



# Basic Skills Capacity in Wales: Provider and Learner Perceptions

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## Research

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# Basic Skills Capacity in Wales: Provider and Learner Perceptions

<b>Audience</b>	Basic Skills Providers, Practitioners and Policymakers in Wales.
<b>Overview</b>	A literature review followed by discussions with 25 basic skills providers/practitioners and a survey of 200 learners, spread across Wales. The aims were to gather information on providers' and practitioners' views on the challenges involved in improving basic skills capacity in Wales, the key implications for policy and practice in Wales and to identify and discuss any recommendations.
<b>Action required</b>	None - for information.
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<b>Additional copies</b>	Further copies may be obtained at the above address. This document can also be accessed from the Welsh Assembly Government website at: <a href="http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills">http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills</a>
<b>Related documents</b>	The Report from Stage one is available on request from Jackie McDonald, as above.

**BASIC SKILLS CAPACITY IN WALES:  
PROVIDER AND LEARNER PERCEPTIONS**

**A report to the  
Department of Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills  
of the Welsh Assembly Government**

**September 2007**

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## 1. Introduction

1. The Basic Skills Strategy for Wales, '*Words Talk – Numbers Count*', was published by the Welsh Assembly Government in April 2005, setting out a five year approach to raising standards of literacy and numeracy in Wales. The Strategy is structured by ten priority groups, and ten 'horizontal themes', which define the intended beneficiaries and the main areas of intervention of the Strategy.
2. The priority groups are:
  1. Early years and the Foundation Stage
  2. Pupils under-attaining in schools
  3. Families
  4. Young people
  5. Adult learners
  6. Low-skilled people in the workforce
  7. Jobseekers
  8. Offenders and ex-offenders
  9. Other groups at risk of social exclusion
  10. ESOL.
3. The 'horizontal themes' are:
  1. Raising awareness
  2. Better identification of learning needs and tracking progress
  3. Providing a better range of attractive learning
  4. Improving the quality of provision
  5. Developing the practitioner workforce
  6. Fit-for-purpose qualifications
  7. Better help and support for learners
  8. Welsh language
  9. Working together to maximise impact
  10. Better evidence of what works
4. The Strategy is delivered in Wales by the Basic Skills Agency (BSA), which is contracted to do so up to 2008. The BSA publishes an annual Delivery Plan, which lays out projected activities for that year in support of the Strategy and activities are delivered by the BSA, Local Authorities and appointed sub-contractors. National Support Projects (NSPs) have been set up to support many areas of activity. A delivery budget of £12.8m was made available for Basic Skills delivery in 2006-07.
5. Of course, a basic requirement for the success of the Strategy is that there should be sufficient capacity to deliver the volumes and levels of training which the Delivery Plan requires – capacity in this context meaning having enough basic skills teachers (with the necessary levels of experience and skills) to generate the number of teaching hours in literacy, numeracy and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Language) which the Strategy requires.

6. However, a first phase of research commissioned by DELLS suggested that capacity to deliver elements of the Basic Skills Strategy directed at adult learners might be insufficient. A report (*Rapid Evidence Assessment of current practice in addressing capacity and workforce development issues in basic skills provision*, LE Wales for DELLS, February 2007) examined the available evidence on basic skills capacity and its development, using information and data both from Wales, the UK, and beyond.
7. The report, quoting Estyn (the learning inspectorate for Wales), noted that *'in general, most providers are able to recruit basic skills teachers with suitable experience, though often they do not have specific basic skills teaching qualifications at Level 3 or above. There is, however, a particular shortage of experienced and qualified numeracy teachers, even though numeracy enrolments from students remain relatively low. There are also shortages of experienced and qualified family learning tutors in North West and in South East Wales. Retention of staff is ... a problem, particularly where there are several providers in an area competing for the same pool of staff.'*
8. The report suggested that shortages of capacity arise variously because of:
  - Difficulties in judging how much capacity is required: lack of strategic information on demand for, and supply of, teaching capacity.
  - The low perceived status of basic skills teaching compared with teaching of other subject specialisms.
  - The high proportion of basic skills teachers who work on part-time, short-term contracts.
  - Low pay in FE compared with teaching in schools.
  - Consequent problems in staff retention, particularly where several providers in an area are competing for the same pool of staff.
  - Poor or limited access to training or professional development for basic skills teachers.
9. The report also described a number of approaches which had been used to seek to raise basic skills teaching capacity, not necessarily in Wales, but, in some cases, in the UK or other countries. These include:
  - Efforts to develop a professional structure for basic skills teaching which includes clear pathways for professional development, with qualifications that map onto a national qualifications framework.
  - Marketing programmes to attract new recruits to basic skills teaching, to target existing or retired teachers, and to clarify basic skills career structures and opportunities.
  - Bursaries to cover the cost of initial training or continuing professional development.
  - Subsidies to providers to compensate them when basic skills teachers take time out to train.
  - Mentoring and placement programmes for new basic skills teachers to help them through the early stages of their training.

- Attempts to stabilise funding for basic skills teacher training so that the uncertainties of temporary funding are minimised.
10. However, the report's authors were commissioned, as noted above, to look at existing published material as the basis of their analysis. Clearly, some of this would necessarily be a little dated and some was not specific to Wales. In order to deliver a 'reality check' on this initial analysis and to gain more detail, a second phase of research was commissioned which examines the position on the ground and at the present time.
11. The overall aim of this second phase of research was to:
- 'Gather responses from basic skills providers, practitioners and learners relating to the research undertaken into addressing capacity issues in basic skills provision'.*
12. Contributing to this aim, objectives for the study were set out as:
- Identify key areas of good practice identified by the Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) report, in discussion with policy staff in DELLS.
  - Gather information on providers' and practitioners' views on the good practice examples.
  - Gather information on providers' and practitioners' views on the challenges involved in improving basic skills capacity in Wales.
  - Gather feedback on the key implications for policy and practice in Wales identified during the REA.
  - Gather information on learners' experiences of capacity issues and how they impact on learning progression.
  - Identify and discuss any recommendations receiving notable support or criticism from participants.
  - Gather insights on any logistical/operational issues involved in implementing any of the recommendations.
13. The research which is reported in the remainder of this report addresses the aim and objectives of the study. The research had two major practical elements:
- Discussions with 25 basic skills providers/practitioners. These were mainly undertaken face-to-face with the person or people most responsible for basic skills delivery in a range of Further Education, Work Based Learning, and voluntary sector providers spread across the four regions of Wales.
  - A survey of 200 learners, again spread across Wales, who had recently undertaken a basic skills course either alongside or as part of another course or as stand-alone basic skills education.
14. The results of this research are reported below in three further Chapters of the report:
- Chapter 2 reports findings from the in-depth interviews with providers.

- Chapter 3 reports findings from the learner survey.
- Chapter 4 draws conclusions from both strands of the research and makes recommendations for the future.



## 2. Provider perspectives

### Introduction

15. Interviews were held with respondents from twenty-five organisations across Wales. The organisations comprised Further Education Colleges, Work Based Learning providers, and voluntary sector organisations. They were selected from lists of such organisations in Wales supplied to the research contractor by DELLS. To guide the selection, a sampling frame was constructed which approximately reflected the distribution of such organisations by type (FE, WBL or voluntary organisation) within the four Welsh regions. Organisations were contacted in order to seek to ‘populate’ the sampling frame with appropriate cases. There were no absolute refusals to take part but some organisations were unable to take part within the time frame for the study. The organisations which were eventually interviewed were distributed as follows:

**Table 1: Distribution of interviewed providers**

	<b>SE Wales</b>	<b>SW Wales</b>	<b>Mid Wales</b>	<b>North Wales</b>	<b>Total</b>
FE College	5	4	1	4	<b>14</b>
WBL provider	4	3	1	0	<b>8</b>
Voluntary organisation	0	1	0	2	<b>3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>25</b>

16. Interviews were held on the respondent organisations’ premises. Respondents from FE Colleges were usually the Lifelong Learning Managers or Basic Skills Co-ordinators for the College, sometimes accompanied by their deputies. In WBL providers and voluntary organisations, the respondent usually had a more general title (such as ‘Training Centre Manager’ or ‘Director of Operations’) reflecting a role which extended well beyond the organisation of basic skills tuition.
17. Interviews were preceded by an e-mail to respondents which described the areas which were expected to be covered in the interview in order to allow them to give some prior thought to the ‘capacity’ issue. Interviews themselves were guided by a discussion guide (appended) which structured the discussions according to some main themes:
- What the organisation delivered in terms of basic skills learning.
  - Who they employed to manage and undertake their basic skills provision.
  - The extent to which they suffered from capacity problems or difficulties.
  - What effects such difficulties had on the organisation and learners.
  - What they saw as the reasons for difficulties.
  - What solutions they favoured as likely to improve the supply of basic skills teaching capacity in the medium and longer term.

18. The points made by respondents were noted down and, in cases where the respondent was agreeable, interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The analysis which follows is based on these notes and transcriptions. It will be noted that 'qualitative' research of this kind is not expected to and does not deliver statistically significant numerical estimates relating to the social phenomenon (in this case, the question of basic skills capacity) which it investigates. Rather, it ensures that it covers the relevant ground both in terms of respondents (hence, the spread of types and locations of respondents set out in Table 1) and in terms of areas of interest (hence, the discussion guide). In doing so, it is hoped that a fair description of the basic skills capacity issue, as perceived by providers, emerges and that this description will be helpful in developing future policy regarding this issue.

### **Basic skills provision by the sample of providers**

19. All providers were asked to describe their basic skills 'offer'. A first and basic observation is that there is very little in the responses to this questions which can be regarded as standardised across apparently similar institutions.
20. In *Further Education Colleges* a range of types of provision were observed:
- Some basic skills provision, a majority of the total, is provided for the 'captive audience' of 16-18 year olds and 19+ adult students who attend the College in order to pursue vocational or academic courses of some kind. Students are routinely assessed at an initial interview or on induction. Those with poor basic skills are given basic skills tuition – as stand alone 'learning support', in conjunction with Key Skills provision, or as teaching 'embedded' into the primary course(s) they are pursuing.
  - Some basic skills provision for adults is provide either on College premises (as, say, evening classes) or as 'outreach' at a community facility. This provision is advertised in local newspapers, on notice boards, with leaflets, and so on. It is variously described and presented and sometimes associated with other types of learning (typically in ICT skills) in order to sugar the pill and reduce the perceived stigma of needing to improve reading and writing skills.
  - Some basic skills provision is delivered as part of a package to local groups in the community, perhaps concerned with health matters or a special interest, and sometimes linked to Communities First activities.
  - Some basic skills provision is delivered as Family Learning where (mostly) mothers with young children are engaged in joint basic skills development, often with the incentive that the adult will be better able to read to his/her children and to help with their reading skills.
  - Some basic skills learning is combined with Key Skills learning and delivered under an 'essential skills' banner.
  - ESOL training, mainly for migrant workers is regarded, not surprisingly given the rising numbers of migrants, as an area of growth for those institutions which supply it.
  - Some provision comprises the training of employees in the workplace, typically as a consequence of the employer having signed up to the Employer Pledge (a commitment by employers to address basic skills needs in their workforces).

- Some provision results from 'downward' linkage into schools such that colleges supply basic skills learning support to school pupils where the College has an existing agreement to deliver vocational learning as part of integrated 14-19 activity.
21. However, the extent to which different Colleges adopt this menu of circumstances for the delivery of basic skills training is hugely varied – with variation both in the number of types of provision which are adopted and in the depth in which adopted types are pursued.
22. The result is that the overall scale of provision is also quite varied between Colleges in ways which are not explained just by the size of the College or of its catchment. The College with the most provision (of the ones interviewed) had sufficient activity to employ a team of over 70 people who were engaged in basic skills delivery, around 10 times the employment level of Colleges which were less active in the basic skills area. Factors which appeared to govern this variation were:
- The pro-activity or otherwise of the individuals responsible for the basic skills area in different institutions.
  - Particularly, their acuteness in understanding the availability of funding for different forms of basic skills provision and their willingness to seek expansion and growth when such funding is time bound and there is no certainty of its continuation.
  - The extent to which basic skills provision is valued with the institution both at management level and as an embedded activity in the normal run of FE College teaching and training. All institutions formally regard basic skills as a core issue but some respondents suggested that, in practice, basic skills provision was liable to constraint and cutbacks if College budgets were tight and/or if there were doubts as to the commercial viability of provision.
23. The question of capacity is discussed in more detail in later sections of this report, but at this point it is *not* suggested that variations in levels of activity between FE Colleges are primarily caused by differential availability of basic skills teachers in different College locations. Rather, it seemed that Colleges which took a very pro-active view of basic skills provision also took a pro-active view of teacher recruitment and development which tended to overcome whatever the local limitations in capacity happened to be.
24. *Work Based Learning* providers have, of course, a narrower role than Colleges. They are commercial organisations usually with expertise in a limited number of curriculum areas. As such, their repertoire of modes of basic skills provision is considerably narrower. As with FE Colleges, these providers assess their learners at an early stage. Those (sometimes a majority of learners) who have low level basic skills are then given teaching and learner support alongside other tuition and training in their main area of skills development. As with Colleges, some of this basic skills work is direct 'stand alone' teaching, whilst others is 'embedded' as part of the primary course. WBL providers tend to describe their basic skills provision as 'RoRo' (Roll-on, Roll-off) in the sense that it does not have a set intake but is continuously delivered with different learners at different stages throughout the year.
25. In two cases, WBL providers reported that they had no formal funding for basic skills teaching. In these cases, trainees who were managed or taught on other courses were assessed for literacy and numeracy on entry and at exit. In between, however, basic skills tuition was, in one case, delivered 'for free', partly as a social

responsibility by the organisation concerned and partly to enable individuals to get an NVQ with which they would otherwise struggle. In this case, basic skills provision was on a very small scale. In the second case, the organisation, whilst not delivering, nor being paid to deliver, any basic skills provision, did deliver the key skills modules in communications and application of numbers and reported that these generated significant before-and-after improvement in the basic skills exit assessment.

