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for adult literacy and numeracy

# Research Report

## **The impact of adult literacy and numeracy on small businesses in rural Lincolnshire and Rutland: a case study**

Chris Atkin and Paul Merchant  
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# The impact of adult literacy and numeracy on small businesses in rural Lincolnshire and Rutland: a case study

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# Executive summary

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## Synopsis

This research examines relationships between rurality and the interest of employers in adult literacy and numeracy training for employees, in small businesses in rural areas of Lincolnshire and Rutland. We argue that existing literature on relationships between rurality and adult learning underestimate crucial questions of individual and social identity in rural areas. We engage with recent work in cultural geography and the work of Pierre Bourdieu to explore connections between forms of conscious and habitual self-understanding (*habitus*<sup>1</sup>) and the valuing (or not) of literacy and numeracy. Our analysis draws on 84 questionnaire responses and interviews (17) with senior personnel (owners, directors, managers, senior administrators) in 15 small businesses. We make recommendations for policy development.

### The research found that:

- Concern for adult literacy and numeracy among senior personnel in the small businesses is very limited. Only 4 per cent regard literacy levels as 'poor' and only 6 per cent regard numeracy levels as 'poor'. Just under half (48 per cent) of respondents said they are not aware of the **Skills for Life** agenda and 65 per cent claim not to be aware of local initiatives to support adult literacy and numeracy.
- Employees are represented by employers as having little interest in their own literacy and numeracy. This lack of interest is linked to a rural economy which, though changing, is still centred on low-paid, seasonal, practical, manual work; and to a closed, homely, limited social and cultural environment which comforts but creates contentment with self, rather than curiosity, ambition and intellectualism.
- Lack of interest in literacy and numeracy is linked to specifically rural kinds of 'coping'. Older people understand themselves, and are understood by others, to have coped, managed and made do with low levels of literacy and numeracy for so long that training now seems inappropriate, not worth presenting to them. Literacy and numeracy training is seen to jar with older employees' long-standing, habitual ways of working, living and coping.
- There is evidence that employers and employees do not place sufficient value on literacy and numeracy skills. Further, there is evidence that such attitudes are a deep-seated part of rural ways of life. There is a tendency for men to undervalue learning in favour of practical work. This is theorised in the research as part of rural masculine and feminine identity.
- Employers suggested two approaches to improving basic skills in the rural workforce. First, to embed adult literacy and numeracy in other kinds of adult learning which carry less stigma; and secondly, to find ways of making such learning normal and everyday. In these ways, the fact that people need to improve their basic skills could be less exposing and begin to open up the social closeness of rural culture to learning.
- Only five among the 84 respondents (6 per cent) indicated that small businesses should provide

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of the concept of *habitus* please refer to page 21

literacy and numeracy training for employees. Questions of responsibility for adult literacy and numeracy prompt criticism of local school education. Different small businesses present different existing cultures of training and care in relation to employees.

- Although business leaders argued they had little part to play in developing their employees' levels of literacy and numeracy, some interviewees recognised the negative effect on the business that underdeveloped literacy and numeracy levels may cause. These were expressed in connection to recruitment policies, health and safety concerns and the ability of employees to adapt to increasing levels of technology.

### **Background rationale and approach to research**

We argue that *Skills for Life*: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills (DfES, 2001) has an underdeveloped geographical imagination and that research on relationships between rurality, adult literacy and numeracy and adult education more generally does not engage with issues of individual and social identity. We engage with recent work in rural cultural geography on the social construction of rurality, masculinity, femininity and ageing to theorise relationships between rurality and self-identity. We also explore the implications of Pierre Bourdieu's work on relationships between 'habitus' and 'field' for a theorisation of self-identity. In particular we argue that it is not possible to understand ways in which adult literacy and numeracy are valued, or not valued, in rural small businesses without examining ways in which forms of identity are produced and reproduced.

### **Main elements of research; methods, sample, etc.**

We obtained from Lincolnshire and Rutland Business Link the names and addresses of 40 small businesses in each of the 10 Travel to Work Areas (TTWA) of Lincolnshire and Rutland: Louth, Skegness and Mablethorpe, Horncastle, Gainsborough, Lincoln, Sleaford, Grantham, Boston, Spalding and Holbeach, and Stamford. The businesses are 'small' in the sense of having less than 50 employees (Business Link's search criteria for 'small'), and they are all outside principal urban centres. In each of the TTWAs, the sample of businesses reflects the employment structure of Lincolnshire and Rutland, expressed through the Broad Industrial Groups, 1–9.

Questionnaires were sent to each of the small businesses (400). We received 84 completed questionnaires; a response rate of 21 per cent. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis of the questionnaires, we identified a number of themes and selected 15 small businesses to interview in relation to these themes (see Section 3.1). Given the focus on conscious and non-conscious self-understanding, together with individual and social identity, the interviews were in-depth, semi-structured and tape-recorded; most were held at the small business so that particular work environments could prompt discussion.

