative courses and was hoping to arrange some further learning provision for ProductsCo. ProductsCo indicated that it welcomed advice and guidance on how best to support further learning and some thought had been given to options such as taking one or two people to a Learn Direct Centre.

The collaboration with TrainingCo seemed to have the potential to have a lasting impact on organisational practices rather than being a one off exercise. However, ProductsCo made it very clear that continued funding would be important for it to build on the foundations that had been laid.

Case study 3 - working in partnership with a social services day care centre

Establishing common agendas

This project involved collaboration between a further education college essential skills department and a social services day care centre for adults who were described as having additional learning needs. Collaboration was instigated by . the local social services department which had contacted the college to ask for an assessment of the abilities of people attending its day care centres across the local authority. This meant that there was support for the project at senior levels from the start. There were four or five day centres in the borough and the project team chose to work at a day centre attended by people with the most complex needs. After background work, the question was how to address this area of basic skills provision**.**

While cultivating support from senior managers was not problematic it was seen as being of fundamental importance to get day centre staff on board from the outset. The project team met with some resistance. One anxiety was that the college would take clients away from the day centre. They also had their own day-to-day organisational issues to contend with. There was uncertainty about jobs, as services had just been put out for tender, there was a high rate of staff turnover and a related use of agency labour.

Organisers felt that staff had underestimated what users could gain from this kind of project:

> *'.they hadn't heard their voices before and hadn't realised that these people had a lot of thoughts and ideas that they could vocalise if given the chance' (project leader, FE college).*

To cultivate support from centre staff, the project team had flagged up issues for them at the outset. They emphasised that centre staff were the experts and that they had ownership, since they knew the adults and their abilities. Drawing on their knowledge of centre users, staff made an input into action plans, suggesting materials and topics to be used in the classes. The project team took these suggestions on board. Enabling staff to contribute in this way got them involved in the whole exercise; and increased their commitment to it.

The new learners and their courses

In addition to people with learning difficulties, people had visual, hearing and physical impairments. Some had difficulties with learning associated with age, others had asthma, epilepsy or mental health needs. The pre-entry curriculum framework was the basis for identifying educational levels. The initial assessment involved a two and a half hour oral session with open questions being asked of the learners. For this exercise the project team took over the canteen area. It was a room that was both familiar and safe for people, though

noisy for the teachers. Eighty people were involved in this initial assessment. Of these, 50 went on to attend the course. The emphasis was on letting the learners choose what they wanted to do. As the teacher said 'they voted with their feet to come'.

The course lasted for ten weeks with a two and a half hour session each week. As for participants in ProductsCo, the course took place in their centre canteen, again a place with which they were familiar and comfortable. The venue was an important consideration as this quote from the teacher conveys :

> *we're all working with psychological safety, that was a room that was safe for them, that was a room that was non-threatening for them. The fact that it was a pain in the arse for teaching in, is beside the point*
> (project manager/teacher on day centre project).

The course was organised so that participants began each session with structured activity, with a break half way through and then more informal chatting. Some thoughtful ways of working, with sensitivity to participant needs, were developed. Small group work was used frequently to develop peoples' confidence. Members of each study group were selected to work together, with people with different skills placed in the same group. The teacher felt strongly that it is a learning experience itself to realise that there are skills that you have and others don't have, and vice versa. This philosophy underpinned the approach to small group work.

The project team felt that it was important for the clients/learners to see that there was no competition between the day centre and further education college. They wanted them to get a feel for the range of activities that they could access, knowledge about leisure activities and recreation, what they had to pay for and what they didn't. Further aims were for clients to be more proactive, for example understanding the connections between things that were a leisure activity and things that were an education activity, and also to understand the difference between wants and needs.

Stakeholder outcomes and follow-up

The project leader was very pleased with the outcomes of the collaboration. She described how staff had had misconceptions that the most vocal and self-advocating centre users would have the strongest skills, but this was not the case. Indeed they were 'amazed' at the abilities that people had and their motivation to learn. People's skills were described as having improved considerably during the course. They came on, in the project leaders' words, *'in leaps and bounds'.*

At the end of the course it was felt important to find teachers to work in the day centre to provide further learning support, getting 'a good deal' for the clients. Consequently time has been spent thinking about the implications of assessment

data generated by this project for future provision and setting out the principles that should underpin any future collaboration between the day centre and any new provider. The following chapter will consider the implications of this positive development for good practice.

Case study 4 - working with drama teachers

Establishing common agendas

ActivitiesCo, a training provider used by several pathfinder areas, put out tenders for basic skill courses encouraging bids geared towards boosting the confidence of participants. The interviewee for this case study, a freelance drama teacher, responded and was successful in his bid to contribute a drama element to a residential course being organised by a further education college. Information exchange and trust between agencies appeared very important in establishing good working relationships and suitable course content. The drama teacher had discussions with basic skills teachers about the nature of the course and what he might contribute. Teachers briefed him on the background of the learners and he was very positive about the outcome of this period of negotiation and the respect for his expertise:

> *'I felt very good about it, very positive about it. I came away with the feeling that they were very open' (drama teacher, residential 2)*

The new learners and their courses

The characteristics of the learners on residential 2 were outlined in table 2.1 in chapter 2. Most participants were women and in their twenties and thirties and they represented a mix of ethnicities. The drama teacher contributed to two residential courses. The focus of his work with the learners was not on basic skills in terms of literacy and numeracy, but rather on 'soft' skills that are highly transferable but hard to measure. Work with the pathfinder was about personal development, an underlying aim being for learners to find their voice. This teacher felt very strongly that these softer skills were undervalued. In his words they are 'priceless but they become worthless'.