26. In the *voluntary sector*, similar diversity (even within a very small number of examples) was observed. At one extreme, the voluntary organisation interviewed delivers a significant volume of direct provision on formal contracts using its own team of full-time staff. At the other extreme, the organisation has no basic skills teaching staff itself but buys in a basic skills teacher from the local College in order to offer a limited amount of basic skills teaching as part of the 'return to learn' module in its portfolio of informal and formal learning opportunities.
27. In short, therefore, within and across the three types of provider which were interviewed in the course of the study, there was very great variation in the ways in which basic skills teaching was delivered and in the scale of delivery. In some Further Education institutions, a highly active basic skills/lifelong learning function well supported by institution managers could pursue funding and learners and develop a complex pattern of provision. In other FE institutions, a more minimalist view could be taken with a focus on meeting the basic skills and learning support needs of the College's core students but with lesser aspirations to develop new markets outside the College. Correspondingly, some WBL providers and voluntary organisations could actively pursue basic skills funding and direct delivery of significant numbers of basic skills outputs whilst others might only deliver basic skills teaching unfunded, as they saw it, and on a very small informal scale in order to assist trainees towards success in their 'mainstream' courses.
28. A further characteristic of basic skills provision, particularly when delivered in the community, is that it frequently needs to be tailored to specific learner groups and individuals. Several respondents made it clear that their learners were 'free to walk' - if learning experiences did not meet their needs and expectations they terminated their participation - and that basic skills cannot, in some situations, be successfully offered as a 'you must do this' form of learning. Rather, the approach, with a community group, is 'tell us what you want and we'll help you'. This necessarily introduces a further element of variation into the pattern of basic skills delivery.
29. The description of observed modes of provision might seem just that – descriptive. However, it may have a number of important messages:
  - The first is that noted earlier, that it seems unlikely that teaching capability or lack of it in a particular area is strongly explanatory of marked variation in the local scale of provision. The attitudes and aspirations of the provider seem to be much more significant.
  - The second is that the variation in the pattern and scales of provision between areas may be linked to the difficulties, which will be discussed later, in developing the basic skills area as a professional curriculum area. If local patterns and volumes of provision develop haphazardly, depending on local degrees of enthusiasm and activity in respect of funding streams and such that there is no direct relationship between the scale, types and volume of provision and local population needs, then the message is generated that basic skills provision is not a 'regulated' service to which local populations have roughly equal rights across Wales. Rather,

it remains the 'Cinderella' service which several respondents still assert it to be – and, therefore, one which is constrained in appeal as a professional career choice for teachers.

### Staff and qualifications

30. If variety and complexity are hallmarks of the pattern of basic skills provision, they are hallmarks, too, of the staffing arrangements which deliver that provision.
31. In the FE Colleges which were interviewed:
  - The number of staff reported as being involved in the direct delivery of basic skills learning varied between 2 and 75.
  - The average number of staff was 16 (but this is significantly raised by the 'outlier' College which reported having 75 staff).
32. In the WBL providers which were interviewed:
  - The number of staff involved in delivery varied between 1 and 6.
  - The average number was between 3 and 4.
33. In terms of contracts, the most typical picture in Further Education was that, in a unit of around 6-12 basic skills staff, one or two full time permanent co-ordinators would be supported by the remainder of a team who would be employed on a mix of fractional (but permanent) contracts and of part-time, insecure terms involving hourly inputs of between 2 and 12 hours.
34. In Work Based Learning, where contracted provision is delivered, it is more usual to have small teams of more-or-less full-time permanent staff organised by a full-time permanent co-ordinator.
35. The patterns of qualifications held by staff delivering basic skills training were also fairly mixed.
36. In Further Education, the typical picture was of one or two basic skills managers holding a Level 3 or Level 4 basic skills teaching qualification supported by a team which would mostly hold a general teaching qualification (PGCE for example) and a Level 2 basic skills teaching qualification (with the City and Guilds 9285 being most frequently mentioned, though other 'old' City and Guilds qualifications, 9281 and 9282, were also recorded). However, there was considerable variation. One College respondent suggested that many of her team were qualified to Masters Degree level in various aspects of learning difficulty. Others recorded that some of their staff had achieved or were working towards the new Level 3 qualification.
37. In WBL providers and the voluntary sector a similar mix was observed: typically, a well-qualified co-ordinator supported by a team of qualified teachers, most, but not all, having a Level 2 basic skill qualification in addition ('They've all got City and Guilds numbers' was as close as one respondent could get to clarifying the matter). However, whilst it is difficult to quantify the point exactly, it appeared that the average qualification level of basic skills teachers in WBL may be a little lower than the average in FE institutions.
38. Overall, therefore, the picture of basic skills delivery staff and of their qualifications is:
  - Widely varying numbers engaged by different organisations.

- Varied employment arrangements including staff on permanent full-time and fractional contracts supplemented by part-time hourly paid staff; with balances of use of these arrangements which varied between organisations.
  - A qualification profile which is dominated by ‘qualified teacher plus a Level 2 basic skills qualification’ status but which has a sprinkling of better qualified people (often working as team manager/co-ordinator) and some worse qualified (teacher-qualified but without any formal basic skills teaching qualification or, in the case of learning support assistants, without any qualifications beyond their own GCSE or A level qualifications).
39. However, whilst the qualifications profile of the workforce is important, particularly to the expectation that a more ‘professionalised’ basic skill workforce can be developed, several team managers pointed out that experience and personal qualities were often at least as good an indicator of teaching ability in this ‘person sensitive’ area as formal qualifications. And the research observed that operations which had some less qualified people had obtained and maintained the Basic Skills Agency Quality Mark.

**Is there a shortfall in basic skills teaching capacity?**

40. When respondents had described what they delivered in terms of basic skills teaching and who delivered it, they were asked whether they perceived any shortfall in basic skills teaching capacity in their organisation or local area.
41. Responses to this question fell into a number of groups:

**Table 2: Some ‘capacity models’**

Model	Explanation
<p><b>Group 1</b> No shortfall – limited demand (5 cases)</p>	<p>In these cases, the organisation reported either that their role in basic skills training was quite limited and/or that learner numbers or referrals were stable or declining. One provider, for example, described its basic skills staff as ‘not stretched’.</p> <p><i>Illustrative quote</i> ‘I wouldn’t say that that’s been a problem to us, we can fulfil our need as it stands at the moment. If this suddenly turned around and reverted to the hefty number of referrals that we’ve enjoyed in the past and there’s no logic as to why that shouldn’t be happening, but it isn’t, but if they suddenly turned it around we would find it quite challenging to meet that need now, because once you relinquish that service it’s very difficult to put it back into place.’</p>
<p><b>Group 2</b> No shortfall – stable staff (and flexible back-up) (2 cases)</p>	<p>These organisations reported that they had little difficulty with capacity because their core basic skills team was stable and that they had sufficient back-up in terms of staff on flexible zero-hour contracts to cope with contingencies.</p> <p><i>Illustrative quote</i> ‘We’re very fortunate in that we’ve got highly qualified, very experienced staff that has been a team that have been working together for a long time. If we needed to recruit others then it would be difficult but we’re in a situation at the moment that we haven’t had the need to recruit, so it hasn’t been a problem. But I’m aware that there aren’t the people out there. People who send their CVs and say is there any work going, and they</p>

<p><b>Group 3</b> No shortfall – limited ambitions or limited funding (6 cases)</p>	<p>haven't got the minimum Level 2 qualification.'</p> <p>These organisations cut their coat to their cloth. Essentially, they limited their delivery aspirations to the funding and teaching capacity which was immediately available to them. This might include not bidding for funds when they knew that success would stretch them. It included internal constraints by senior management on basic skills teams' expansion. It included organisational willingness to grow basic skills work organically – if a teacher became available they might seek to offer additional services but not otherwise. It included the view that basic skills provision could be expanded significantly but central funding would not be forthcoming to fund the expansion.</p> <p><i>Illustrative quote</i></p> <p>'I like to be proactive and I wrote a policy which has been taken on board very positively by the ground troops within the college, despite their lack of understanding of Basic Skills. The problem I have in requesting more staff is the lack of understanding by Senior Management of what Basic Skills is, the specialist qualifications required to teach Basic Skills, the selection process and induction process of any staff that are taken on within the college and the fact that as far as Senior Management are concerned, we're, dare I say, a waste of time. That is my stumbling block.'</p>
<p><b>Group 4</b> No shortfall – internal development capacity is strong (4 cases)</p>	<p>These organisations said that, because they had strong internal basic skills teacher training capacity, they could develop staff as and when they needed. For example, experienced learning support assistants could be developed and qualified. Tutors in other departments who expressed interest and capability could be converted into basic skills teachers. Volunteers could be eased inwards into paid, skilled and qualified roles.</p> <p><i>Illustrative quotes</i></p> <p>'You don't get people applying with the full qualifications. What we very often find is that the ones who apply to us are probably part qualified and the majority of the people who come into the team are already working in some shape or form for the College. Occasionally, we recruit somebody from outside but generally it's somebody internal. And as for their qualifications, we teach the qualifications, all of them, Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4.'</p> <p>'I think though it really depends how you use your volunteers and how you nurture them really, and I think that's what we've done more of this year. In the classes there are volunteers as well to assist the tutors, and often they will then develop their skills and then move on to become tutors. We then do the 9297 and the PGCE which helps our staff to move up the ladder.'</p> <p>'Its rare that we get people that have got PGCE, unless they've come from another institution and were in teaching in schools. We tend not to do that, and sometimes we have people who are doing another function, teaching a technical subject or something, and we will start them off with Key Skills and Basic Skills. We will start them off teaching that and see if it works. People just do it and, well, if they manage it well, their formal training kicks in.'</p>

<p><b>Group 5</b> Yes, shortfall – staff replacement crises (3 cases)</p>	<p>These organisations reported capacity problems mainly in terms of specific instances, the problems which occurred when an individual (usually full-time) member of staff fell ill for a long period or moved on. The result was a period of organisational discomfort until a solution was eventually found. In essence, these organisations were ‘Group 2’ organisations (above) but in which stability failed and flexible back-up was not in place.</p> <p><i>Illustrative quotes</i></p> <p>‘I haven’t really come up against any major difficulties, except that last year, last September, because I lost this one member of staff it took me a full half term before I could appoint anyone. The people that were available, by the time you got them processed, our advertising and go through the interview process and finding people who could actually fit the hours, because again you’re not offering a full-time contract, you’re offering a partial timetable, which people have to fit around other work. And so inevitably some people turn around and say well actually I can’t do those hours, so you’re forever juggling, and it took a full half term before I could find somebody who could fit into the timetable slots that we were offering.’</p> <p>‘It’s a major issue with lack of qualified staff, because we had an incident this year where ..... was off for 6 months, and I had terrible trouble getting somebody to replace her. I couldn’t get anyone, I advertised, I used all my contacts, I went to the colleges. In the end I managed to get 3 part-time tutors who could come in and do a couple of hours here and there. So I had somebody from the Workers Educational Association, which was part of the network, I had some contacts from that. I had somebody through ..... College, again I had to pay for. And then I had somebody from Learndirect who came in.’</p>
<p><b>Group 6</b> Yes, shortfall – coping with specialisms and fluctuations in demand (3 cases)</p>	<p>These organisations have no general shortfall in delivering ‘core’ provision. However, they can run into difficulties in two ways. Firstly, they may struggle to deliver particular types of provision (Polish language within an ESOL programme was, for example, mentioned by a number of respondents or Family Learning of Employer Pledge provision may cause difficulties). The basic issue is not that ‘capacity’ is not adequate in total but that particular types of provision may demand particular teaching skills or personal qualities which are not in sufficient supply within that total capacity.</p> <p><i>Illustrative quotes</i></p> <p>‘The problems for me are that we have an annual programme whereby we identify slots at community centres where classes always run. We have 4 Community Co-ordinators dedicated to different Communities First areas in the locality, and they sort of do a lot of work with existing community groups. So throughout the year we have to plan our full annual programme a year in advance and get it approved in terms of how many are involved, and how many learners we are going to have, and to be able to do the planning effectively. Now throughout the year then, and obviously we need to fill people’s timetables at that point to account for their jobs. So then when people come up later with a need for a short course on Financial Literacy or they want an 8 week course on Confidence Building through speaking and listening, it’s very difficult to staff those, because you can’t have people just floating.’</p> <p>‘Demand is increasing more and more because of the Employer Pledge, so companies are contacting us needing support and you don’t know how, necessarily how robust this class is going to be, or until you offer the class you don’t know how many learners you’re going to get.’</p>
<p><b>Group 7</b></p>	<p>These organisations argued that there is a widespread shortage of basic</p>



<p>Yes, shortfall – generic and widespread skills shortage (2 cases)</p>	<p>skills teaching skills extending not only across Wales but across England too.</p> <p><i>Illustrative quote</i></p> <p>‘Of course we have capacity shortage problems, everybody has, there’s not enough young new up and coming blood coming into Basic Skills. Most of the staff would be 40 plus. And in one area particularly, we’ve had to make a very rapid response to EU in-migration. We have thousands of Poles here. We’ve gone from offering about 4 classes in 2001 to offering 60 plus in 2007. We have had to really look hard to secure ESOL staff, a real problem. We’ve just about done it and in fact they’re a very strong team, but it’s been difficult. People just don’t have the skills and the qualifications and what is it that we can advertise that would attract people in?’</p>
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42. This analysis suggests, therefore, that there are quite varied provider positions vis-à-vis basic skills capacity. Some organisations do not have capacity problems because of lack of demand for basic skills learning. Some organisations recognise capacity shortfalls but have various strategies for avoiding the worst effects of this circumstance. Coping strategies include:

- Minimisation of demand – not pursuing all the basic skills teaching avenues which they might if more capacity (and more funding) were available to them.
- Having effective internal recruitment and development resources.
- Reliance on a stable team of staff, ideally with a flexible back-up resource of staff on zero-hours contracts as necessary.
- Patching together some form of back-up when a significant team member leaves or becomes unavailable.