### **Policy recommendations**

- Adult literacy and numeracy training should be integrated into existing forms of training, in particular businesses. For example, on farms, literacy and numeracy should be taught within practical training courses offered by agricultural training organisations (such as LANTRA); in

establishments such as nursing homes, they should be taught within formal and informal training associated with new forms of recording in care work. Incentives for the introduction of training should be considered.

- There should be wider and ongoing attempts to make literacy and numeracy training common, widespread, open and familiar, rather than exceptional, unusual or embarrassing. Interviewees suggested numerous, varied kinds of provision in colleges, workplaces and popular spaces (such as shopping centres), and frequent advertising across local radio and newspapers.
- Advertisements for literacy and numeracy training and the training itself need to be aligned with particular, often distinct, forms of self-identity in employers and employees. These forms of identity are often connected to particular understandings of rural masculinity, femininity and age, and are often habitual, taken for granted and very durable (see especially section 3.2).
- Publicity regarding adult literacy and numeracy should be sensitive to a feeling in rural areas that rurality is constructed as 'disadvantaged' by policy; the novelty or particularity of the rural location should not be presented as containing difficulty or disadvantage.
- Discourses on adult literacy and numeracy should not be separated from discourses on school literacy and numeracy. Employers might be more inclined to introduce training if they felt that schools were also taking responsibility for the literacy and numeracy of children and young adults. (This policy recommendation is intended to highlight the importance to policy makers of ensuring that recent steps to provide linkages are maintained, e.g. National Literacy Strategy (1998) and a year later, the National Numeracy Strategy for primary education, the recent focus on the early years of secondary education and the *Skills for Life* agenda for adults).
- Adult literacy and numeracy should be offered alongside, or within, a range of ambitious local courses: including vocational qualifications, A-levels, degrees and postgraduate study.
- Adult literacy and numeracy should be promoted in relation to more general attempts to develop opportunities for cultural consumption in rural areas (art galleries, museums, libraries, theatres, etc.).

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# 1. Review of literature

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The first section (1.1) considers *Skills for Life*: the national strategy for Improving adult literacy and numeracy (DfES, 2001). Although the strategy has a particular spatiality, it tends to operate with too vague a sense of geography; rurality is not seen as a specific factor. We then examine previous research on the potential impact of the rural location on the implementation of *Skills for Life* (1.2). Section 1.3 considers research on relationships between businesses and skills, focusing on small businesses in Lincolnshire and Rutland. In Section 1.4 we review literature on relationships between rurality and adult education. We argue that although valuable, this work does not examine important questions of individual, social and cultural identity in rural areas.

Finally, in Section 1.5 we engage with recent work in rural cultural geography on issues of identity and difference and with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, to develop our own theorisation of relationships between rurality, self-identity, literacy and numeracy. We are clear that in adopting a particular theoretical lens, the research builds on the existing work outlined in Section 1. Although the development of a theoretical framework is important in itself, it also offers policy makers an alternative conceptual model for policy debate.

## 1.1 The geography of Skills for Life

This section examines *Skills for Life*: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills (2000), through questions of geography and place. In particular we consider the proposed spatiality of implementation and the role of workplaces. We argue that *Skills for Life* tends to present an urban or unspecific geographical imagination. *Skills for Life* echoes *A Fresh Start* (DfEE, 1999), linking 'literacy and numeracy difficulties' in adults to individual, social and national problems, claiming for example that industry loses an estimated £5 billion a year because of poor literacy and numeracy (DfES, 2001: 4). The report outlines a 'National Strategy' which includes new, robust quality standards, screening and diagnostic assessment, a national core curriculum, new National Tests, the commissioning of new learning materials, professional qualifications for literacy and numeracy teachers, and an improved, robust quality framework (DfES, 2001: 5–6). An Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (2001) and an Adult Numeracy Core Curriculum (2001) were published in February 2001.

Implementation of the national strategy is co-ordinated by the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABBSU) within the DfES (Coben, 2001: 134). The Strategy (as part of post-16 education) is funded by central government and delivered through the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), which has local offices, giving the strategy a sub-regional geography, although these LSC localities have limited autonomy. In a more detailed sense the implementation has a particular spatiality, seeking to operate through existing networks such as those in receipt of state support or detained in offenders' institutions, allowing the government quickly to identify literacy, language and numeracy skills needs and to address them (DfES, 2001: 7).

The DfES's argument is that people already within certain networks or arenas where government influence is strong are easily accessed, assessed and acted on. There is a tension in the characterisation of government: on the one hand encouraging and on the other 'imposing duties' on individuals in relation to their basic skills. Whether people are to be encouraged or compelled, the issue of accessing people raises questions about the role of

physical and social space. For example, do forms of rural dispersal and remoteness, or forms of rural culture, act against attempts to find and act on people? Does learning in close-knit societies risk separation from the community (Schuller, 1998)?