At the start of the course there was an ice breaking session followed by a series of classes that were about building a performance in a very visual and physical way. Then some basic physical performance exercises were taught, followed by exercises on developing performance material and how to build an actual show. Under pressure of time, the learners put together their own shows and, as noted in chapter 4, presented them in front of other learners. The course was described as 'very much about people working together creatively and being supportive of each other'.

Stakeholder outcomes and follow-up

The drama teacher described residential 2 as having reached out to new learners. In his words, it had managed to 'reach the unreachable'. The learners' sense of achievement was described as 'tremendous'. Further comments reinforced residential 2 teacher observations that participants had learnt a great deal, both about themselves and their fellow learners, and in some cases had worked together when they had not thought that they could:

> '…by the end of it there had been huge amounts of laughter, huge amounts of openness and also learning of, amongst them. They'd learnt things about each other, which they didn't know beforehand' (drama teacher).

7.4 The demands on providers

These collaborative links between providers and agencies can make new demands on both parties to the evolving working relationships. These will vary according to the nature of the agency and client groups, a theme also implicit in Godsmark's research. Preparing for collaboration is an important feature of successful outcomes as is the need for teacher flexibility.

The importance of preparation

A good illustration of the importance of preparation emerged from case study 3, the day centre project. The project team felt that it was important to design the project in a way that was sensitive to the needs of the course participants. They began with a month of background information gathering that was heavily informed by a policy context, increasingly supporting access to learning and a wider range of leisure activities for disabled people and people with learning difficulties. This meant that they embarked on developing a working relationship with day centre staff with a strong awareness of issues facing day care centres and people attending them.

Running new courses can involve a heavy investment of time. For the day centre project available pathfinder funding was described as having covered about one third of the time that staff spent on the project. Teachers were described as working at home, in the evening and at weekends. However, they were generating new teaching and assessment materials. While the development of work with new learners can involve a lot of preparatory work, once the ground work has been done, less preparation is required for similar work in the future. This was something that the project team recognised.

The need for teacher flexibility

Demands can also be made on teachers in other ways. Responding to these demands can be crucial to sustaining a project and generating the kinds of positive outcomes that can make agencies feel that future collaboration will be

fruitful. Case study 1 reinforces the message coming out of chapter five of this report that working with employers requires at least some adjustment to their practices. It was noted earlier that in case 1 social care workers were working shifts and based at a number of residential care homes. This system of work organisation increased the demands on the teacher, who had to undertake additional administrative duties as the venue for classes changed from week to week. Moreover, while the initial agency contact was the social services training department the lead person subsequently left and handed responsibility for co-ordination onto the PA to the director of social services. The PA liased with the managers of residential care homes. The long chain of command involved in this process made it more difficult to progress the organisation of learners and classes quickly.   TrainingCo also indicated that that it was a new kind of classroom situation. The teacher, who was experienced and qualified, found it strange to be in an environment where people with severe disabilities would at times wander into the class she was teaching and interrupt, and needed to develop an understanding of the work context.   This again highlights the importance of being prepared.

7.5 The demands on agencies

The examples discussed in this chapter tend to be based on existing relationships and do not reflect the effort or the processes involved in establishing new inter-agency relationships.   Nonetheless they did place demands on agencies. In several of the cases reviewed, staff within agencies got involved in the actual courses to varying degrees.   In the day centre project, it was noted that day centre staff were encouraged to participate in learning processes, in part as a way to develop good will and co-operative working relationships, but it was more than this. Their familiarity with the learners meant that they had an important contribution to make. In all the teaching sessions at this day care centre, three educational support workers and up to twelve key workers participated in learning support.

The support services manager in case study 2, ProductsCo, suggested that she would have liked to have contributed a little more to learner learning support. Facilitating the basic skills courses did not take up too much of this manager's time. Trainers were provided with space to keep their materials, found a room in which they could hold the classes and their course related communications were passed on. As she noted: 'we got more out of it than I put into it'.

Chapter 8: Implications for developing good practice

8.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together experiences from the previous chapters to identify issues for good practice in the delivery of basic skills courses. The final chapter explores the implications for future policy development in this area.

8.2 Course design

As one would expect, when research participants were asked about their suggestions for improving the courses, different themes often emerged for different kinds of extension activity. A theme cutting across all the extension activities was the importance of finding what can be described as the right balance of intensity of learning on the courses, and the ways in which this varied according to the needs of participants.

Course content

Course content was particularly important for employers. Where they had identified problems in the workplace arising from employees' basic skills they had a clear interest in seeing these addressed through the course design. Using actual documentation and forms from workplaces as training exercises, and more broadly, using workplace products and processes to contextualise basic skills training was a highly successful strategy, although one that involved a considerable amount of additional work for teachers. However, fixed-rate replacement courses (and other courses offered via employers) also appeared to work best where the content of the courses included both elements which were highly relevant to day-to-day work and aspects which helped learners to address their own personal aspirations.

Course planning

Several teachers commented on the importance of planning, particularly where residential courses incorporated learners from different groups. Working with several agencies to get a residential course with innovative elements up and running could also create difficulties in organisation.