43. A further sub-set of providers, however, revealed a variety of ways and detailed instances in which capacity shortfalls clearly impacted negatively on the volume and effectiveness of their delivery and, in some cases, still do.

44. The picture is, therefore, not one in which lack of capacity presents itself as a dramatic and universal limit to the national strategy for adult basic skills improvements – rather it is one which generates a background of restricted ambition, improvisation, and ‘make do and mend’ against which much of the delivery process takes place.

### The reasons for capacity limitations

45. Respondents were probed in more detail as to what they saw as being the *underlying drivers* of this situation. Their responses are summarised below.

46. Firstly, of course, any discussion of skills shortage must look at the question of pay levels in relation to the work required. A number of respondents reported that, though hourly rates sometimes looked attractive, the requirement for additional meetings, preparation time, and marking and holiday pay which was built into the rate was sometimes not made sufficiently explicit to teachers recruited at that rate, or at least they tended later to forget that their rate built in those assumptions. Other respondents believed that pay rates were too low absolutely. Some respondents in commercial WBL providers reported that their hourly rates were kept as low as

possible in order to maximise the margin on basic skills funding. Some respondents believed that pay was too low in relation to the increasing expectation that staff should have Level 3 or Level 4 qualifications. Others linked low pay with poor progression opportunities. Some comments were:

*'The salary is really poor and tutors have very strong feelings about it. They don't get paid for meetings, and they notice, so basically there's a lot of feeling of wanting to do more but on the other hand probably feeling that people are really working for next to nothing. And that's not because of the pay the college gives but its overall, across the system.'*

*'Basic Skills teachers, tutors do an amazing amount of paperwork in their spare time, and nobody, hardly anyone gives them credit for that I think. Because I don't think unless you actually are in the house of a Basic Skills tutor you don't really realise just how much is being done and that makes the hourly rate much less than it looks.'*

*'Well the other teachers in other subjects that we were paying on an hourly rate were £20.00 odd an hour and then the Basic Skills was £13.00.'*

*'Numeracy is difficult as you would expect. Getting people to come and teach numeracy. You have to have Level 4 in numeracy and you're getting paid £18.00 an hour and you get more money working in industry so you'll go and work somewhere else.'*

*'The rate is not good for the amount of work that's required, no definitely not. It's very undervalued and when you look at wages generally its poor. You know I've children in their 20s who are doing manual labour for twice my wage. I have a son that will not get out of bed on a Monday morning if he isn't going to have £500 in his hand at the end of the week on a Friday night.'*

*'The biggest bugbear is that there is no professional development. Its still linked to the old system whereby if you're teaching entry level students, you get paid at entry level rates. So you can come into a college like this and you teach Key Skills which is Level 1 and actually get more money than for teaching Basic Skills. And if you're teaching A level or you're teaching any other qualification, you get more again. On basic skills you have to start at a part-time temporary contract. If you're the main bread earner, to get paid £14.95 an hour for less than 30 hours a week isn't realistic. You couldn't survive, so people are not coming into it. This is why you see a large proportion of middle aged women. For a large proportion it's their second income. It's flexible, its adaptable, they can fit around their families and so on and so forth. But you're not going to get very many men for that reason, because they're going to be the main bread earner and you don't get very many young people, because there's no career development, no career path.'*

47. Because pay was believed to be a barrier, it was widely recognised that a basic skills teacher, often dealing with reluctant learners or those who find learning difficult, requires a special type of person who often has a strong commitment to the social and community value of basic skills teaching and learning. This compensates for low pay in terms of job satisfaction, but restricts the labour market for basic skills teachers in that those who lack this commitment either don't enter the profession or leave fairly quickly:

*'And I think this about our Basic Skills staff that you've got to believe in what you're doing and the people that we're working with. It is about having that empathy with the client group. I think that they get a lot of satisfaction of seeing someone who has never achieved anything in their life and they've helped them to achieve something. So it is about job satisfaction as well.'*

*'I think it's not seen as part of teaching salary-wise. I think they are very specialist and you've got to be a very certain type of person to do it, especially to deal with the youngsters with all these difficulties and the barriers they've got, it's not just a case of turning up and speaking. You're dealing with a lot of social problems and issues as well with these people.'*

*'It's more than just the Basic Skills. It's having that ability to accommodate these people who have only ever experienced failure or rejection, and it's about dealing with all that mindset and being able to establish that rapport with them. Some teachers are very good at teaching if they've got an interested class but when you've got behavioural issues or social issues on the scale that we sometimes have, you need special people.'*

48. Because of this requirement, there was a wide resentment of the perceived belief that a basic skills teaching job is an option which doesn't require much specific skill:

*'It's also still the perception, no matter how much raising awareness that goes on, it's still the perception, particularly with literacy, not so much with numeracy, that if you can speak English you can teach it. But it's been recognised now by research that teaching Basic Skills is a highly skilled job and it is not about just passing on the things that you can do. But there's still this perception that if you speak English you can teach Basic Skills, so anybody can be put in a class to do it.'*

*'I've been quite shocked recently because some people have come to see me, maybe their art class isn't doing very well on numbers and they may think that Basic Skills is an easy option and they come to me and say have you got any Basic Skills classes going.'*

49. Somewhat undermining this view, however, were some perceptions that current requirements to upskill the basic skills teaching workforce are too stringent:

*'Why do you need a level 4 in teacher training when in Wales the national basic skills standard is to Level 1, the benchmark? But we teach to Level 2 so you should be 1 level above that at which you teach?'*

*'This is my big bugbear. We had a standard meeting last week with the other Basic Skills tutors and we were discussing the new qualifications that they're bringing in, and saying everybody's got to be trained to at least Level 3, Level 4. Our own opinions of this is that we are going to lose some very, very valuable Basic Skills teachers, because some of the people who actually teach Basic Skills now, the reason that they're very good at what they do is because they're not necessarily very academic themselves, and by making everything so academic, up to an A level or degree level or whatever they're doing and looking in such depth, it's putting them off.'*

*'In general Level 4 does not equip you for the actual on-the-ground teaching. And they would all say that downstairs, even though they're experienced tutors, they'd all say exactly the same, that if they just did the*

*Level 4 it wouldn't help them at all. Which is one of the reasons why I like Level 3.'*

*'I have a couple of staff who have been delivering training for 25 years. It scared one of them to death because she doesn't have a degree. I think that someone who has been around a long time has got a lot of good practical experience. When they're then talking about well, this Level 4, you've got to have this. That can be quite off putting as well, I think.'*

*'Another issue at the moment is having qualifications which are fit for purpose. I think the City & Guilds Level 2 is good, but the Level 3 I'm delivering at the moment, I'm having all sorts of issues with it to be honest. There was this City & Guilds Level 3 support qualification, 9483, which was so hard you would need a Degree in English language to be able to do it effectively, or certainly years and years of ESOL experience. So the one that we chose to do was the City & Guilds 9375 but I think it's also unrealistic and a bit unmanageable and much harder than Level 3 should be.'*

50. Some of the resistance to the push towards a better qualified workforce was in the context of recognition that career progression was frequently difficult and that the incentive to move to a higher qualification level was frequently not matched to an opportunity to earn more money, to move into full-time work, or to gain seniority.

*'There's no structured path for anybody in basic skills teaching whatever the qualification. You're taken on as a tutor or lecturer and then you get the chance, if you call it a chance, to be a course co-ordinator, and then you maybe have a Programme Area Co-ordination role and there's very few promotion opportunities after that.'*

51. The combination of perceived low pay and lack of progression opportunity was perceived as tending to leave the workforce dominated by women, often of older years, content to work on part-time terms:

*'And I think one of the difficulties which I have noticed in the team is that they are mature women. There aren't youngsters moving into the team, it's not their preferred professional route.'*

*'Unless they want only a small amount of work which may fit with some people, because they may be doing another job. Like we've got people working in the Probation Office and then in the evenings they will take a couple of classes on, and that seems to work for them. But that doesn't make it their main occupation.'*

52. A further specific aspect of this concerns rural providers. Views were mixed. One provider saw that a rural location meant that they had a captive workforce often resident in the location because of preference for a rural lifestyle – and happy to trade this off against low pay and limited opportunity. On the other hand, another rural provider saw themselves as losers against urban opportunities.

*'So if you're a tutor, where are you likely to go, the dynamic exciting, metropolitan centre, relatively speaking, or the tiny little agricultural place stuck in the middle of nowhere? You know, with the best will in the world, it's not an attractive proposition to everybody, so that has to be considered.'*

53. Some limitations in capacity were related to the unavailability of training courses, typically to take teachers towards the new Level 3 requirement. This was somewhat more of a problem for WBL providers than for FE Colleges, the latter frequently having internal capacity to train their own staff to the requirement standard. In one instance, a WBL provider in close proximity to an FE College reported difficulty accessing Level 3 training whilst the College itself reported no difficulty.

54. There were issues, however, not just with the availability of training but with its cost in various ways:

*'I suggest that this isn't a new issue. They've floated these new awards quite some time ago, and I think it's very telling that we're still having issues about whether people are doing it or not, and is there sufficiency of people doing it. I think the fact that it's taken this long to even say whether it's happening or not tells me that it isn't working. Because if we've got to do it to exist as a centre, the reality of it is that it's very expensive, very time consuming. As we've shrunk or reorganised and we've got smaller we've got less capacity to cover.'*

*'Payment for training is an issue as well. There is still a prevalent attitude in many colleges that they will not pay hourly paid staff to turn up for staff training. It is a disgrace, and that's not just this College it's many colleges across Wales. Their attitude can sometimes be, you're lucky to be given training, you should turn up and be grateful.'*

*'The problem as well though is releasing people to be able to go on these courses, because you've got to get your day-to-day running of courses right. You've got to release all your trainers at once, because they don't stagger it. That's a real problem for us.'*

55. If training costs are sometimes seen as burdensome, then the bureaucracy associated with delivering basic skills is also seen as a constraint on teaching time:

*'The paperwork is phenomenal, because we have to fill in for each learner. On an 8 week programme we have to complete 4 ESF forms, an enrolment form, an exam entry, an OCN registration form, the recommendation for Award or Credit form, so you're talking about 8 forms per learner.'*

*'Well we cannot provide any numeracy currently, that's one. We cannot cover the demand in the workplace. We have no community provision because we haven't got the ability to provide it physically. I would suggest that the quality of teaching and learning in Basic Skills throughout the curriculum area, suffers as a consequence of the amount of time that we're able to spend on preparation and resources and use of time, because in addition to actually providing the teaching, we've got the paperwork to deal with.'*

*'If you're not a dedicated tutor you won't last 2 minutes. Because they have to link everything to the curriculum, they have to do individual learning plans, there's individual learning the class it's not a discussion. Everybody is working at their own pace, it is completely tailored to the individual. The amount of paperwork is phenomenal.'*

56. Inevitably, any publicly-funded activity has funding constraints. In the basic skills field this manifested itself in a number of different ways. It was noted above that some FE institutions recognised the limits of funding and set their level of activity within those bounds. There were, however, concerns that basic skills funding was

not 'ring-fenced' in Colleges and could be and was diverted to other purposes. There was concern that there was no available money to convert fractional contracts into full-time or permanent ones:

*'Most staff are on what we call F4 contracts. We haven't got any growth in funding to provide them with secure contracts and this is where a lot of the problems lie. We've got tutors that are willing to give up full-time jobs to become Basic Skills Tutors. In their own time they've done the training but the colleges haven't got the money to give them the opportunity to come on board or full-time. It's a catch 22 really. With all the marketing and the development, everybody is working towards the same thing of getting as many learners into Basic Skills training as possible. There are enough learners out there to accommodate full-time or part-time tutors. It's just the fact that the college hasn't got the money to employ the tutors.'*

57. Insecure funding was also an issue:

*'Funding is always the issue. We're always just going from one ESF bid to the next. We've been lucky in having 8 years of one bid. We'll be coming up to the end of it next year. We don't know what happens after that. There's the whole issue of convergence funding of course, but none of us really know what that entails, and I think it leaves everybody wondering is it just going to be short-term provision, are colleges going to be expected to provide it in the future, or is it going to go elsewhere. Nobody's really in a position to say we'll recruit all these full-time, permanent members of staff and we'll commit ourselves to this kind of provision. It does feel very short-term.'*