The National Strategy aims to engage priority groups, including the unemployed, benefits claimants, offenders, 'those supervised in the community', public sector employees and 'low-skilled people in employment'; the latter will be targeted by involving representatives linked to business and training organisations. *Skills for Life* lists several ways to encourage employers to address literacy and numeracy needs (DfES, 2001: 16). Literacy and numeracy training will be integrated into companies' own human resources strategy, Unions would assist through 'union learning representatives', and literacy and numeracy would become a 'key feature' of National Training Organisations' (NTOs) 'workforce development plans'. A toolkit for employers has been published to improve literacy and numeracy at work, available as text or on CD. This, the DfES' 'readwriteplus' website explains, is intended for large (more than 250 employees) organisations with an existing training infrastructure and includes techniques for identifying literacy and numeracy needs and recommendations on developing training models ([www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/employer\\_toolkit](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/employer_toolkit)).

*Skills for Life* recognises the particular employee training difficulties of small businesses, which lack the flexibility to encourage their employees to enter existing courses or to commission bespoke courses DfES, 2001: 17.

The strategy offered £2.5 million in funding for Employer Learning Networks aimed at small and medium-sized organisations, and to help groups of employers to share resources, expertise and knowledge to develop staff skills (DfES, 2001: 17). A video and information pack has also been produced for smaller businesses. The workplaces featured in the video include factories, call centres, a train, a restaurant and a garage. They are vaguely shot, smart workplaces that could be anywhere. There is little sense that, for example, urban and rural areas might present particular, different kinds of employment, workplace or cultures of work. However, the possibility of particularly rural (or urban) cultures of work may affect the National Strategy's attempt to increase demand for literacy and numeracy training through workplaces. If employers and employees are to be encouraged to value literacy and numeracy skills and training, then peculiarly urban and rural contexts of employment may need to be understood. The notion of a generic workplace may not prove sufficiently real to those whose working environments are not represented.

## 1.2 Skills for Life and rurality

Until recently government initiatives to address adult literacy and numeracy issues did not consider rural areas as particular contexts. However, the 'Pathfinder Projects' did assess the effectiveness of the National Strategy in specific regions and were written up as **What Works: Early Findings from the Pathfinder Projects** (DfES, 2002). These projects suggested that effective basic skills support might face different challenges in rural, as opposed to urban and semi-urban, locations (CRG, 2002: 1).

CRG Consulting (CRG) was commissioned to review the operation of basic skills support in rural areas and to identify constraints on take-up which might be attributable to rurality (CRG, 2002: 1). This report was essentially for internal use and was not made widely available, although many of its conclusions are significant for the rural context.

Between March and June 2002, CRG conducted interviews (face-to-face and telephone) in the three Pathfinder areas with significant rural areas (Cambridgeshire, Thanet and Gloucestershire); Cumbria and Leeds were included for comparison. Interviewees included Pathfinder management staff, management staff in FE colleges, the private/voluntary sector, LEAs, tutors and trainees, and trades union representatives and employers actively involved in basic skills programmes. The (draft) report warns against over-simplification of the rural environment as being different and significant (CRG, 2002: 2).

Although problems of low population density, 'poor' public transport and 'limited' childcare do need to be recognised, differences in the delivery of basic skills support in rural areas are frequently subtle in effect. Distinctions are far from clear-cut: problems of isolation and poor access to facilities can equally affect learners in rural areas and those in peripheral estates or inner city areas (CRG, 2002: 3). The issues which inhibit basic skills uptake in rural areas (e.g. no car, no access to IT equipment at home) are probably better seen as low-income constraints rather than the result of rurality alone (CRG, 2002: 3). The rural environment should not be understood as simply different to the urban.

#### 1.2.1. Issues concerning management of programmes

Poverty and isolation are not exclusively rural. However, the draft CRG report identifies features of rurality which affect basic skills provision. It generalises a geography of rurality that involves great distances, but also generates social closeness. Social closeness may also provide opportunities for engagement, although the inherent practical difficulties of isolation are a focus for concern. In particular, the report argues that the management and co-ordination of tutors is affected by rural distances – for example arranging effective meetings between tutors and managers, discussion of new practices and priorities, and sharing of good practice. Managers and tutors may themselves have to travel significant distances (CRG, 2002: 7–8). The report comments on problems this can cause, including the lack of potential tutors, unpaid travelling time and professional reluctance in rural tutors who work only a few hours a week (CRG, 2002: 6).

#### 1.2.2 Issues concerning learners

Low populations and small settlements can produce social proximity which modifies attitudes and behaviours, with implications for basic skills education (CRG, 2002: 5). A rural culture of conservatism is implied, linked to generalisations about the dispersed spatiality of the rural location. In this environment, covert family learning or IT familiarisation initiatives and employer-linked programmes may be seen as less socially threatening by learners. Distance may allow uncooperative tutors to escape surveillance and standardisation, making the implementation of national or regional policy difficult (CRG, 2002: 11).

Although the CRG report draws attention to a rural geography of distances and closeness, attempts to generalise about the nature of people in rural areas is more problematic, stereotyping country folk as 'cautious' and taking 'a long time to make up their mind about things' (CRG, 2002: 4). While agreeing that the stereotyping of rural residence is not particularly helpful, we do suggest that rural identity is a concept worth exploring. Questions of individual and social identity and social constructions of rurality (including rural people), are crucial in understanding ways in which literacy and numeracy are valued in rural areas. We outline our own theorisation of rural culture and identity in Section 1.5.