It was important for teachers to be well prepared, but also to be flexible in coping with the learners' pace of work during the course. Teacher 3 residential intended to plan many more activities beforehand for future courses, as her enthusiastic learners worked very quickly and she had to prepare extra work during the evenings. At the other extreme, one teacher felt that he had expected to cover more ground than proved feasible.   It should be remembered that teachers felt

that the planning difficulties they had experienced were, in part, linked to residential courses being a new initiative and somewhat unknown entity and also having to set them up to a rather tight timetable. The importance of good feedback and review procedures was highlighted, as where courses had been run several times, many of these original issues had been resolved.

Where courses had been well planned this seemed to reap dividends. Teacher 2 residential emphasised that planning was a key component of the course's success. However, even here there were problems for learners trying to arrange childcare.

> *…we did spend a lot of time preparing for these courses, with a lot of planning and discussing - you know, how we were going to do it, and what we were going to do, and I think that paid off in the sense that we sort of thought through a lot of it beforehand…. It does take a long time to organise things like that, and some people couldn't go because they couldn't get childcare* (Teacher 2, residential)

It was important for the provider to allow sufficient lead-in time to plan for FRRC courses, as employers often needed a considerable amount of time to plan how classes could be fitted in to a working day and to organise cover for staff undertaking classes. There was also a need for awareness raising to be built into the planning stage, as recruitment tended to be less effective where middle management were unaware of, or unconvinced of the merits of, the training on offer.

The length and intensity of courses

The previous chapters have provided mixed evidence on the merits of intensity, since some learners were noted to have benefited from a period of intense learning, while in other cases teachers expressed a view that courses would have been more effective if run over a longer period. Learners who were returning to education after a long period were particularly likely to find intensive courses difficult, and those with limited education were also seen as being able to benefit from a longer period of learning. This suggests that the intensity of courses needs to be carefully matched to the needs and backgrounds of participating learners.

Residential courses can provide a welcome opportunity to have a truncated period of learning away from everyday commitments, as chapter 4 discussed. However, the intensity of that kind of learning experience can be perceived as excessive and the learners were described as needing some time to relax.

The length and intensity of the course has to be explored in relation to employers' needs and staffing arrangements. From the employer's perspective, small classes are better in that not too many people are missing from the shop floor at one time. Similarly, it is often better not to run the class as a full 6-hour

day, so that those doing shift work or working short shifts are not excluded. This points to the courses being run over a much longer period of time. It is, however, harder for such courses to build in the kind of exponential learning curve which may be offered by more intensive courses.

Adapting course activities to meet learners' needs

It was important for teachers to be flexible and to make adjustments to the structure (and sometimes the length) of the working day in response to learners' learning styles. Teacher 1 FRRC had rotated the subjects studies so that all were equally affected by the learners' fall in concentration during the afternoon. Teacher 1 residential, working with young people with difficulties, also felt that there should be some re-organisation of the timing of particular activities and suggested that classroom sessions might be shifted to the mornings to overcome the fall in motivation that can occur when learners have been involved in an outdoor activity for most of the day and then have to return to the class room for more traditional teaching. He emphasised that it was important not to dispense with the classroom element altogether, as the evening sessions had provided an opportunity to have some 'disguised learning', build trust and develop team spirit, with one-to-one help and support.

Other suggested improvements centred on the ways in which particular classroom activities might be refined. Some of these changes occurred as the courses progressed.   For examples learners on the third course run as part of residential 1 chose to have a classroom session focusing on their plans for the future, and this helped them feel more engaged. The teacher on residential 3 also felt that there were additional opportunities for family learning in that might usefully be explored were the course to be run again.

While some learners had told their teacher that the length of the course was too short, it had been adjusted during the pilot so that the teachers had time to familiarise themselves with learner needs.   This highlights the importance of planning and advance preparatory work to meet learner needs effectively. This emerged as particularly important where residential courses drew together learners from several different courses, as the following quotation illustrates:

> *Certainly from the point of view of the basic skills teachers who were only involved in the residential, only briefly got to meet them, meet the learners, before that, it was difficult to focus on what development each specific person would be trying to achieve* (Teacher 1, residential)

8.3 Recruitment and marketing issues

Seeing a friendly face, or having a welcoming conversation with someone on the telephone, at the first point of contact with the education system can be crucial. Teacher FRRC1 noted that when people meet a teacher through outreach work

this teacher can become an important 'bridge' into college. It can therefore be beneficial if, at least initially the outreach worker is the first teacher. Providing courses in familiar venues, such as the workplace, a community centre or a child's school, can also make people feel more comfortable and help to avoid negative associations with earlier experiences of education.

The evidence that use of language can influence take up should also be taken on board when reaching out to new learners. Some teachers and learner representatives avoid the use of the term 'basic skills' as they feel it conveys a sense that a person doing a literacy or numeracy course is inadequate. At Clothco, for example, it was felt that the word 'basic' had negative connotations, implying that someone is below standard. One way of encouraging people was by adopting the name 'essential skills' and thus attempting to remove the stigma attached to basic skills. Similarly, at Midcity, the course was labelled as 'better basics'. A similar theme surfaced at ProductsCo where the training provider recruited supervisors and managers to courses by labelling them as 'report writing'. To go as far as renaming basic skills courses would, however, require a more general review of the marketing of basic skills, essential skills and key skills courses.