58. As was the complexity associated with ad hoc funding opportunities:

*'We do have some grants available to us for various initiatives and training sometimes, but they're so complicated. I haven't got the time to sit down and go through pages and pages and wait for Finance to come and tell me what we can do and wait. You know, it's got to be a very simple and straightforward process.'*

59. At least one respondent believed that output-driven funding did not appropriately recognise the value in learner development:

*'Funding tends to be output related, rather than, paying for the assessment and progress along the way. It doesn't recognise what people really need and want when they sign up for a basic skills course.'*

60. And there was concern that, whilst abundant funding was available for learning materials, there was constraint on developing the staff to apply those materials:

*'The literature we've got is phenomenal. All these resources, you can phone up and you can have up to 10 of this file, that file, the other file, but why aren't they training anybody to damn well deliver the stuff?'*

61. It was also recognised that forecasting difficulties presented a problem when seeking to develop a local basic skills delivery plan:

*'I mean nobody can ever really forecast accurately can they? We could be planning tomorrow and might say there's 50 people that need Basic Skills training, we don't know that, it's just guesswork.'*

62. Finally, it is evident, as recognised earlier, that basic skills delivery is inherently complex – many parties involved in delivery, many different target groups, varied funding streams, many different types and levels of courses and qualifications both for basic skills learners and for their teachers – and that the basic skills environment has evolved rapidly in recent years. It might be expected that this complexity would cause some confusion in the basic skills workforce and several interviews suggested that it had. It is difficult to establish a direct connection but it seems at least possible that complexity and change, and the ability to deal with these, are in themselves one explanation of why capacity issues are, as above, differential between different institutions which are ostensibly in the same position, are explained differently, and manifest themselves in different ways:

*'We wanted to deliver Level 3 this year and we couldn't. City & Guilds were ready to. For some reason it wasn't launched on the 4<sup>th</sup> July, it wasn't launched until October, and then very few people have been able to deliver that this year. The ones that have, had had ESF or other funding in order to be able to do it, so that hasn't happened for us. The same with the Level 4 literacy. We're quite happy to run it here, the Level 4, because there isn't a numeracy one in Wales but there wasn't enough uptake because people felt that they were waiting to do the Level 3. They thought well if the Level 3's available, for the majority of them that was more appropriate than jumping straight into Level 4. And of course organisations were looking at the pots of money that they got for professional development, saying well we're not giving you the Level 4, we want you to do the Level 3 because that's going to be of more benefit, and then it didn't happen.'*

*'Other colleges buy into Basic Skills big style and they make enormous amounts of money out of it as a business enterprise. There needs to be a realisation from the Welsh Assembly Government and the Basic Skills Agency about the monster that they've created and how it's administered within colleges like ours. I mean I can think of 2 or 3 colleges, there's 1 person running them and they just run around like headless chickens. What the Basic Skills Agency have done with the Welsh Assembly Government is excellent. They've identified a huge need. They've got the Leitch Report, they've got all sorts of initiatives and incentives as a result of that. And what they are trying to do is first class, is excellent, and I can understand that all of their initiatives or whatever need to be evaluated and monitored, but we can't teach and do all of that. They have created a monster and in my situation it's an unwieldy monster. Bigger colleges may be able to cope. I don't know and I'm certainly not management here, so I don't know that either. I don't know except the LLDD and a little bit about how DELLS fund courses.'*

*'The other issue is they're not clear on what is going into this training themselves, from what we can gather. We can get no information on it as to what exactly they want you to do. There's also rumours that that's going to change anyway. There's no clear guidelines for somebody who's got their teaching certificates, their PGCE etc., if they can APT anything across from it or whether they will have to do it from scratch. And there's also nothing as to what levels do they want people to do. Plus with the changes that they're going to bring in, with all the qualifications that they're bringing in, we don't know where we're going to fit in with regards to what training we would need to or what we will eventually be delivering.'*

*The Level 2 was changed. It was 9295, it's now the 9275 but they've altered that slightly and I think possibly to the better, because there was a written test, which they've taken out and it's now assessments. The 9375 is aimed at basic skills teachers, the 9483/4 is aimed at vocational lecturers.*

*I've been involved in the teacher training workshops so we've looked at these. The level of grammar for the literacy side and the level of maths that the vocational lecturers are expected to work at is really, really high. A lot of effort needed I think and because they've got to do it in their own time we're not going to get that commitment. Now they've withdrawn it for some reason or other. I think it was up and running in England. We weren't funded for it, then the funding came in and now we've heard that England have withdrawn it, and as far as we know there's nothing in its place.'*

63. In summary, therefore, providers ascribe their capacity limitations to a range of interlinked factors, most of which were foreshadowed by the Rapid Evidence Assessment which formed Phase 1 of this research into basic skills capacity:

- Low, uncompetitive pay, particularly when the non-teaching add-ons contained in hourly rates are accounted for.
- The requirement in many basic skills roles for a level of commitment to, and interest in, the basic skills function which is out of the ordinary.
- A mistaken belief that basic skills teaching is not a role which requires a significant professional expertise and, therefore, some perceptions both within and outside learning institutions that 'basic skills' is a low-status area of work.
- Somewhat contrary perceptions that the current attempt to professionalise the workforce by requiring more staff to have higher level qualifications (particularly Level 4) may drive out experienced and competent staff.
- Recognition that career progression opportunities in basic skills, often delivered by smallish teams of staff, are extremely limited. This, together with the pay constraint, leads to team membership being dominated by older people, often women, using part-time basic skills teaching hours as supplementary income only.
- Limits to the availability of Level 3 courses, perhaps more for WBL providers than for Colleges, with availability limits compounded with cost and time-away-from-the-job barriers.
- Bureaucracy as a constraint on the time available for actual teaching.
- Funding constraints of various kinds – absolute availability, insecurity, complexity, focus on output-driven funding, over-emphasis on materials at the expense of staffing.
- Difficulty in planning the level of capacity needed given that several areas of demand for basic skills learning (in the community or by employers) can't be easily predicted.
- Complexity of and change in basic skills mechanisms which results in some institutions and areas generating much more capacity/delivery than others – depending on managerial determination and co-ordinator acuteness as to how far the basic skills agenda can and should be pursued.

### **The impacts of capacity limitation**

64. Basic skills providers sought, of course, to minimise the impacts of limitations on capacity. There was a general view that whatever capacity limitations there were,



students did not, in the main, suffer from poor quality teaching. However, several impacts were variously recognised, including:

- Impacts on the *total volume* of learners who could be taught. Some institutions regretted their inability to train other than 'statemented' students. Others recognised that more students were assessed as having weaknesses in basic skills than they could deal with.
  - Impacts on *staff* with co-ordinators and supervisors describing themselves as 'fire fighting' and requiring themselves and others to put in long hours to cover for unforeseen staff absences.
  - Instances were identified where tutors with the 'wrong' blend of skills or personality were required to do work in areas where they were not wholly comfortable (for example, requiring a tutor who was effective in a College environment to go out into a community facility or employer's premises where they were less effective).
  - Delivery of basic skills tuition in larger groups than the respondent thought was ideal.
  - Reduced throughput or delays in delivering the basic skills element of a WBL training course when staffing levels were below the required levels.
  - Occasional cancelled classes (but this also occurred not because of lack of teaching capacity but because sufficient numbers of learners couldn't be recruited to make the class financially viable – the reverse of a 'capacity' problem).
65. There were only one or two instances where respondents had a sense that their achievement rates might have suffered because of staffing difficulties; and this view was partially associated with a suggestion that funding rules were driving them to seek to push students of quite limited ability towards higher qualifications than they were capable of in the timescale available.
66. Overall, there was a sense that notwithstanding instances, as above, of impacts from capacity problems, most organisations had experienced managers who managed their way round difficulties and avoided *major* failures with widespread impacts on basic skills learners. If there were 'widespread impacts' they were on the numbers of individuals who may have needed learning support but could not be offered it within the limits of funding; rather than that learners who were drawn into basic skills learning received a poor quality of provision (other than as occasional incidents).

### Improving the capacity position

67. As discussions with providers moved towards a conclusion, respondents were asked what they saw as good practice in improving the capacity position and to identify future developments which they thought would have that effect. Many of their ideas are built into the analysis of provider perceptions of the reasons for capacity shortfalls which were reported earlier in this chapter. Necessarily, if they saw an aspect of the basic skills environment which they regarded as inefficient or ineffective, the 'solution' was to remove or solve the problem. It may also be noted that, as we have observed above, at least some respondents confessed that basic skills provision in its entirety is so complex that they did not clearly understand what was happening. In suggesting 'solutions' they may, in fact, be proposing developments which may already be on track. Recognising these points, however, provider views of what

brings benefit to the capacity position, or would bring benefits if instituted, are outlined below:

#### *Internal development resources*

68. It was clear from interviews that some of the organisations which had the fewest capacity difficulties were those, primarily FE Colleges, which had strong internal development resources. In these cases, they were able to identify individuals, perhaps volunteers, or learning support assistants, or tutors in other subjects who wanted to make a career move into basic skills, who could be assisted towards the status of a qualified basic skills tutor.
69. One FE College respondent also reported that good internal support and development could also help to increase the flexibility of basic skills tutors able to operate comfortably in a variety of settings – to become ‘multi-skilled, multi-environment, multi-experienced and multi-confident’ individuals who could be used to deliver basic skills teaching wherever demand arose.

#### *General teacher training*

70. Some respondents saw the long-term solution to the capacity problem as introducing basic skills teaching modules as an integral part of basic teacher certification:

*‘I would like to see basic skills awareness as part of all PGCEs. Everybody has to do equality and diversity and disability awareness. Basic skills should be put at least on an equal footing so that all teachers who come into FE had a foundation in recognising basic skills problems and at least the basis for moving into basic skills teaching itself.’*

#### *‘Embedding’ with vocational teachers*

71. Similarly, respondents saw improvements to capacity as lying in the development of more teachers of vocational subjects with the ability to identify and partially deal with learners’ basic skills difficulties themselves.
72. At least one College reported that they were trying to develop basic skills awareness training and pilot programmes to train vocational tutors in basic skills support; and were backed by management and tutors themselves – but that they were time-constrained in these efforts because of their mainstream commitments.

#### *Mentoring new basic skills teachers*

73. Mentoring new or newish basic skills teachers was widely discussed with providers as a route to increasing capacity by reducing the number of teachers who exit basic skills teaching at an early stage. All respondents support this idea. However, equally, all reported that mentoring, with a greater or lesser degree of formality depending on the size of the basic skills team, was already in place. Formal induction, joint teaching (experienced and inexperienced teachers together), and supervisory visits were widely reported. It does not appear, therefore, that there is much margin for gain in this area.

#### *A ‘supply pool’*

74. The question of developing a formal supply pool of basic skills teachers on a regional or sub-regional basis analogous to the ‘supply’ arrangements in secondary education was also discussed with providers.

75. Mostly, it did not find favour, the main counter-argument being that providers would not be happy with tutors who they did not know being put into situations (perhaps with a community group or an employer premises) where they couldn't predict the outcome or quality of the teaching. In effect, as reported earlier, many providers (particularly in Further Education) maintained their own 'supply pools' of staff on zero-hours contracts or who only undertook a small number of hours who could be pressed into service when shortfalls arose.

*Improving training supply*

76. Several respondents reported that the requirement or wish to improve their tutors' qualifications could be improved if:
- Level 3 training courses were more readily available to them. This was more likely to be reported by WBL providers than by FE providers.
  - Training courses were available on a more frequent basis (so that teachers at an institution did not have to go simultaneously to particular training days but could go sequentially).
  - Grants were available to cover the cost of the training itself or of replacement cover (though some institutions reported that such funding had been made readily available, either from internal College budgets for professional development or from external sources).
  - Information supply on what basic skills teacher training courses are available were improved. One WBL provider suggested that a central database of basic skills teaching courses, their dates, times and costs, would be of significant help to them.

*Management support and financial acuity*

77. It was evident in discussions with providers that effective basic skills delivery, with fewer capacity problems and more extensive engagement, was likely to flourish where the senior managements of organisations were strongly supportive of the basic skills function from an educational point of view or, at least, sought to develop basic skills funding as a significant income stream.
78. However, in six (of the total of 25) interviews, basic skills co-ordinators reported that their senior managers had little real interest in basic skills activity, occasionally failed to ring fence basic skills funding, or diverted part-time basic skills teachers into other vocational areas.
79. 'Funding' was much more of an issue for those institutions where there was less drive and, perhaps, less skill in recognising and accessing funding opportunities.
80. It is not easy to see where these observations lead in policy terms. It might be argued that one 'key' to improving basic skills capacity is purposeful basic skills-oriented senior managers supporting knowledgeable and pro-active basic skills co-ordinators. And, of course, this position would be desirable in all locations and institutions. However, the overall cost of basic skills support across Wales would rise as the levels of delivery of the less active institutions rose to those of the most active. The question might arise as to what other learning activities were *not* funded in order to permit this expansion.

### *unding issues*

81. The success of any public policy depends on funding levels. It is not surprising, therefore, that providers discussed funding availability as a constraint in various ways:

- Limiting pay levels and, therefore, recruitment and retention.
- In WBL providers, particularly, the requirement to make a significant margin on basic skills funding may depress pay levels.
- The absolute availability of funding as a constraint on activity levels.