The next two sections examine literature on small businesses and skills, focusing on

Lincolnshire and Rutland (1.3), and literature on the relationships between rurality and adult education (1.4).

### 1.3 Small business and skills (in Lincolnshire and Rutland)

This section examines relationships between the workplace and literacy and numeracy, in small businesses in Lincolnshire and Rutland.

In 2000, the Science, Technology and Mathematics Council (ST+MC, an NTO), conducted research as a response to the Moser Report (**A Fresh Start**) and the Second Report of the National Skills Task Force, Delivering **Skills for All**. This investigated the claim that employers tend not to view themselves as responsible for providing basic skills training. The ST+MC sent questionnaires to and interviewed just over 200 contacts, drawn from NTOs, employers, training providers and other selected interested parties. The responses were as follows:

	NTOs	Employers	TPs/others	Teachers
Postal questionnaires	14	5	13	0
Telephone interviews	1	0	2	0
Face-to-face interviews	8	3	1	3
Overall responses	23	8	16	3

(ST+MC, 2000: 4)

Employers were asked: 'Do you believe that employers have a role to play in raising numeracy levels?' Explanatory documents explaining and defining numeracy were included with the questionnaires. Only eight employers responded, four answering that employers do have a role in raising numeracy levels, and four answering that they do not. Nevertheless, the report on key findings states:

*The Moser Report's findings on employer attitudes to basic skills, i.e. that the school system has failed, are clearly reinforced by ST+MC's research: they currently avoid poor numeracy simply by weeding it out at the recruitment stage. ...employers are adamant that it is not their role to improve the basic numeracy of their recruits and employees. (ST+MC, 2000: 5)*

The report interprets the research through a distinction between two broad categories of employers – one responsible and ensuring staff are equipped for the job, the other (irresponsible) not employing staff unless they already possess basic numeracy skills. Irresponsible employers are seen as being in a significant minority (ST+MC, 2000: 5). Even responsible employers may pursue specific vocational (which include numeracy) qualifications for job/sector needs, rather than fostering a general 'learning culture'. Employers also encourage numeracy through health and safety, legislation and business operations (ST+MC, 2000: 6).

ST+MC relates the views of NTOs that employers most frequently cite cost and time as barriers to training. However, the report also considers other emotional barriers, including employers' lack of confidence in approaching basic numeracy training and employees' reluctance to admit their need (ST+MC, 2000: 6). NTOs and training providers feel that

employers often do not have sufficient expertise to conduct or arrange basic skills training and are not sufficiently aware of specialist trainers within LEAs and colleges (ST+MC, 2000: 6).

Although ST+MC has some doubts about the size of its sample, this is its picture of 'attitudes' and 'barriers' to 'numeracy skills in the UK workforce' as a whole. Various other employer/business surveys offer insights into barriers to literacy and numeracy in small businesses, particularly in Lincolnshire and Rutland. In 2001, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) surveyed all members, asking questions on training, education, qualifications, etc. A total of 1,702 responses were received from small businesses in East Midlands (nationally the response rate was 14 per cent). An interpretation of these responses is published as **Lifting the Barriers to Growth in UK Small Businesses: East Midlands** (FSB 2002).

The analysis is almost wholly quantitative, but gives a general sense of feelings among small business owners about the value of education and training. Asked to consider which factors were most important for the survival and growth of their business, most respondents felt this to be their own business's capabilities (77 per cent). This was followed in order of importance by the ability to employ staff (56 per cent), finance and banking (51 per cent), legislation (46 per cent), and education and training (40 per cent). Considered less important were government-funded business support at 24 per cent, public services at 23 per cent, and EU-funded and funding programmes at 18 per cent (FSB, 2002: 6). Most respondents were employers, and the report claims that they value 'attitude and character' and 'experience' most highly when recruiting, and value 'industry-related courses' over A-levels, 'vocational qualifications' and degrees. Academic ability is not highly prized, with university qualifications considered to be the least important (FSB, 2002: 8).

Only 15 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the suitability of their labour force and 29 per cent of the respondents registered dissatisfaction with the literacy and numeracy of their labour. Compared to the rest of the UK, East Midlands respondents were generally less satisfied with both the literacy and the numeracy of the labour force (FSB, 2002: 8).

A table is reproduced in the report showing 'satisfaction with education and training'. The literacy and numeracy rows are shown below:

%	Not answered	Not relevant	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Literacy of labour force	11	13	7	22	27	17	1
Numeracy of labour force	12	13	7	22	27	17	1

(FSB, 2002: 40)

We are unable to be certain how literacy and numeracy were defined, raising issues over what employers thought was meant by these terms.

The report goes on to claim that 20 per cent of employers were 'satisfied to any degree' with the relevance of locally available training courses. It echoes the ST+MC report, arguing that employers were deterred from training staff by time constraints and cost. The workplace was

usually the setting for learning, with 34 per cent of all respondents' staff undertaking workplace-based learning in the previous 12 months (FSB, 2002: 8).