The importance of effective recruitment processes and publicity was emphasised by teachers on the intensive courses. Intensive Teacher 2 reiterated that the wrong learners had been admitted to the course, mainly as a result of inappropriate publicity materials. The quantitative survey also found evidence that a substantial minority of learners had joined courses without being aware of the residential element, and some other features (White et al, 2003). Intensive Teacher 2 suggested that if another course were to be run each prospective learner would be given a one-to-one interview, in addition to a telephone interview. Intensive 1 had introduced one-to-one interviews after experiencing similar difficulties with its course publicity materials, and they were used on a variety of other courses. This not only represents good practice in adequately identifying learner needs, but is likely to enhance efficiency in making the most of available resources.

For workplace courses, where the co-operation of managers and supervisors was vital to recruitment and attendance, an effective strategy for getting them on board was to encourage them to take the course themselves. At Midcity, supervisors were the first to take the course and this had a positive effect on applications. Supervisors were aware of the value of the course and actively marketed it to their staff, while for staff, the fact that their immediate line manager has attended the course removes stigma. This was particularly effective in Clothco where management had been less aware of basic skills issues.

8.4 Working with employers

The development of a close relationship between providers and at all levels of the organisation was a prerequisite for successful basic skills courses in the workplace, as chapter 5 discussed. Having time to plan and design courses was another important element.

A key issue identified by providers was the need for more work in promoting the benefits of basic skills training to employers, since many employers do not realise that this is relevant to them. A company basic skills training analysis or audit provides one way of raising awareness. This is an aspect of good practice that can facilitate constructive outcomes for workers and their employing organisations. It does so, in part, by helping to identify the appropriate learners to come on the course. It was also argued that a strategic company basic skills training analysis might have helped to address the lack of minority ethnic group participation in training which had been noted in one area. This analysis can, it was argued, potentially help a basic skills course to contribute to the skill requirements of an individual's job, but there needs to be sufficient 'up-front time' to facilitate this. Employer co-operation, locally and at senior levels, is essential in developing this pre-course preparatory work. Implicitly, this increases the likelihood of making the gains for employees and their employing organisations more work-orientated.

8.5 Resource issues for providers

Accommodation

Having the flexibility of more appropriate accommodation for teaching purposes was also raised as an issue. One teacher would have liked a separate room into which she could take learners to undertake group work and have group discussions without being disturbed. Course numbers were also sometimes restricted by the availability of accommodation.

ICT

IT is popular with learners, and offered some specific benefits, as chapter 6 discussed. There was evidence that ICT was a big draw in recruitment but that some learners reported being disappointed the there was not more included on the actual courses. Resource constraints played some part in this, but it was also an issue of course planning and design. It was important for teachers to be flexible in responding to learner demand:

> *..the next day we had to completely revamp our scheme of work because we were finding that the learners being strong-minded adults were saying "I don't want to do this, I want… to work on a computer. I'll do maths but I*

want to do it on a computer"…So we had to have a complete rethink because within the three teachers that were teaching and the support worker only one of the teachers was an IT expert, we were maths experts… [name] can work on Access and I can do data bases and spreadsheets but not to the extent that I'm confident to teach it... (Teacher 2, intensive).

It might be argued that the demand reported by intensive teacher 2 stemmed from the initial difficulties in advertising and recruiting on the course. However, employees in intensive 1 were also keen for more work with computers and this would seem to reinforce learner support for this mode of learning.

Teachers also played a valuable role in introducing IT to people who were not initially attracted to it, and in helping to break down their misconceptions and fear about working with computers, so it is important that ICT is offered in a variety of ways, and that provision is not simply demand-led.

8.6 Building on success - the importance of longer courses, follow-up, and the management of learner expectations

A recurring theme throughout the report is the importance of follow-up to build on the foundations of the pilots. The training coordinator at ClothCo pointed out that although the pathfinder was a great opportunity, there are not the resources to support this kind of activity or to facilitate greater participation on this kind of training in the future. The lesson here is that it is important to consider the issue of sustainability of learning opportunities before an existing course comes to an end. The desire for longer courses, follow-up and the management of learner expectations are integrally linked. As providers and agencies collaborate in facilitating the expansion of basic skills provision into new learning contexts a fundamental aim is to support people to go on to further studies. Moreover, participant expectations are raised *during* the course. ProductsCo, case study 2, emphasised that for any further course it facilitated it would be important to make clear to people how long the course was going to last. Participants on its basic skills course had been told that the course would be re-established a few months later and, when it wasn't, they felt let down.

For employers too, the basic skills courses had largely been a great success and most were able to identify some striking outcomes in terms of workers abilities, confidence, morale and pride in the work. Several were anxious to establish whether there would be more opportunities forthcoming as they were being put under pressure by staff who had not been on a course and wanted the chance to benefit in the same way as their colleagues.

The case studies with employers highlighted the need for more on-going training of learning representatives, more 'follow through' of the learner representative

role, equipping them with more knowledge and confidence so that they can really go out and sell the benefits of learning to their workmates. The Union Representative at ClothCo emphasised that there is a need to continually update learner representative skills, and was aware that the TUC is looking to train learner representatives in basic skills. There was seen to be a need to invest more in training learner representatives to a high level.

Generally, agencies have an important contribution to make in pro-actively seeking follow-up to the courses and taking on board lessons that have been learnt. Agencies do of course have everyday work roles and pressures to contend with, so the majority of input, and expertise, needs to come from providers. However, opportunities for agencies to contribute should be embedded into the processes of provider-agency negotiation. This can be as simple as asking agencies to share their ideas for improving support to learners as a course progresses.