82. However, beyond what are, perhaps, inevitable concerns about funding there is the particular issue of the continuity of funding. The concern can be seen in respondent descriptions such as:

*‘Where the employer has signed the Employer Pledge they will pay for the tutor to come in and deliver, so you’re free from the constraints of the accreditation funding, which is fab. The Basic Skills Agency will also give grants, but it’s all so bitty, and what kills me with those sorts of funding streams is that you’ll make brilliant progress and you’ll do excellent work and then they’ll say “right we’ll stop all that now and we’ve got a new fund that you’ll have to bid for”. They don’t seem to consolidate on good practice, which is really frustrating, because it’s “right cancel all that lot now and you can all start the process over again”.*

83. As noted earlier, there are also concerns:

- About the complexity of funding with some providers reporting that bidding and application processes are too complicated and time-consuming.
- About funding being too often directed to copious learning materials and less often to staff development and the learner.
- Too frequently directed at final outputs and too infrequently at ‘distance-travelled’ by the learner.

84. Some of these points may, perhaps, not be specifically directed at the capacity issue, or may well apply to many other areas of learner funding, but, in total, they serve to inhibit and complicate the environment in which basic skills teaching takes place and, thereby, inhibit the consistent development of a ‘basic skills profession’ underpinned by certainty of delivery, competitive salaries, and progression opportunities.

85. The simple message may be: allocate more funding to basic skills provision, and, if that is not possible, at least allocate it with more long-term security and less complexity. In this way, basic skills capacity may be built up on the basis of known future funding levels and with less bureaucratic drag.

### *Organisational complexity, partnership and information share*

86. Underlying provider concerns about the complexity of funding is, however, a broader feeling from some providers that the structures underpinning basic skills delivery are also not wholly coherent – a circumstance which undermines long-term planning and, implicitly, the development of a stable basic skills teaching workforce. A particularly stringent description of this issue was given by one FE provider:

*'There isn't really coherence. Things happen in a co-operative way despite central government rather than because of central government. On a local basis things happen despite what WAG is doing. In fact WAG makes it worse. I mean, on the ground, DELLS staff are fine. That's not the problem. On the ground they're great. It's WAG needing to say "OK here's your structure we're going to stick with it", the departments in WAG stop fighting each other and come up with an agreed and coherent policy, and it's not there. We need WAG to say on an area basis, that there will be a lead body for the delivery of ACL and Basic Skills. It could be a college, it could be a Local Authority. You will bring all the money together which is available for the delivery of ACL and Basic Skills. You incorporate Communities First money, incorporate Local Authority Money, incorporate a whole range of other sources of funds, ESF, lottery. And on an area basis you will identify where need is, and you will direct funds as to where they are needed and WAG tells all partners that they will co-operate in that arrangement. Have we had it? No!'*

87. Another College provider expressed something of the same sentiment:

*'Basic skills teaching has got to be a job that people want to aspire to. The rewards have to be there. There has to be more commitment from the top to the provision of the service. We're in an uncertain area now that Basic Skills and ESOL are put in with community education under ACL as to what the direction is that we might be taking. Of course, the emphasis now is on the joined up thinking and provision and so on. There's all kinds of talk out in the community about is it going to be one provision, are we going to be looking at more control of them, are they going to take over from us. Area X is doing it one way. College Y has done it another way. Area Z did it another way. There seems to be change in the air and that's quite disconcerting for planning.'*

88. Perhaps more encouragingly, another respondent reported that developing area partnership was leading to rather more cohesion:

*'Across the Area Learning Partnership all the organisations delivering Basic Skills come together. There's a Strategy Group, there's an Operational Group and across the partnership we are looking for opportunities to share practice. It has started in a small way but co-operation is taking place across different organisations, so that's excellent.'*

89. Overall, the message is that some providers at least believe that a coherent and stable basic skills policy base and good area planning is required to underpin any hopes of developing the more stable basic skills delivery environment on which long-term workforce planning can take place.

### **Summary: key provider perspectives on basic skills capacity development**

90. In summary, interviews with providers suggest a range of positions with respect to capacity - ranging from those in which the provider has no particular capacity difficulties because of lack of demand for basic skills learning or because they limit their activities only to core requirements to circumstances where a significant shortfall of basic skills teachers places considerable constraint on delivery.
91. In this context, the key circumstances and developments which providers variously report as being important to basic skills teaching capacity are:
- Strong internal capacity to nurture and develop quality basic skills tutors.

- Building basic skills awareness, assessment and/or teaching capability routinely into general teacher training.
- Having the resources and support to 'embed' basic skills awareness, assessment and/or teaching capability into more teachers of vocational subjects.
- Mentoring and supporting new basic skills teachers.
- Maintaining a *local* flexible pool of part-time or zero-hours basic skills tutors.
- Improving the supply of basic skills teacher training (particularly towards new Level 3 qualifications) – more courses, more flexible timing, financially-supported, more information on availability.
- Having institutional senior managers who are committed to basic skills development and team co-ordinators who are expert in accessing funding opportunities.
- Having a funding regime which, whatever its overall level, is less complex and more consistent than at present.
- Having a policy structure for basic skills teaching and learning which is stable and which ensures local cohesion.

### 3. Learner perceptions of basic skills courses

#### Introduction: the survey process

92. In addition to seeking providers' perceptions of capacity issues, a survey of 200 basic skills learners was undertaken. This survey sought to ascertain the extent to which learners who had undertaken basic skills courses were satisfied with them and had achieved benefits; and, more particularly, whether any of the effects which might be expected from a limited 'capacity' position in Wales were perceptible to learners.
93. The survey was undertaken by telephone in April and May 2006. The sample frame for the study comprised a list of those who had undertaken a basic skills course in Wales during 2006/07. This list was supplied to the contractor by DELLS and was drawn from the Welsh learner record system (LLWR).
94. Prior to the survey, the list was analysed in order to describe the learner population by its social and demographic characteristics. Non-interlocking quotas for the survey sample were then established which matched these characteristics. Interviewers sought to obtain interviews to 'fill' the established quotes, selecting individuals for interview randomly but in so far as they enabled a quota target to be met. Up to 10 attempts to interview a selected prospective respondent were made. The results are shown below:

**Table 3: Social and demographic structures of the population and survey sample; percentages**

	Population (the list supplied from the LLWR) %	Sample (actual interviewees) %
Male	53	52
Female	47	48
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
16-24 years	68	46
25-44 years	22	37
45+ years	10	17
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Mid Wales	6	8
North Wales	18	21
SE Wales	45	50
SW Wales	27	21
Not known	4	0
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Rural	26	27
Urban	78	73
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
FE	71	69
WBL	29	31
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

95. It can be seen that this process achieved reasonably accurate outcomes. The target discrepancy was in terms of the age structure of the sample. Because of a very high level of unavailability amongst younger basic skills learners the age structure of the sample is somewhat 'older' than that of the population. However, examination of

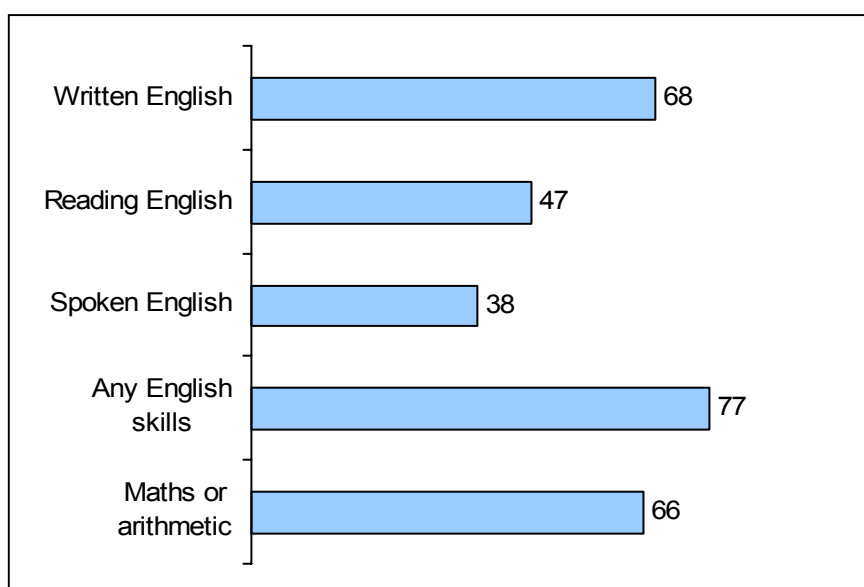
results of the survey in terms of the age group of respondents does not suggest that this affects the overall conclusions of the survey. Below, major data items are analysed by age group so that any significant age differences in responses can be seen.

96. The questionnaire (appended) used as the basis of interviews had a maximum of 25 questions and took around 10 minutes to administer. In summary, it covered:
- The basic skills course(s) undertaken.
  - Reasons for going on the course.
  - Difficulties in finding a course, delays in starting, and other positive and negative aspects of the learning experience.
  - Whether the student completed and, if not, reasons for not doing so.
  - Outcomes of the course and overall appreciation of its value.

### Courses undertaken

97. When students were asked what courses they had undertaken, it was evident that there was a wide overlap in function with many students reporting that their courses were intended to improve different aspects of literacy (including ESOL) and numeracy:

**Figure 1: What skills was the course or courses intended to help you with? percentages**

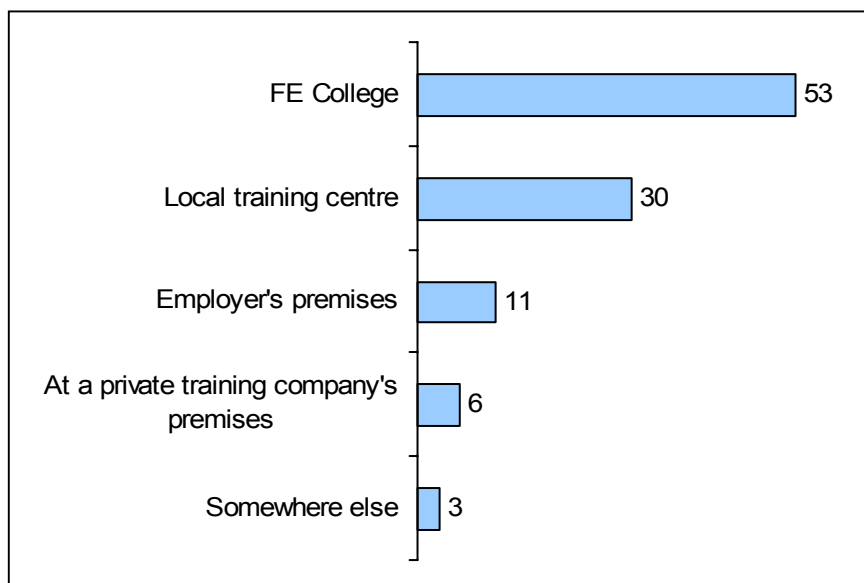


Base: All respondents  
Multi-response

98. Around half of learners had learned at a Further Education College (with the proportion, at 62%, being somewhat higher for 16-24 year olds):

**Figure 2: Location of basic skills learning; percentages**



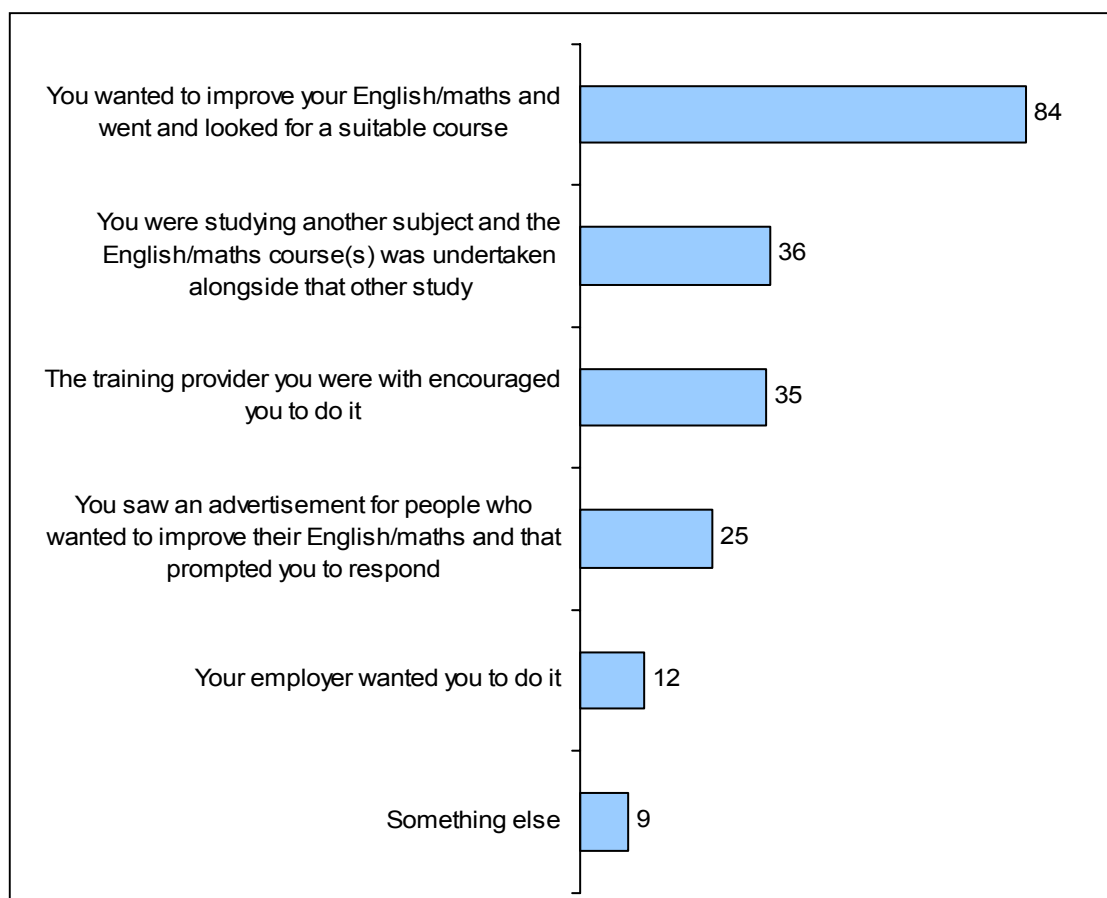


Base: All respondents  
Multi-response

### Reasons for going on the course

99. When respondents were asked why they went on the course, much the most frequent reason was that respondents wanted to improve their skills and sought out a course to do so. However, it appears that learners somewhat exaggerate the spontaneity of 'self-determination' implied in that response. The question was a 'multi-response' one and significant (overlapping) percentages of respondents also reported that they were encouraged by providers or employers or that the basic skills element was undertaken alongside another course of study:

**Figure 3: What prompted you to go on the course? percentages**



Base: All respondents  
Multi-response

100. Within this overall pattern:

- The 'employer encouraged' response was more significant for older (45+) learners (18% against an average of 12%).
- The 'employer encouraged' and 'training provider encouraged' responses were more frequent amongst WBL learners than FE learners (19% vs. 8% and 53% vs. 27% respectively).