Employers in Lincolnshire and Rutland are surveyed every year by Lincolnshire Development's (LD) Employer Survey. The most recent telephone survey (October and December 2002), published as **Doing Business in Lincolnshire and Rutland** (2002), interviewed 1,002 companies and organisations across Lincolnshire's 10 Travel to Work Areas including Rutland. They were representative of the structure of employment and covered the full range of businesses including public sector organisations (LD, 2002a: 1). All respondents listed barriers to business growth and chose the most important barrier. Respondents were not given a list of possible barriers, but were asked to construct their own list.

The most important barriers to growth were market size (20 per cent of employers) and increasing labour costs (18 per cent). Skills, training and qualifications were not listed (LD, 2002b: 5). Barriers to growth included 'availability of craft' (about 2.5 per cent), 'technical' (about 1.8 per cent) and 'management skills' (about 1.5 per cent) but did not list basic skills such as literacy and numeracy (LD, 2002b: 6). When companies questioned in relation to recruitment specifically, a concern for skills emerges. Among responding companies in Lincolnshire and Rutland, 28 per cent had current vacancies for permanent staff and more than half of these had vacancies which were proving hard to fill. This is higher than the UK average of 14 per cent (LD, 2002b: 8-9).

The report briefly considers reasons for difficulty in Lincolnshire and Rutland. Rurality, which we think here stands for remoteness, dispersal, poor transport etc., is discounted, because companies with vacancies were not related to location. Instead, problems arose with particular occupations including personal service occupations, skilled trades, health professionals, machine operators and drivers (LD, 2002b: 9). Employers' perceptions of the main reasons for these recruitment difficulties included 'general lack of applicants' (26 per cent), 'lack of applicants with required qualifications/skills' (24 per cent), and 'lack of applicants with experience/job-specific skills' (11 per cent). One of the least common reasons was 'applicants' lack of basic ability' (3 per cent), although this does not necessarily refer to literacy and numeracy.

Asked to reflect on skills needs, 18 per cent of the employers surveyed felt that there were significant gaps between the type of skills that their current employees had and those which they needed to meet business objectives (LD, 2002a: 6). Should we assume, then, that 82 per cent expressed satisfaction with their employees' skills? The figure of 18 per cent (or 21 per cent in the full report) is compared to a UK figure of 7 per cent (LD, 2002b: 10), suggesting that employers in Lincolnshire and Rutland are more than averagely dissatisfied with their employees' skills. The summary report notes that employers claimed that the skills most in need of improvement among employees were manual/craft (46 per cent), personal (44 per cent), technical (39 per cent) and team working (36 per cent). Literacy (about 17 per cent) and numeracy (about 14 per cent) were the least commonly cited specific skills considered as in need of improvement (LD, 2002a: 6).

We might conclude that employers are less concerned about literacy than for example personal skills, but we have no sense of what employers take these terms to signify. The main report considers these findings, noting that small businesses are less likely to perceive gaps in skills (LD, 2002b: 10). It also notes geographical differences in skills shortages, due to the nature of industries within different locations. This is in slight contrast to Lincolnshire's LEA, which maintains that teacher recruitment is more difficult further east in the county (more

rural, poor transport links, etc.).

Within the report, employers in the manufacturing sector and the distribution, hotels and restaurants sector were slightly more likely, in relation to all companies, to regard literacy and numeracy as being in need of improvement. Employers in the public administration, education and health sector were less likely to regard these skills as needing improvement. Employers' views of the reasons for 'increased skills needs' might offer some understanding of their tendency to value certain skills, because more than 40 per cent of employers considered implementation of higher-quality standards, introduction of new working practices and introduction of new technology as the reasons for the increased skills needs. Many also noted the development of new products or services as a factor (LD, 2002b:10).

The picture, therefore, is one of skills needs arising from economic change, rather than in relation to government assessment of basic skills.

The report goes on to analyse responses to questions on training. It highlights the wide variations in business provision, noting that more than half of all businesses have no training budget and more than a third no staff training plan (LD, 2002b: 11). Within companies with fewer than 10 employees, about 69 per cent have no training budget, about 54 per cent have no training plan and about 73 per cent have no personal development plan (LD, 2002b: 12). This may be because smaller companies are less frequently affected by skills gaps and put more emphasis on recruitment of employees with the correct skills. There are also financial constraints restricting training provision in smaller companies (LD, 2002b: 11).

#### 1.4 Adult learning and rurality

This section examines literature relating to adult education and rurality. Such literature is limited; as Gray observes:

*...there is very little policy discussion in government or debate amongst education researchers about rural lifelong learning.* (Gray, 2002: 3)

Exceptions include a report by Lowerson and Thomson (1994), two NIACE publications (Payne, 2000; Gray, 2002) and Clarke et al. (2002).