Chapter 9: Implications for policy development

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter draws together the implications for policy development and relates these to the barriers which can prevent individuals from addressing their basic skills needs. It also considers the advantages and disadvantages of different extension activities.

9.2. Improving access to basic skills provision

People with basic skills needs may face a range of practical and attitudinal barriers to taking part in training. Some of these are general, while others apply to specific groups. The following section discusses these and the implications they have for the ways in which courses are provided.

Addressing practical barriers to learning

There was felt to be a need for childcare to be integrated with basic skills provision, as many teachers felt that this 'was the biggest barrier for most people'. Teacher 2 financial incentives course highlighted that the majority of learners his organisation supported were female, many having childcare responsibilities. While they were attending college, they received free childcare provision on site. As noted in chapter 3, his learners emphasised that this kind of support was invaluable and a major factor in making the courses that they were attending accessible. If people are to progress to other courses on completion of basic skills training, childcare also needs to made widely available at a range of educational institutions.

It was seen as important that courses and any associated childcare provision should be free, since many of those with basic skills needs were seen as having very low incomes. However, some people's domestic commitments and patterns of working time are such that even free training is inaccessible unless offered as paid time off work. This is an important issue, not only for the continued development and funding of basic skills courses, but for a range of follow-on provision. There is a particular need for imaginative forms of provision which could meet the needs of shift workers, many of whom found it impossible to take up training or education.

Addressing attitudinal barriers to learning

Most teachers, and many learners, described experiences at school, whether relating to school as a whole, or to particular subjects, as the main barrier to tackling basic skills problems, because an individual's fears and anxieties can

appear to pose an insurmountable barrier to learning.

 A closely related issue is that of shame and stigma associated with basic skills needs. The individual's embarrassment, and a perception that they are deviating from 'societal norms', can also lead attempts to try to hide basic skills needs. It can be particularly difficult to get men to address their basic skills deficits, because of pride and not feeling that such a step fits in with their life style, and there may be a case for single sex groups.   Teacher 1 financial incentives implied that pressurising people to attend is not necessarily the best way forward:

> *…. Sometimes you get them pushed, pushed to me from benefit agencies and I know that they're not going to turn up.* (Teacher, financial incentives)

These issues highlight the importance of outreach work, sensitive marketing and course design issues.

ESOL needs and the background of refugees

Refugees could be particularly disadvantaged, especially if they entered the UK system having already had their schooling interrupted by civil war, and emerged as a group with distinctive needs, for which more provision is required. As the third case study in chapter six (section 6.4) discussed, ESOL learners have quite different literacy needs from 'traditional' basic skills learners, and their diverse skill levels can make them a challenging group to teach. The fact that refugee attendance on the courses sampled tended to be from a younger age group, and that drop-in sessions were more utilised by men, suggests that the ESOL needs of older people, and particularly older women, have been less easily met by the pathfinder activities, and that greater efforts are required to communicate with and engage these groups.   ESOL pathfinders have subsequently been established to meet the needs of these learners.

9.3 The design and marketing of basic skills courses

The design and marketing of basic skills courses is at one level an issue for providers, as discussed in the previous chapter. It is also something to be considered in terms of national strategies for marketing. There is a need for considerably more outreach work to meet the needs of groups not currently accessing basic skills provision:

> *I think it's getting the message out to people that you're there, and how the courses are run, that's the major barrier* (teacher, FRRC 1)

As discussed in the previous chapter, terminology can be an important issue, and sensitive marketing is required if people are to overcome feelings of shame and inadequacy sufficiently to seek help. Several people mentioned that linking IT skills to other skills made it easier for people to come forward, as people felt less stigma about a lack of familiarity with computers. However, as chapter 6 and

chapter 8 identify, this implies a commitment to resources and highlights the need for strategic planning in the deployment of ICT.

9.4 The role of on-going funding in facilitating collaboration

The importance of having on-going support and funding to facilitate collaboration was stressed by organisations participating in the case studies. This was also a theme at the working with other agencies pathfinder conference workshop, mentioned in chapter seven. It was also felt important that small grass roots organisations received financial support, rather than it being concentrated amongst recognised service providers. Initial work appearing from the wider review of working with other agencies that was occurring across pathfinder areas at the time of writing appears to indicate that the inclusion of a variety of organisations in local communities has been taking place (Godsmark, 2002). Exploration of opportunities for matched funding appear to have been a feature of this process. The issue for future progress is whether this can be built upon and extended in a way that removes the availability of financial resources as a barrier to providing second chances to learn.

There was also a concern that if ICT-delivered basic skills courses were to be successful, they required a sustained financial commitment to maintaining and updating software, systems and technical support, in addition to meeting ongoing staff development and learning support needs. It was also felt to be important to maintain good communications and coordination between partner organisations to ensure that systems were compatible.

9.5 Did one pathfinder model stand out as the most effective?

Although the pathfinder model was designed to compare a variety of ways of providing basic skills training, the qualitative evaluation, like the early findings of the quantitative evaluation (White et al, 2003), did not provide firm evidence in support of the benefits of one particular model over another. Rather, as will be discussed below, it highlighted the benefits of particular types of courses for specific groups of respondents and demonstrated a demand for a range of provision to meet the diversity of need which exists. Courses of nominally contrasting types (for instance an intensive or a highly structured course) did not always differ significantly in terms of their design, and this evaluation is not concerned with differences in pedagogic approach, which may have been significant. The qualitative evaluation was more concerned with access to, and experiences of the courses, and differences in course design appeared less salient in this respect than the issues of good practice discussed in the previous chapter. The quantitative evaluation will shed more light on whether particular types of courses offer improved longer-term outcomes, whether across the board or for specific groups of learners.