### Difficulty in finding a course

101. When asked whether it was difficult to find a suitable course in the area, only 16% – around 1 in 6 – said it was quite or very difficult.

102. That provision was a little higher for:

- Learners aged 45 or over (22% said quite or very difficult).
- Those learners resident in North Wales (24% said quite or very difficult).
- Those learners who learned with a WBL provider (22% said quite or very difficult compared with 12% who learned at an FE College).

103. There was very little difference between the urban resident proportion (16%) and the rural resident proportion (14%) – and the difference was, perhaps, surprisingly, in favour of the rural situation.
104. The minority who *had* found it difficult to find a course were asked what the difficulty had been. Because the overall base for those with difficulties is small (only 27 cases) the instances of particular difficulty are few in number but they include:
- Lack of educational facilities (5 cases)
  - Transport difficulties/distance (6 cases)
  - Difficulties understanding English (2 cases)
  - Disability (2 cases)
  - Lack of information available (2 cases)
105. Other reasons given by individual respondents included: 'I would prefer one-to-one sessions and not in groups, and it was hard to find a course that does one-to-one sessions'; 'the hours involved, and being in work'; 'didn't have the suitable course at the time'; 'because of my age'; 'the course is very competitive, so getting a place is difficult'.

#### **Delay in starting the course**

106. Twenty-seven percent of learners reported that they had had to wait for their course to start. This proportion was higher for learners with WBL providers (37% waited) than for those with FE providers (22% waited). It was (perhaps surprisingly, given Estyn's view, noted earlier, that numeracy teachers, particularly, are in short supply) lower for those who undertook maths as part or the whole of their study (19% waited) than for those who didn't (30% waited).
107. And it was higher in urban areas (29% waited) than in rural areas (21% waited).
108. However, the delays were mostly not significant. Of those who waited...
- 32% waited only 1 or 2 weeks.
  - 30% waited 3 or 4 weeks.
  - Only 26% waited for more than 4 weeks.
  - 11% couldn't recall how long they had been delayed.
109. Overall, therefore, only 7% of the whole sample (including those who hadn't waited at all) had waited more than 4 weeks for their course to start.
110. When asked why the course had been delayed (where this had occurred), 38% of respondents didn't know. Of the remainder:
- 23% said that the course start date was fixed and they simply had to wait until this point.
  - 17% said the course at the point they wanted to start was full and they had to wait for the next one.
  - 9% had to finish an existing course before they started the one in question.

- 4% said they had to wait for paperwork or a registration process to be completed.

111. Perhaps, only the second of these reasons, affecting under 5% of all respondents, clearly suggests a capacity limitation in the overall pattern of basic skills provision.

### Class sizes and teacher continuity

112. A further indicator of capacity shortage may be that of class size. There is a widespread view that basic skills are most effectively taught in smallish groups. The data suggests that older learners and those taught via a Work Based Learner provider may be somewhat more likely to be in smaller groups:

**Table 4: Class sizes for literacy and numeracy classes; percentages of learners taught in classes of different sizes**

	1-5 people	6-10 people	11 or more people	Don't know	Total
<b>Literacy classes</b>					
16-24 years	16	36	47	30	100
25-44 years	14	53	30	4	100
45+ years	29	36	32	4	100
FE College	10	47	40	3	100
WBL provider	25	41	33	2	100
<b>All</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Numeracy classes</b>					
16-24 years	17	42	39	2	100
25-44 years	19	49	29	3	100
45+ years	33	40	20	7	100
FE College	15	48	35	2	100
WBL provider	22	42	33	2	100
<b>All</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>100</b>

Bases: 151 learners who took part in a literacy class;  
129 learners who took part in a numeracy class

113. Size of class did not much affect whether or not respondents felt they got sufficient personal attention in the classroom. Only 5% of respondents said they did not. This percentage varied only between 3% (where classes were somewhat smaller) and 6% in FE Colleges (where classes were somewhat larger).

114. However, there is a suggestion in the data that class size may be related to completion (ie. not leaving early) and outputs:

**Table 5: Relationship between class size and completion and between class size and achievement of qualification; percentages**

	Class size		
	1-5 people	6-10 people	11+ people
Completed literacy course	68	82	72

Completed numeracy course	83	81	80
Obtained qualification/certificate in literacy	87	71	70
Obtained qualification/certificate in numeracy	86	76	65

Bases: 151 learners who took part in a literacy class;  
129 learners who took part in a numeracy class

115. This data is not wholly consistent (the ‘completed literacy course’ data is not in line with the other indicators) but it may carry the suggestion that being in a larger class tends to relate with non-completion and non-certification.
116. Having one or more changes of teacher in mid-course may also reflect capacity pressures. Overall 19% of learners – 1 in 5 – reported a change of teacher. This percentage was higher in urban areas (22%) than in rural areas (11%). This perhaps reflects what was suggested by at least one rural provider in the provider discussions – that opportunities for basic skills teachers to move around are fewer in rural areas and that this promotes workforce stability.
117. Again, the data suggests that teacher changes may be related to course completion. 81% of learners in classes where the teaching stayed constant completed the course, whereas only 68% of learners in classes where the teacher changed stayed on to the end of the course.
118. When asked directly whether a change of teacher had caused a problem, interrupting the flow of learning, three-quarters (76%) of those who had experienced a change of teacher said it had *not* – whilst 14% said it was a big problem and 11% said it was a minor problem. However, those saying it was a problem at all represent under 5% of the whole sample (when those whose teachers did not change are taken into account).

### Learner perceptions of course quality

119. Learners were then asked in various ways to express their views on the quality of the course(s) they had undertaken:
- How well they rated their tutors on a number of aspects.
  - The overall quality of teaching
  - How well some aspects of provision were managed by their learning provider.
120. In respect of individual aspects of their tutor’s performance, respondents were asked to rate each on a 10 point scale. In the following table, a score between 7 and 10 is described as ‘good’; a score between 4 and 6 is described as ‘intermediate’; a score between 1 and 3 is described as ‘poor’. Using this scale, it can be seen that most learner ratings were very much at the positive end of the scale:

**Table 6: Learning ratings of individual aspects of their tutors’ performance (percentages) and average ratings (means)**

	Poor %	Intermediate %	Good %	Average rating
Ability to explain the subject	1	13	85	8.5
Listening to your needs	2	11	87	8.5
Making your subject interesting or	4	14	81	8.1

enjoyable or you				
Understanding you and how you like to learn	2	15	82	8.3
The support they gave you, for example, in improving your learning techniques or time management	1	13	85	8.5
Making good use of sessions time	1	12	86	8.3
The quality and availability of teaching materials they gave you	3	16	81	8.2
Setting clear targets or learning goals to help you improve	2	14	84	8.3
Providing prompt and regular feedback on progress	3	11	85	8.3

Base: All respondents

Note: Excludes 'don't knows' to a maximum of 2% for each category

121. Within the overall picture of satisfaction with tutor performance there was relatively little variation. However....
- The satisfaction of younger learners tended to be lower. 'Good' ratings by 16-24 year olds tended to be in the 70%-80% range for each aspect whereas they mainly were in the 80%-90% range for older students.
  - Satisfaction levels tended to be 5%-15% higher for women than for men.
122. These 'individual aspects' ratings were, not unexpectedly, carried through into assessments of the *overall* quality of teaching they received. Over 8 out of 10 learners rated the overall quality of teaching as quite or very good but with somewhat lower ratings by men than women and with learner satisfaction increasing with age:

**Table 7: Learners' overall satisfaction with the quality of teaching they received**

	Quite or very poor	Neutral	Quite or very good	Total
Male	2	17	81	100
Female	2	9	89	100
16-24 years	2	21	77	100
25-44 years	2	6	92	100
45+ years	2	1	97	100
<b>All</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100</b>

Base: All respondents

123. Asked particularly about the quality of learning materials used on the course (textbooks, handouts, worksheets, etc.), there was again a generally positive view. 82% said they were quite or very good, 13% said they were 'average' (neither good nor poor), and only 5% said they were 'quite poor' (3%) or 'very poor' (2%). The very small number of respondents who said they were quite or very poor (only 9 cases) explained variously that: they hadn't been given any textbooks; only photocopied sheets were given out; they had to buy the materials themselves; the material was old-fashioned; or they had to get the materials from the internet.
124. As well as asking about the quality of teaching and course materials, learners were also asked how well a number of issues were handled by the College or learning provider, again using a 10-point scale. Again, most responses were positive but there may be limited concerns, particularly about sufficiency of teachers. Within the data (figures not set out here) there was a tendency for men and younger people to be less satisfied with each aspect but the differences were not sufficient to change the overall picture from being one in which the great majority of respondents in all groups are satisfied with course management:

**Table 8: Respondents' ratings of specified statements about how issues were managed at their College or learning provider; percentages and average scores**

	Poor %	Intermediate %	Good %	Average rating
Making sure enough tutors were available	6	12	80	8.2
Providing support when you or other learners had problems	3	8	88	8.5
Helping new people setting in	1	8	88	8.7
Managing timetables so that they suit the learner as best they can	2	13	83	8.4
Communicating changes in times for lessons	3	11	83	8.3

Base: All respondents

Note: Excludes 'don't knows' to a maximum of 3% for each aspect

### Completion

125. When learners were asked directly whether or not they had completed the course or left early, the majority, 78%, had completed whilst 22% had left early:

**Table 9: Completion rates for different groups of learners; percentages**

	Completed	Left early	Total
Male	69	31	100
Female	88	12	100
16-24 years	70	30	100
25-44 years	85	15	100
45+ years	91	9	100
Mid Wales	88	12	100
North Wales	81	19	100
SE Wales	75	25	100
SW Wales	80	20	100
Urban	76	24	100
Rural	85	15	100
FE College	79	21	100
WBL provider	76	24	100
English	76	24	100
Maths	81	19	100
<b>All</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>

Base: All respondents

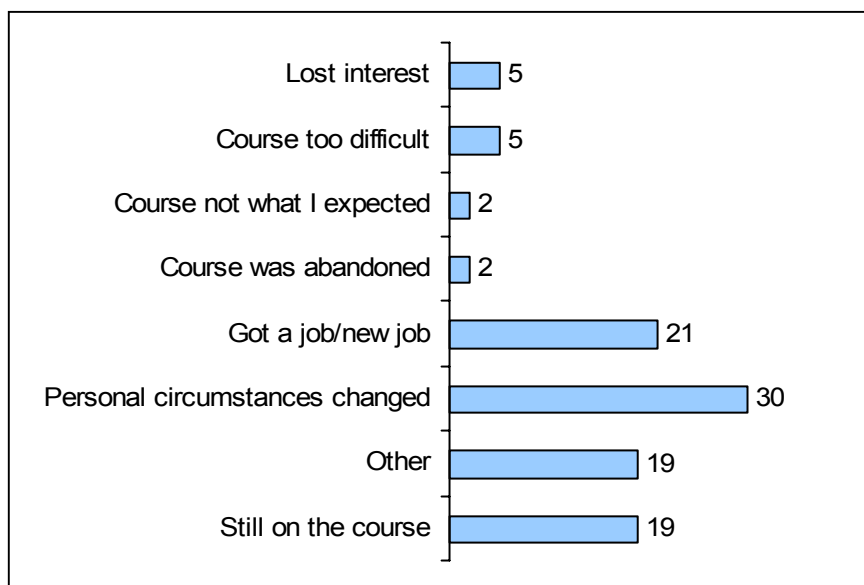
126. This data shows that completion rates tend to be *lower* for:

- Men
- Younger learners
- Those in urban areas (hence for residents in SE Wales)
- Those on literacy rather than numeracy courses

127. When early leavers were asked why they left early, the main reasons quoted were:



**Figure 4: Reasons for early leaving; percentages of early leavers giving each reason**



Base: 43 respondents who left the course early

128. Other reasons mentioned by individual respondents included: 'I wanted to go into IT instead'; 'it was too expensive'; 'lack of support received'; 'medical problems'; 'work commitments'; 'the teacher was changed and the new one was not as good as the previous one'; 'I had already learnt most of the stuff, so I decided to leave'; 'couldn't finish the course because I had appointments'; 'I was pregnant'.