Lowerson and Thomson (1994) focused on barriers to participation in rural adult education in East Sussex, Derbyshire, Cornwall and North Yorkshire, defining barriers in the broadest sense as imposed, operational and internalised obstacles to learning (Lowerson and Thomson, 1994: 5). The barriers investigated were mostly factual, actual, physical and economic, Lowerson encourages researchers to build on their work by looking at issues of identity and rural culture:

*The biggest problem, yet to be cracked by any researches significantly, is that of the barriers raised by the intended beneficiaries of so much provision. 'What holds them back?', is a key issue. We had not the resources to do more than hint at this problem but it remains surely central to any future research agenda.* (Lowerson and Thomson, 1994: 7)

Lowerson and Thomson are clear about their research methodology and its link with lifelong

learning initiatives in rural settings. They report on the reality of rural adult education; their approach largely ignores rural studies approaches, influenced by postmodernism, which examine rurality through a focus on identity and difference (e.g. Philo, 1992; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Philo, 1993; Murdoch and Pratt, 1994; Gilg, 1994; Cloke and Little, 1997).

Lowerson and Thomson (1994) present four accounts of lifelong learning initiatives in their rural study areas. Payne (1994) describes transport, population, employment and pay levels in East Sussex and links these to the provision of adult education in the area. Payne apologises for the 'factual' treatment, but suggests that a limited project would struggle adequately to characterise subjective experiences of rural isolation and poverty (Payne, cited in Lowerson and Thomson, 1994: 14). Questions of how people feel, act, understand themselves and value things are suggested in the text but are not a central theme.

Lowerson and Thomson (1994) list as barriers to education in rural areas the following:

- a. relatively scattered potential cohorts are likely to form small and comparatively expensive groups;*
- b. physical isolation is exacerbated by transport difficulties, public and private, affecting women in particular;*
- c. powerful cultural factors may inhibit take-up rates.* (Lowerson and Thomson, 1994: 2)

The report does not examine these 'powerful cultural factors' or theorise the cultural in relation to the rural. At the end of the report Lowerson locates the field studies within the current debates about rurality (Lowerson and Thomson, 1994: 6). He asks whether there is a distinctive mindset in rural areas, commenting that reality is much more complex than popular stereotypes would allow; and he notes that understanding the factors which encourage isolation will be difficult without a different type of enquiry. Lowerson and Thomson (1994) refer to 'cognitive dissonance', 'mental barriers' and 'internalised resistance' as aspects of the barriers to learning in rural communities. In this report we pick up these concepts and explore their relationship with issues of individual and cultural identity in rural communities.

The NIACE publication **Landscapes of learning: Lifelong learning in rural communities** (2002) collected essays and case studies that examine the relationship between rurality and adult education. The context of particular rural areas is stressed and it is concluded that lifelong learning needs to be attuned to the locality (Gray, 2002: 15–16). Many of the essays are written against imaginings of rural areas as socially homogeneous and focus on rural deprivation and inequality (Jones, 2002; Ryley, 2002). Ryley (2002) argues that the most common popular view of rural society is one of cosy advantage. Against this vision he presents facts about rural parishes. In 1997, 75 per cent had no daily bus service, 49 per cent had no school (Ryley, 2002: 39), and only 4.4 per cent of individuals were directly employed in agriculture – instead, a fragile post-agricultural economy exists based on light industry, leisure and e-business, with an extraordinary dependence on small businesses and part-time employment (Ryley, 2002: 39). This employment profile has been strongly skewed as male full-time jobs are lost. Much of the temporary employment, which has replaced the full-time model, is seasonal, implying winter unemployment (e.g. the summer work along the coast of Lincolnshire).

Ryley argues that rural deprivation has a particular geography, involving:

*...three distinct aspects; the difference between central and peripheral rural areas; the dispersal and concealment of deprivation amongst affluent communities; and the marginalisation of rural poor from the social and economic centre of rural life. (Ryley, 2002: 40-41)*

Ryley contrasts two kinds of rurality: one, the urban economy of commuters and second, the homeowners and the retired, which masks a local economy to which the increasingly immobile rural poor are tied (Ryley, 2002: 41). Ryley argues that adult education is unlikely, on its own, to transform rural society, economy and culture. He combines criticism of policy with empirical, often numerical description of rural areas, but quantitative indicators alone do not capture the full experience of rural deprivation.

Gray (Gray, 2002: 9) and others have considered the 'rural proofing' of adult education. Rural proofing was advocated in the White Paper **Our Countryside: The Future – A Fair Deal for Rural England** (DETR, 2000). Gray interprets this as an effort to attune policy to the specificity of the rural and in a report to the Countryside Agency on the 'rural proofing' of lifelong learning, 'rural' and 'rurality' are defined in terms of settlement size rather than as social constructions (Clarke et al. 2002: 11). (This is a very difficult area for forming any definitive answer. At one level tangible definitions of rural are whatever the researcher wants them to be. At another level almost everyone has his or her view of what rural really means). Throughout the report there is a potential tension between the need to generalise, to identify the characteristics of rural areas which affect supply and demand for lifelong learning and a recognition that rurality is diverse and heterogeneous (Clarke et al. 2002: 11).