Advantages and disadvantages of particular courses

All residential courses were offered as an adjunct to existing courses. The issues with them were again those of access in that they could present a considerable problem for people with childcare and family responsibilities. If these courses were extended they would require provision of childcare facilities or financial incentives for childcare for those that attended, to ensure equality of access.

One aspect of their distinctive value was in offering an element of intensive study on other types of courses, thus combining the benefits of 'fast-track' learning with the more consolidated approach offering by a longer-term class. Another was the fact that they usually combined classroom-based teaching and learning with other activities. In addition, residentials provided a different teaching environment and the chance to contextualise literacy and numeracy skills through activities such as map reading in an unfamiliar town. In this sense they provided important added value to an existing classroom based course. They also offered a chance for course participants to bond as a group, and were described as invaluable for the development of 'soft skills' such as confidence and teamwork.

The qualitative evaluation covered only one course offering financial incentives for learners. These did appear to have been important in motivating some people to participate, and to maintain their attendance, and were valued by the teacher:

> *it has acted as a real motivation for some learners who are probably very low on confidence, self-esteem, who haven't really worked much, but probably could if they got their skills up …* (Teacher, financial incentives)

The central improvement suggested for this extension activity was in the criteria that potential learners needed to meet in order to qualify for financial incentives, an issue raised in chapter 2 in relation to course take-up. Although some of these who had taken part were economically inactive and clearly within the intended target group, the requirement that learners should not be claiming benefit was seen as having the perverse effect of excluding many potential participants whilst attracting people on relatively high levels of income.

The value of an intensive course is the rapid progress which can potentially be made over a short period of time, as compared with the more incremental learning offered by regular weekly sessions. They are perhaps best suited to people who have studied recently, and those which are currently attending other courses, as the pace of study and length of the working day can be difficult for those who have not studied for a long period. Because the appropriate balance of intensity varies according to the differing needs of learners, funding mechanisms could usefully provide for a greater degree of flexibility within this category.

The benefits of fixed-rate replacement courses

Fixed-rate replacement courses had one obvious and distinctive advantage, in that they reached groups of learners with demonstrable basic skills needs who were not accessing other forms of provision. These low-paid, mainly manual and unskilled workers had domestic and employment commitments which meant that attending daytime classes was not a realistic option for them. In several cases, people had more than one paid job. While some employers had provided courses without the incentive of replacement costs for staff cover, the fixed rate replacement cost extension had been useful in encouraging businesses to take up the programme where they might otherwise have found the staffing problems insurmountable.

A crucial factor here is organisational culture. Where an organisation already had a staff development ethos, a positive attitude to basic skill and understood the benefits they were happier to support the costs themselves. In addition neither mid city or Employable were entirely profit motivated and staff development issues were high on their agenda. The FRRC employers also placed staff development quite high on their agenda but they had less knowledge about the benefits of undertaking basic skills courses. Their work practices were much more defined by tight staffing structures that would allow them to maximise profit. Most did not see the replacement costs as the most important motivation. One training provider that had run several worked based courses explained that in the internal evaluation they carried out none of the employers said the FRRC were a key factor. However, she believed that it did 'help get the courses started'. It clearly provided a key additional incentive for employers who were less convinced about the benefits of basic skills. A manager at Superstore thought it had really helped to convince the managers to take on the course:

> *Obviously they could replace that person while they were out doing the training. They did lose people for a day, so to them that was quite a big impact and I think that helped sell it to them.*

The training co-ordinator at MidCity noted that in her directorate there was an unmet need amongst the subcontracted services such as waste management and bereavement services. She felt that people working in these areas were unlikely to be released without funding for cover, so that a fixed rate replacement course might be beneficial. *'In the private sector it's all about money'.*

This model would appear to have scope for much wider application. The workplace can provide a context for a basic skills needs assessment and training in work time overcomes the time poverty issue raised by teachers. It means that practical issues such as childcare are already in place. One manager noted that a further advantage of doing these courses at work was that many people hide their problems from their families. It is easier to deal with them in an employment setting where they can simply talk about 'going on a training course at work'.

The problem with work-based basic skills courses highlighted by the pathfinder initiative is that employees in very marginal jobs particularly those involving shift work, anti social hours or zero hours contracts were not being reached. It is also these employees who are likely to be most in need and thus the ones who would benefit most from such provision. The experiences of teachers and participants also highlighted the need for provision which could address the needs of people with a range of workplace skill issues, and not simply those with the greatest needs.

Extending provision would require both a continued commitment to offering funding and a strategic approach to engaging employers, many of whom were described as having little awareness of either their employees' basic skills levels or of the ways in which improving these could benefit their business. One suggestion was for a video to be made demonstrating the benefits to employers. Seminars where employers could discuss their experiences of running courses and introduce these to other interested employers would be another option. Increased financial support is also necessary to support college's outreach work with companies.

Appendix 1

Topic guide for participants

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. My name is [name] and I work for the Policy Studies Institute. We are involved in the evaluation of the course you are taking part in (have recently taken part in) and we are interested in your views on how well the course has met your needs. Anything you tell me is confidential and will not be passed on to anyone else. When we write about your views in our reports we will not give personal details which could identify you. Any questions before we begin?
Obtain consent for interview to be taped.