129. In short, therefore, the completions and 'reasons for leaving' data shows that:

- Only a fifth of learners failed to complete their course.
- Those who left did so for reasons unconnected with the quality or circumstances of provision. Only 3 learners left because of direct complaints about provision. Around 6 more found that the course was not as expected, proved expensive, too difficult, etc. – implying a failure of *information* rather than a failure of provision per se.
- Overall, 80% of early leavers left because of factors not directly concerned with the course but much more with learner circumstances and attitudes.

### Achievement of qualifications

130. 73% of learners reported that they had achieved a written qualification or certificate as a result of participating in their literacy or numeracy course. Achievement rates were higher for women, older learners, rural learners, those who participated via a WBL programme. There were no differences between literacy and numeracy course participants:

**Table 10: Percentage of learners achieving a written qualification or certificate as a result of their basic skills participation**

	<b>% achieving</b>
Male	69
Female	78
16-24 years	73
25-44 years	73
45+ years	79
Urban	76
Rural	72
FE College	70
WBL provider	79
English	74
Maths	74
<b>All</b>	<b>73</b>

Base: All respondents

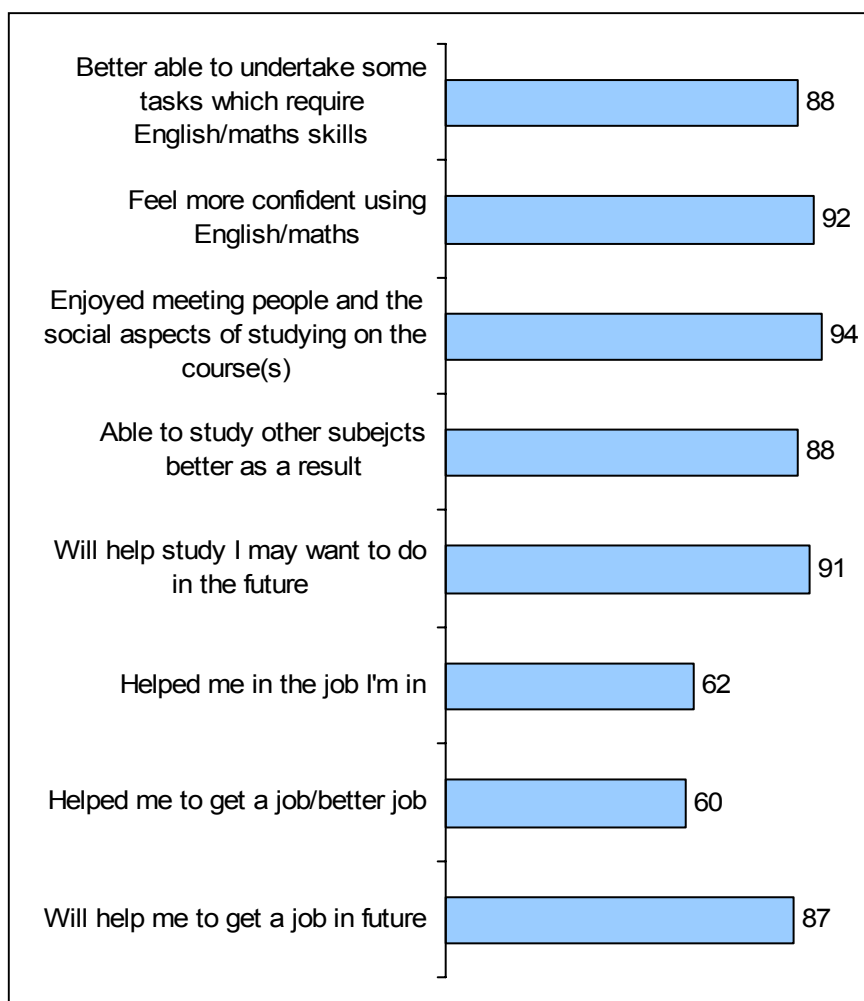
131. Around 4 out of 10 learners who had got qualifications could not identify the Level of qualification achieved but...

- 23% said 'Level 1'
- 20% said 'Level 2'
- 12% said 'Level 3'
- 13% suggested other gradings which are quite difficult to interpret in terms of standard levels such as 'pass level', 'certificate', 'intermediate'.

### **Benefits of participation**

132. In addition to certification, learners were asked whether or not they had achieved each of a list of possible benefits. Proportions saying they had done so are shown in the following chart:

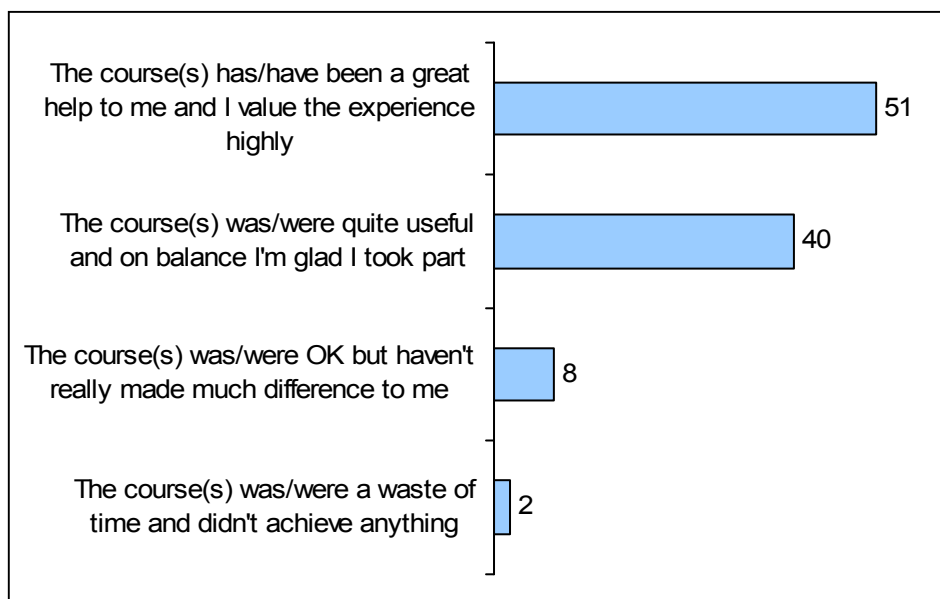
**Figure 5: Benefits of participation in basic skills learning; percentages**



Base: All respondents

133. These are clearly very positive results which reveal a mix of attitudinal, social, and employment benefits.
134. When asked, in an 'open' question, whether they had achieved any other benefits, sixteen percent of respondents said that they had. For example....
- Improved general level of confidence (13 respondents).
  - Generally improved maths or English skills (9 respondents).
  - Improved IT skills (2 cases)
  - Able to help children with their maths and English (2 cases).
135. Finally, asked to make an overall summary judgement of the course(s) being undertaken, most learners gave positive assessments:

**Figure 6: Learners' overall judgements of their basic skills learning experiences; percentages**



Base: All respondents

136. A table below breaks down these assessments for different groups:

**Table 11: Different groups of learners' overall judgements of their basic skills learning experiences; percentages**

	A great help	Quite useful/glad I took part	OK but not made much difference	A waste of time	Total
Male	47	45	8	0	100
Female	54	35	7	3	100
16-24 years	47	43	8	2	100
25-44 years	53	38	8	1	100
45+ years	58	36	3	1	100
Urban	42	39	8	1	100
Rural	47	43	6	4	100
FE College	54	37	8	2	100
WBL provider	44	48	8	0	100
English	48	42	9	1	100
Maths	57	36	6	2	100
<b>All</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100</b>

Base: All respondents

137. It can be seen that all groups of learners have positive perceptions but they are somewhat more positive for:

- Women
- Learners aged 45 or over
- Urban learners

- FE College learners
- Numeracy learners

### **Key points: a survey of learners**

138. The survey of 200 learners can only be described as being of modest size but its results are so clear-cut that it would hardly have been profitable to have undertaken a larger one.
139. Broadly, the results are extremely positive:
- Only 1 in 6 learners had difficulty finding a course and the main difficulty concerned individuals' distance from facilities rather than absence of courses per se.
  - Only 7% of the sample had waited more than 4 weeks to start a basic skills course.
  - Fewer than 5% of learners gave an explanation of delay which could be directly attributed to capacity ('course was full').
  - Over 8 out of 10 learners gave positive assessments of their teachers' abilities.
  - Over 8 out of 10 learners gave positive assessments of the learning materials they had used.
  - Over 8 out of 10 learners gave positive assessments of the management of different aspects of their courses.
  - Nearly 8 out of 10 learners completed their course.
  - Non-completion was much more strongly associated with learner circumstances than with course or capacity issues.
  - Nearly three-quarters of learners gained a qualification or certificate.
  - High proportions of learners reported social, attitudinal, or employment benefits.
  - 9 out of 10 learners gave positive overall assessments of their learning experience.
140. The only indicators which hint at capacity limits were:
- 38% of literacy learners and 34% of numeracy learners were taught in class sizes of 11 or more. There were some indications that such class sizes have an association with non-completion and non-certification.
  - 19% of learners had experienced a mid-course change of teacher and a quarter of these (around 1 in 20 of the whole sample) said this had been a problem to some degree. Data suggests that a change of teacher was associated with non-completion.
141. Overall, therefore, the learner survey suggests that, whatever capacity problems exist they are mostly managed in a way which leaves much the greater proportion of learners with a substantial degree of satisfaction with their basic skills learning

experiences. Any capacity problems have only marginal impacts on learner experiences and generate few negative responses.

## 4. Discussion

142. Overall, the study reveals a picture of basic skills delivery in Wales which might best be described as managed complexity. The sources of complexity include:
- *Complexity of delivery* – by FE Colleges, WBL providers, voluntary sector organisations; in varied settings (Colleges, private training company premises, community facilities, employer premises); to multiple socio-economic groups (many of which imply disadvantage); of literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses at a range of levels and towards a range of certification; by teachers employed on a range of contractual terms ranging from full-time permanent contracts to insecure zero-hours contracts (and who, in their skill levels, range from learning support assistants with few, if any, relevant qualifications, to people with post-graduate degrees in learning difficulty) or by volunteers; of skills which are not always clearly differentiated ('key skills', 'basic skills', 'essential skills', 'skills for life' and 'practical skills' were terms variously used by providers without total clarity as to what was intended); the development of which is variously funded (by WAG, ESF, employers) or sometimes is delivered but not specifically funded (in order to allow learners on other courses to succeed); in circumstances where basic skills development is variously taught 'up front' in specific literacy or numeracy or ESOL classes but may also be 'embedded' (sometimes concealed) within or alongside another type of course (such as IT or a vocational subject); by organisations whose managements can vary considerably in their enthusiasm for the basic skills agenda; and which may or may not be linked in partnership with other organisations involved in basic skills delivery in the same area.
  - *Change and uncertainty* – new demands on providers: to qualify their staff; to move towards integration of key skills and basic skills programmes; to cope with the varied needs of an influx of migrants; to deliver learning which has insecure funding or for which the funding arrangements are changing; and to offer provision for which the level of demand (in community and employer settings particularly) is difficult to predict.
143. Several providers openly confessed that they had only limited knowledge of the whole basic skills picture and/or that they did not fully understand the changes that are taking place or are anticipated in funding, qualification requirements and specifications, and so on.
144. In these conditions, basic skills teams are challenged to provide a viable basic skills service in which teaching capacity is just one variable interlinked with several others, of which fluctuating or uncertain learner demand, senior management expectations and ambitions, and funding levels and availability are particularly important.
145. The learner survey undertaken as part of this study shows that, in terms of the learners who join basic skills courses are concerned, this challenge is well met. Learners were almost all very happy with the basic skills training they received and most acknowledged that they got real social and employment benefits from it.
146. How is this achieved? There are two basic strategies. The first is the 'minimalist' one in which organisations take an unadventurous stance, limiting basic skills

provision largely to such 'mainstream' basic skills learning as is necessary to enable FE students or those on Work Based Learning courses to progress, with only limited excursions into community or employer provision. The second strategy is much more pro-active. It seeks to stimulate or to respond to demand wherever it might arise, to maximise funding by tapping into all the sources available, and generally to be a 'leading player' in the basic skills field.

147. Under both strategies, however, teaching capacity needs to be maintained at the necessary level, whether lesser or greater. A number of 'good practices' facilitate this:

- Having and maintaining the internal capacity to nurture and develop staff towards higher levels of skill and experience is obviously strongly beneficial. This capacity is more likely to be found in larger FE Colleges than in smaller ones or WBL providers or voluntary organisations.
- Wherever possible, encouraging and developing teachers of other subjects, outside the basic skills team, to enable them to recognise and address the basic skills limitations of their students
- Having a management which values and supports the basic skills function and which encourages all teaching staff to take an interest in, and have a positive valuation of, basic skills needs is also an important, perhaps critical, factor.
- Having the resources, time and competence to get through the 'confusion' barrier is also a strong asset – funding and training opportunities are recognised and exploited more fully and consistently.
- Developing a strong team ethos which helps to retain staff, even those who teach for only a few hours a week, is important. One of the factors which assist basic skills teams to meet demand fluctuations and unforeseen events is the maintenance of an adequate number of teachers who can and will increase their hours when the occasion demands. Contrastingly, a high rate of retirement, as mainly mature, part-time, female staff leave basic skills teaching, is a factor which increasingly challenges providers to maintain teaching levels.
- Similarly, mentoring of new recruits to the basic skills workforce (widely practised) is important in ensuring that new teachers are not quickly lost.
- And clarity of information on pay – ensuring that recruits recognise from the outset that hourly teaching rates have expectations regarding meeting attendance, marking and preparation built into them – avoids disgruntled teachers leaving because they have not fully recognised that the 'headline' rate is not necessarily what it first appears.