While recognising that there are specific kinds of rural area and rurality, the report generalises the effects of rurality on lifelong learning. Echoing the CRG report to DfES, it identifies the dispersed nature of rural populations and the smallness of businesses as general, rural contexts (Clarke et al. 2002: 13). These might be experienced differently by different occupants and are likely to be more pronounced for women and those who are economically disadvantaged (Clarke et al. 2002: 21).

In contrast to a view of rurality as something that 'impacts' on different kinds of people, it may be useful to understand 'rurality' as a category that is given meaning in particular social practices. In other words, 'rurality' does not impact on women; instead 'rurality' and 'femininity' are both socially constructed through particular representations and practices. These understandings and enactments of 'rurality' and 'femininity' might explain ways in which adult education, including training in literacy and numeracy, are valued or not valued. These ideas are explored further in the next section.

## **1.5 Rural culture: identity and consciousness**

This section develops our theorisation of rurality in relation to anthropology and geography. First, we examine issues of identity, difference and 'otherness' in rural studies, especially in rural geography. In particular we consider the social construction of rurality in relation to rural masculinities, femininities and ageing. Secondly, we examine the understandings of identity, consciousness and practice in the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

### **1.5.1 Rural geographies**

Recent work has focused on the social construction of rurality in relation to identity, power and 'otherness' (see Philo, 1992; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Philo, 1993; Murdoch and Pratt, 1994; Gilg, 1994; Cloke and Little, 1997). We begin with research on rural femininity (Stebbing 1984) that pre-dates this new rural geography, but which anticipates some of its concerns and style.

Stebbing (1984) used a phenomenological model to analyse women's 'role perceptions and behaviour' in rural East Kent. Individual identity was conceived as identification with a 'role'. Female roles are reproduced by and reproduce, local society (Stebbing, 1984: 200). Questionnaires sent to a 10 per cent random sample of women collected subjective information about living in the countryside, personal histories (especially employment history), sex-role perceptions and, for married respondents, conjugal-role behaviour. Stebbing classified the responses, as either 'traditional' or 'non-traditional', with traditional responses home-centred and nurturant, while non-traditional responses stressed the equality of the sexes (Stebbing, 1984: 201).

The research found that 82 per cent of respondents believe in 'traditional' sex roles. This valuing of traditional female roles was linked by Stebbing to the persistence of 19th century understandings of rural women as natural, homely, domestic, skilled and positioned at the centre of the home, family and community. Also, 65 per cent of respondents considered themselves 'countrywomen'. Although Stebbing hints at a slightly defensive self-belief, she argues that objective conditions of the rural locality maintain local conceptions of appropriate female roles and behaviour. Lack of contact with difference and diversity, and the visibility of individuals, maintains their belief in 'traditional' kinds of femininity. Isolation insulates from conflicting definitions of the reality of the female role (Stebbing, 1984: 204). Although 55 per cent of respondents had access to a car, Stebbing pointed out that individuals might not be motivated to aspire to things beyond the locality (Stebbing, 1984: 204).

Although Stebbing's use of the concept of social 'roles' conflicts with Bourdieu's concept of social practice, the argument above is close to habitus. A local habitus tends to reproduce itself, gaining legitimacy from those who share the habitus. Meaning is given by others in the locality and mixing with like-minded people plays an important part in the maintenance of perceptions of reality (Stebbing, 1984: 205). Stebbing found that interaction between the women was limited, mostly to who lived nearby or with work colleagues. While employment introduced some respondents (including many of those with 'non-traditional' sex roles) to other versions of reality, for the majority work was socially restricted and restricting. Most (58 per cent) worked locally and there were no local jobs that allowed mixing with a more diverse workforce. Indeed, over 40 per cent were home workers (Stebbing, 1984: 205).

Relative lack of social service provision loads women, rather than men, with unpaid work within the family and home. Stebbing's argument is that isolation (physical, social, personal) reproduces certain perceptions of reality, including 'proper' ways of being female. They are also reinforced, she suggests, by social closeness in small settlements, where any behavioural non-conformity is extremely visible (Stebbing, 1984: 206). The same might be true of men, as localities construct stable kinds of masculinity, in which adult education in general and literacy and numeracy in particular may not feature.

Recent work in rural geography has examined women in rural areas as a kind of 'other', excluded by many studies of rurality (Hughes, 1997; Little, 1997). Femininity and rurality are categories that are constructed and given meaning in spatially and historically specific social

and cultural practices. Hughes (1997), focusing on rural women in mid-Wales, examined the ways in which domestic identities adhere to or contest dominant constructions of rural womanhood (Hughes, 1997: 126). These dominant constructions were identified, as in Stebbing, as central within the home, caring for the family (Hughes, 1997: 125). Hughes quotes at length from interviews with women. Older women recalled that, in the recent past (about 30 to 40 years ago), all women worked in the home. Younger women are quoted as arguing that, from the late 1980s, local women were increasingly involved in paid employment, away from the home. Hughes stresses the continuities with the past, but notes that most women worked full-time, their paid employment fitting around their domestic responsibilities (Hughes, 1997: 130).