Section A: Personal details

Gender:
Age:
Ethnicity:
English is second language: Y/N

Section B: About the Course

1. How did you find out about this course?

2. How/Why did you decide to do this course?
    Probes:
        recommendation
        necessary for work or further training
        for daily life
        when you heard about the course, what things about it appealed to you?
        was there anything that didn't appeal to you when you first heard about it?

3. Was this course the only one you could go to or did you choose it from among other courses?   Why did you choose this one?

4. Can you tell me a bit about the course and the way it is organised?
    Probes:
        how long
        how often are the classes
        class size
        cost

5. How easy is it for you to get to the classes?
   Probes:
   location
   distance travelled
   costs
   day time/evening

Interviewer please indicate: very easy/quite easy/OK/quite difficult/very difficult

6. What about your personal arrangements? How easy was it for you to arrange   your time so that you could attend these classes?
   Probes: what are these commitments, if any?   What would have helped?

Interviewer please indicate: very easy/quite easy/OK/quite difficult/very difficult

7. Can you tell me about what the course covers?
   (**Probe**: content)

8. How did you feel about the course when you first started?

9. Has that stayed the same, or do you feel differently now?
   (how? in what ways? why?)

10. What aspects of the course have been most helpful to you?
    Probes:
    Why?
    How did this help?

11. Were any aspects of the course unhelpful to you?
    Probes:
    Why?
    How?

12. If this course is going to be run again next year, what aspects do you think should be changed and what aspects should remain the same?
    (**Probes**: why?)

Section C: Current Employment and Work History

1. Are you doing any paid work at the moment?
    (Remind of confidentiality if they appear worried.)

Interviewer - please indicate whether respondent is in paid work at the moment
YES/NO - If no, go to Q8.

If yes, currently in paid work
    2. Can you tell me about your job?
Probes:
       Full-time/Part-time?
       How long in this job/this type of work
       What does that involve - can you describe it a little bit?
       How long have you been doing this job/this type of work?
       How much enjoys job overall?
       What aspects enjoys/doesn't enjoy?
       Any thoughts on changing your job? (Employer or type of work?)

    3. Is this the same job you had before going on the course?
        Interviewer - please indicate
        YES/NO

    4a. If yes,Have there been any changes in your job or pay since taking the course?
       Can you tell me a bit more about these?

    4b. If no, please could you tell me about the job before and how you came to change it?

Work History

    5. How old were you when you got your first job?

    6. Can you tell me about the different jobs you have done and what would you say your main job has been over the years?
       Which did you enjoy the most?
       Why? **(now go to section D)**

If no, not currently working
    7. How do you tend to spend your time?
       Probes:
       job search
       training for a job
       voluntary work
       care responsibilities

Have you done paid work in the past?

Yes/No

If yes, had paid work in past

Last paid job

    8. Can you tell me about your last job?
Probes
        Full-time/Part-time?
        How long in job?
        Main tasks involved?
        How long have you been doing this job/this type of work?
        How much enjoys job?
        What aspects enjoys/doesn't enjoy

    9. How did you come to leave that job and why?

Work History

   10. How old were you when you got your first job?
       Can you tell me about the different jobs you have done
       Which did you enjoy the most?
       Why?

Section D: Education

   1. What age were you when you left school?

   Interviewer please write age here:

   2. Can you tell me a bit about your time at school?
      (**Probes**: Were you happy at school?
      Did you have any favourite subjects or teachers?
      Did you have any problems at school?
      What type of problems?
      With the work?
      With teachers?
      With other kids?
      Bullying?
      Problems at home?
      Health problems?)

   3. Did you change secondary schools at any time? (Why? How did you feel about this?)

4. Did you feel that you got much out of school?
   Probes: literacy, numeracy, qualifications?
   Why/Why not?

5. Have you been on any courses since you left school? For example, any courses for personal recreation, things you do in your spare time?
   If yes, can you tell me why you did these courses and what you got out of them?
   If no, have you wanted to?   What would have helped you to do this?

6. Can you remember doing any other training, for example any training for a job?
   Probes:
   - what training, when, how long, qualifications, paid/unpaid
   - on the job or off the job training
   - run by the employer

7. Did this training help you in your job?
   How?
   Why/why not?

Section E: Outcomes, and future hopes and plans

1. Has anything changed for you as a result of the course?
   (in what ways?)
   (Some people find that it changes things at work…at home…dealing with children's school… dealing with things like writing letters, bills, letters from the council, bus/train timetables - mortgages and insurance… has anything like this happened for you?)

2. Do you plan to do any education or training in the future?
   If not, why not?
   If yes, what type of education or training would you like to do?
   What do you think you would get out of doing this?

Interviewer: Please indicate whether currently interested in future education or training: Yes/No/Maybe

3. If you had wanted to, could you have done this course before you attended the basic skills training?

Interviewer: Please indicate whether to do this training before basic skills course: Yes/No/Maybe

4. How do you think your attendance on the basic skills training influenced your decision to do further study?

Probes: (in what way?):
    a. increased confidence?
    b. improved skills & abilities?

5. What would help you to do training or education in future?

6. How do you think it would affect your work (chances of work)?

7. How do you think that the basic skills course can help improve your (or has helped your) employment prospects?
    In what way?
        Able to do current job better, perform a wider range of tasks, improved communication skills
        Got a new job already?
        If got a new job, what is this new job?
        Are you using some of the skills you have learned on the course in your new job? (in a direct or indirect way - e.g. confidence)
        Did you expect it to improve your job situation?
        Why do you think the course did not improve your employment opportunities?
        What would help improve your job opportunities?