148. Essentially, therefore, basic skills teaching capacity is maintained by a series of human resource management practices most of which would be viewed as good practice in other employment situations. The research found that, in cases where these practices were weaker or absent, staff were more likely to be aggrieved, to be more critical of poor career structures and senior management, and so on.



149. To support these good practices, some additional features which providers would value include:
- The greater availability of training towards the Level 3 basic skills teaching qualification (particularly, of course, outside those institutions which can deliver it themselves).
  - Its provision in flexible time formats which do not require several staff to undertake the training simultaneously.
  - Consistent support with the cost of training (a bursary to cover the training fee and a grant to cover the cost of substitution).
  - Better information on what basic skills teacher training is available.
150. However, good management practices and some further support and help with staff training are factors which may do no more than sustain a basic skills service which performs as at present; that is, one which offers training which is valued by those who get it but which requires frequent improvisation and adaptivity on the part of basic skills teams to work around the difficulties and problems, not least of maintaining a stable workforce, which arise.
151. In the longer term, some providers suggest that a more fundamental repositioning of the basic skills function is the real key to solving the teaching capacity issue and extending provision beyond its present limits. What is required, according to the proponents of the argument, is essentially:
- One, the creation of a stable funding pattern in which a known level of funding, co-ordinated across its varied sources, proportionate to the needs of an area, and sufficient to reflect the importance which national policy ostensibly awards to the basic skills issue, is guaranteed for a future period of time.
  - Two, the development of centrally-imposed partnership delivery in each local area, with a single local lead body taking responsibility for the strategic allocation and organisation of local resources, in order to avoid duplication and wasteful competition.
152. It is only under these conditions, it is suggested, that basic skills teaching can truly move towards the 'professionalisation' which is sought. With stable funding and a guaranteed role, it is argued, the workforce would have more incentive to pursue higher qualification levels, more staff could be given permanent, full-time contracts, and younger people would be attracted into basic skills teaching. Complexity would be reduced and change would be less frequent. The basic skills function would cease to be a 'Cinderella' service requiring frequent 'fire fighting' but would become a more widely respected and standard part of post-16 and adult education frameworks.

## ANNEX 1: Discussion guide for providers

1. Confirm organisation name and function; confirm interviewee name and job title.
2. Check whether or not has read mail-out document and understands the purpose of the interview. Explain as necessary.
3. Check time available for interview in order to judge pace of interview.
4. Lead into basic skills teaching capacity issue by asking respondent to describe *current scale and function of basic skills teaching* in the organisation.
  - 'Pure' basic skills teaching: that is, specific literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses taught as stand-alone courses for 16-18 year olds or 19+ years adults.
  - 'Embedded' basic skills courses: that is, literacy, numeracy and ESOL skills taught as part of a wider key skills package or in conjunction with particular vocational course(s) for 16-18 year olds or 19+ years adults.
  - Ask for description of who supplies basic skills teaching:
    - Dedicated basic skills teachers (How many? What basic skills qualifications? How many hours? What lengths of contract? How funded?)
    - Those teaching basic skills although predominantly employed to teach other subjects (How many? What basic skills qualifications? What hours/proportion of work committed to basic skills teaching?)
5. Turn to *basic skills teaching capacity* issue:
  - Does the organisation have any basic skills teaching capacity shortfalls?
  - What is the nature and scale of these? Check for:
    - Literacy/numeracy/ESOL distinctions
    - Qualification shortfalls/what qualifications are missing?
    - Shortfalls in teacher experience
    - Numbers of additional teachers/teaching hours required to reach adequate level
    - For how long have problems persisted?/Are they consistent or fluctuating?
  - What are the impacts of shortfalls? Check for:
    - Cancelled or delayed provision
    - Sub-standard quality

- Failure of students to reach required levels
  - Learner dissatisfaction
  - Other
6. Turn to *reasons* for shortfalls. Probe for possible difficulties:
- Problems in judging demand for basic skills learning?
  - Too few qualified/experienced basic skills teachers in the area?
  - Poor pay/hours/contracts on offer?
  - Recruitment and retention difficulties?
  - Competition between providers?
  - Lack of basic skills teaching training/professional development opportunities?
  - Difficulty in accessing such opportunities – costs, funding, time of courses, distance, teacher reluctance, etc.?
  - Other reasons?
7. What would assist in *tackling shortfalls*? Ask respondent to consider and evaluate:
- Extent to which a more professional career structure for basic skills teaching needs to be and could be developed.
  - Use of marketing programme to attract more/better basic skills teachers.
  - Bursaries to cover the cost of basic skills teacher training or continuing professional development.
  - Subsidies to providers to compensate for time out to train of basic skills teachers.
  - Mentoring programmes/placement programmes to help new basic skills teachers at early stages in their basic skills teaching career.
  - More stable or long-term funding to support basic skills teacher training.
  - Increasing the availability of basic skills teacher training courses.
8. Ask respondents to identify and describe any developments or particular practices which they organise or take part in (as part of partnership) which have improved or will improve their basic skills teaching capacity.
9. Any other factors/issues which respondents wants to mention?

## ANNEX 2: Basic Skills Learner Questionnaire

MARCH/APRIL 2007

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Name of respondent: ..... Tel. no. ....

Date of interview: ..... Time of interview: .....am/pm

Interviewer's name: .....

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### Introduction

#### Establish contact with named individual

Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is ..... I am a research interviewer working for BMG Research. BMG has been asked by the Department of Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, which is part of the Welsh Assembly Government, to undertake a survey of people who recently did a course in English or maths to find out how effective such courses are. A national database of registered students suggests that you did a course (or courses) last year on English or maths and arithmetic.

Use database to prompt respondent as necessary. Could I ask you a few questions about this course/these courses?

*Reassure if necessary:*

- Will only take a few minutes.
- Your answers are completely confidential and you won't be personally identified.
- BMG Research is a recognised market research company based in Birmingham.
- This is genuine research; we are not trying to sell you anything.

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### ASK ALL

**Q1** Firstly, could I just check, was the course (or courses) you undertook intended to help with your skills in? **Read out code all that apply**

Writing English	1	
Reading English	2	
Spoken English	3	
Maths or arithmetic	4	
Other (write in)	5	
None of these	6	→ Close interview

**ASK ALL**

**Q2** Where did the course(s) take place? **Prompt as necessary; code all that apply**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| At your employer's premises              | 1 |
| At a private training company's premises | 2 |
| At a College of Further Education        | 3 |
| At a local learning centre               | 4 |
| Or somewhere else (write in)             | 5 |

**ASK ALL**

**Q3** What prompted you to go on the course(s) to improve your skills in English/ maths and arithmetic (as appropriate)? **Was it that? Read out and code all that apply**

- |  |   |   |    |
|--|---|---|----|
| Your employer wanted you to do it  | 1 | → | Q4 |
| You were studying another subject and the English/maths course(s) was undertaken alongside that other study    | 2 | → | Q6 |
| The training provider you were with encouraged you to do it  | 3 | → | Q6 |
| You wanted to improve your English/maths and went and looked for a suitable course                             | 4 | → | Q4 |
| You saw an advertisement for people who wanted to improve their English/maths and that prompted you to respond | 5 | → | Q4 |
| Or something else? (Write in)  | 6 | → | Q6 |

**Q4** How easy or difficult was it to find a suitable course(s) in your area? **Prompt as necessary; code one**

- |   |                 |   |    |
|---|-----------------|---|----|
| } | Very difficult  | 1 |    |
|   | Quite difficult | 2 | Q5 |
|   | Quite easy      | 3 |    |
|   | Very easy       | 4 | Q6 |
|   | Don't know      | 5 |    |

**Q5** Could you describe why it was difficult to find a suitable course(s)? **Write in**

**ASK ALL**

**Q6** Did you have to wait for the English/maths course(s) to start or was it available when you wanted it or expected it to start? **Code one**

}	Had to wait	1	→	Q7 and Q8
	Available on schedule	2		
	Other (write in).	3		Q9

**Q7** How many weeks did you have to wait for? Write in number of weeks

Waited for  weeks

**Q8** Do you know why there was a delay? **Write in any explanation**

**ASK ALL**

**Q9** During your English/maths course(s), what was the typical or average number of people in the class? **Write in number(s) appropriate to subjects studied**

English

Maths

**ASK ALL**

**Q10** Did this number allow you to get the amount of personal attention you needed?  
**Code one**

Yes 1

No 2

Don't know 3

**ASK ALL**

**Q11** On the course(s) you took, did the same teacher for each course stay constant throughout the course(s) or did the teacher(s) change at some point? **Code one**

Teacher(s) stayed constant 1 → Q13

Teacher(s) changed 2 → Q12

**Q12** Was changing teacher(s) a problem interrupting the flow of what you were learning or didn't it matter? **Code one**

A big problem	1
A minor problem	2
Not a problem	3
Don't know	4

**ASK ALL**

**Q13** Generally, what did you think of the overall quality of teaching on the English/ maths course(s) you took? **Prompt; code one**

Very good	1
Quite good	2
Average – neither good nor poor	3
Quite poor	4
Very poor	5
Don't know	6

**ASK ALL**

**Q14** How would you rate your tutor/s for your English/maths course on the following aspects. **Please score on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = poor and 10 = excellent. Read out each; rotate order; score 1 to 10 for each**

Ability to explain the subject	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Listening to your needs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Making your subject interesting or enjoyable for you	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Understanding you and how you like to learn	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
The support they gave you, for example in improving your learning techniques or time management	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Making good use of sessions time	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
The quality and availability of teaching materials they gave you	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Setting clear targets or learning goals to help you improve	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Providing prompt and regular feedback on progress	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK

**ASK ALL**

**Q15** On the whole, what did you think of the learning materials which were used on the English/maths course(s) – things like textbooks, handouts and worksheets? **Prompt; code one**

}	Very good	1	
	Quite good	2	Q17
	Average – neither good nor poor	3	
	Quite poor	4	Q16
	Very poor	5	
	Don't know	6	→ Q17

**Q16** Could you say how or why they were poor? **Write in**

**ASK ALL**

**Q17** Did you fully complete the course(s) or did you leave early for some reason? **Code one**

Completed	1	→	Q19
Left early	2	→	Q18

**Q18** Why did you not complete the course(s)? **Read out and code all that apply**

Lost interest	1
Course too difficult	2
Was a waste of time	3
Course not what I expected	4
Didn't like the teacher(s)	5
Travel too difficult	6
Course was abandoned	7
Got a job/new job	8
Personal circumstances changed	9
Other (write in)	10
Don't know	11



**ASK ALL**

**Q19** On the whole, how well do you think the following issues were managed at your college or learning provider? **Please score on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = poor and 10 = excellent. If necessary: We recognise that ratings may vary over time – please try your best to give us an overall rating. Read out each; rotate order; score 1 to 10 for each.**

Making sure enough tutors were available	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Providing support when you or other learners had problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Helping new people settle in	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Managing timetables so that they suit the learner as best they can	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK
Communicating changes in times for lessons	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	DK

**ASK ALL**

**Q20** Did you get any written qualification or certificate as a result of doing the English/ maths course(s)? **Code one**

}	Yes	1	→	Q21
	No	2		
	Don't know	3		Q22

**Q21** What was that/those qualification(s) or certificate(s)? Do you know what grade or level?  
**Write in**

Name of qualification	Level/grade
(1) .....	.....
(2) .....	.....
(3) .....	.....

**ASK ALL**

**Q22** Would you say you got any of the following benefits from the English/maths course(s) you undertook? **Read out; code 'Yes' or 'No' or 'Don't know' for each**

	Yes	No	Don't know
Better able to undertake some tasks which require English/maths skills	1	2	3
Feel more confident using English / Maths	1	2	3
Enjoyed meeting people and the social aspects of studying on the course(s)	1	2	3
Able to study other subjects better as a result	1	2	3
Will help study I may want to do in the future	1	2	3
Helped me in the job I'm in	1	2	3
Helped me to get a job / better job	1	2	3
Will help me to get a job in future	1	2	3

**ASK ALL**

**Q23** Are there any other benefits from taking the English/maths course(s) which you studied

Yes	1	→	Q24
}	No	2	
	Don't know	3	Q25

**Q24** What is that benefit(s)? Write in

**ASK ALL**

**Q25** Finally, could you give me an overall summary of the value of the English/maths course(s) you undertook? Which of the following would you say is closest to your opinion? **Read out all; code one**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| The course(s) has/have been a great help to me and I value the experience highly | 1 |
| The course(s) was/were quite useful and on balance I'm glad I took part          | 2 |
| The course(s) was/were OK but haven't really made much difference to me          | 3 |
| The course(s) was/were a waste of time and didn't achieve anything               | 4 |
| Something else (Write in)  | 5 |

**THANK AND CLOSE**