Thanks and close.

Appendix 2

Provider topic guide

Section A: Description of project design

1. Can you tell me a bit about your organisation?

2. What does the course you teach cover? (*copies of any pre and post extension course outlines, brochures or other publicity available?*)

[NB: mention when arranging interview that it would be very helpful if they could bring copies of course material to the interview - but interviewers should bring along an A4 size stamped addressed envelope to leave with them in case they haven't had time to put it together]

3. How long does the course last?
Probes:
*How does this differ from previous provision?

4. What is the number of people currently doing the course ?

5. What is your target group?
   Probes:
   *Priority group characteristics, ethnicity, gender, age..
   *Numbers targeted for this first intake of learners

6. What aims does the course have?

7. How do you feel about these?
   Probes:
   How easy/hard to achieve (for all/particular groups)
   How well they match entry needs for other provision/employment etc.

Section B: Recruitment and assessment

1.   How easy are you finding it to reach your target group?

2.   Do you know how the course has been publicised to recruit the target group(s)?
Probes:
*informal word of mouth/outreach work

*formal open days
*use of internet/web pages
   *publicity materials eg.. leaflets, local newspaper ads, posters
   *via other organisations (type?)

If no, go straight to Q7.
If yes, ask Qs 3-6

3.   Would you say that any of these methods is reaching your target group better than others?
Probes:
*How/why?
*Is this being formally monitored

4.   What feature of the course would you say has been most attractive to people at that first stage of recruitment?

5.   Has there been any reluctance to take part?
Probes:
*If reluctance, from which group(s)
*Why?

6.   Have you tried to tackle this reluctance?
Probes:
*Strategies used for group(s)
*Any constraints on addressing reluctance in this/these way(s)?

7.   How do you assess people and when is this done? (copies of assessment available?)
[NB: mention when arranging interview that it would be very helpful if they could bring copies of standard? assessment to the interview - but interviewers should bring along an A4 size stamped addressed envelope to leave with them in case they forget/haven't had time to get it together

8.   To what extent are people able to define their own learning goals?
Probes:
*Scope for fitting provision to personal learning goals
*How important a feature of the course and assessment process is this

9.   Have you experienced any difficulties *in the assessment process so far?*
Probe:
How/why?

10.   *Is there ongoing assessment/end assessment (other than tests/quals)*

Probe:
*Form that the assessment takes *(end of course standard assessment available as yet? - can we have a copy when it is available)*

Section C: Completing the course

1. What sorts of issues have people faced as they have progressed through the course?
   Probes:
   *course related
   *non course related

2. What sorts of changes have you seen in individuals over the period of the course?
   Probes:
   *confidence development
   *competence development

3. Have you noticed any particular issues for particular groups (e.g. unemployed, men, women, over 50s, ethnic minorities?)

4. Have you been able to offer any support that can help with individual or group issues?
   Probes:
   *What kinds of support?
   *How has this helped?
   *Why not?

5. What kinds of support would you like to be able to offer?
   Probe:
   *For each individual or group issue mentioned in response to QC4

6. What would need to happen for you to be able to do this?

7. To what extent has it been possible to follow-up people who did not attend for any reason?
   Probe:
   *Any constraints on doing this

8. Do you have an idea of how many people have dropped out of the course ?
   Probes:
   *Whether there are procedures in place to monitor non completion

9. Do you know the reasons why people have dropped out?

Probes:
*Reasons related to the course
*Reasons not related to the course
*Whether there are procedures in place to monitor reasons

10. Did people seem to drop out at a particular stage?
    Probe:
    *If yes, why do you think that is?

11. What have you found to be the most successful features of the course?
    Check if in doubt:
    *A new feature or traditional feature?

12. Why do you think these features have worked well?

13. Are there any aspects of the course that have not been successful?
    Check if in doubt:
    *A new feature or traditional feature?

14. Why do you think these have not worked so well?

15. Are there any things you will do differently next time?
    Probes:
    *What are they?
    *Why?

Section D: After the course

1. Do people get a chance to provide feedback on how the course has been for them?
   Probes:
   *What form does it take eg.. regular scheduled meetings, informal open door policy?
   *Any obstacles to providing such opportunities

2. What kind of comments have people made about the course so far?

3. Once someone has completed the course, are you able to give advice on what to do next?

4. Are all course participants given the opportunity to talk through their next steps?
   Probes:

*whether formal arrangements in place to facilitate this or a more informal open door policy

5. Are there any other courses locally they can go on to?
   Probes:
   *whether course are based here or at another centre
   *whether they have particular conditions
   *whether initial basic skills course allows them to meet these conditions

6. Will you or your institution be keeping in touch with people once they leave your courses?
   Probe:
   *whether formal arrangements in place to facilitate this or a more informal open door policy

Section E: General issues

1. What would you say are the main barriers which prevent individuals from tackling their basic skills problems?

2. What would you say are the main issues for teachers in helping people to tackle basic skills problems?

3. What more could the government be doing?

4. What more could the various partners in your pathfinder project be doing?

5. How important is the kind of provision you are able to offer under this initiative, compared to other things?

6. Are there any changes you would like to see in the ways in which basic skills courses are funded and taught?

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