Generally, interviewees felt that 'it was a woman's duty to stay at home with her children', an attitude shared by all groups of women (Hughes, 1997: 130). Hughes suggests this contributes to a femininity of caution and non-ambition (Hughes, 1997: 131). The awareness of being seen and judged is both socially and spatially produced and the social constraints on women are much more apparent in rural areas.

Hughes claims that rural areas are being influenced by modern life and that rural women are beginning to make more choices, but it should be noted that Hughes conducted research in 1994: we consider research conducted in May to July 2003. If modernisation in relation to rural employment, domesticity and femininity has occurred, it may have advanced within the general context outlined by Hughes (1997), who reports that despite recent changes in attitude, there is a stability in traditional constructions of rural femininity.

Little (1997), has focused on female rural employment, examining connections between women's self-identity, paid employment, and wider roles within the community in villages near Bristol. Echoing previous studies, Little (1997) found fewer women engaged in paid work than is the case nationally, with most employed part-time. More than half (52 per cent) were doing work for which they had not been trained, or did not use their qualifications. This was partly because of the restricted amount and kind of paid work (Little, 1997). While professional and older women encountered problems in job seeking locally, jobs for younger women (especially school leavers) were especially deficient, and almost exclusively unskilled and poorly paid. Although female employment is connected to the overall pattern of employment available, Little argues that relationships between household, community and the labour market are critical in forming and sustaining gender identities (Little, 1997: 145).

The observation made by both Stebbing and Hughes recurs: women tend to seek work during school hours only. Most interviewees were 'incomers', and Little argues that certain conceptions of the 'rural' environment contributed to the move, to women's strategies in relation to childcare, work and the home. Physical but also social and cultural aspects of rurality influence decisions to give up work, stay at home and care for their children. Interviewees regarded rural areas as attractive environments in which to raise children and understood themselves in relation to wider understandings of rural femininity as domestic, maternal and homely. Again echoing Hughes, Little notes that this identity is formed through attention to the self, but also by the 'attention of others' (Little, 1997: 149).

To date, very little work has considered the social construction of rural masculinities. However, exceptions are Brandth (1995) and Saugeres (2002). Brandth (1995) examined representations of masculinity in Norwegian tractor advertisements, between 1984 and 1994, considering these to reflect and construct rural masculinities. Work is regarded as a practice

through which men make themselves masculine (Brandth, 1995: 124). Brandth suggests that occupations associated with heavy, dirty and dangerous work, including farming, are connected to hegemonic forms of masculinity in some parts of society. Tools and technology contribute to the social construction of masculinities; and masculinities give meaning to tools and technology. He argues that tractors are an important sign of rural masculinity, and that tractor adverts reveal something about the types of masculinities which are being constructed (Brandth, 1995: 125).

The advertisements attempt to sell tractors through appeals to images of masculinity. The machines are pictured with reference, Brandth claims, to a specific, sexualised masculinity. More particularly, Brandth suggests that the advertisements reflect and construct the particular masculinity of the 'lonely rider', supporting the notion that contemporary farming has become a lonely occupation. Women are not included in the images, and the men do not work with, or relate to, other people (Brandth, 1995: 128).

This construction of masculinity is, Brandth argues, reworked and partly challenged by more recent tractor advertisements. The newer adverts are careful not to disrupt the connection between masculinity and tractors by appealing to strength but also appealing therefore to the competitive instincts of the potential customers. A second feature of newer tractors is comfort; this change may reflect, Brandth suggests, new forms of farming masculinity centred on 'a less manual, more white collar image – a masculine type which seems to borrow some of its characteristics from business and engineering work'. (Brandth, 1995: 130) Brandth is unsure whether 'hegemonic' rural masculinity is changing, or merely reasserting itself in a different form (Brandth, 1995: 132). Of particular interest is Brandth's distinction between masculinities focused on manual and intellectual work, and his identification of a new competitive, business-like masculinity in agriculture. Is an interest in literacy and numeracy compatible only with certain kinds of masculinity? Perhaps this new form of masculinity assumes a particular version of literacy and numeracy linked to functional competence within industry.

Saugeres (2002) examined the ways in which, in a town in rural southern France (Rignac in Aveyron), masculinity is constructed through 'symbolic', 'imagined' and real relations between men, nature, land and landscape. She argues that, in traditional peasant farming, the farmer is represented as possessing a physical and biological connection to the land. This is only possible for men, and naturalises and legitimates the idea that only men can be real farmers (Saugeres, 2002: 377). All farmers interviewed, although relying on mechanisation and subsidies, valued and idealised traditional peasant farming (Saugeres, 2002: 377).

A particular kind of agricultural masculinity, based around ideas of connection with the land, emerges from this work. The connection of 'peasant' farmers with the land is represented as embodied (in the blood, a passion, sustenance), and is analysed using feminist psychoanalytical understandings of land and landscape as feminine (nurturing mother and object of desire). Women are constructed and construct themselves, as not having a close relationship with the land (Saugeres, 2002: 380). These representations are connected to actual and practical situations: fewer women than men farm, women do only certain types of work on the farm, men inherit farms, men have appropriated agricultural technology and women are seen as only being able to do menial and secondary tasks (Saugeres, 2002: 380–381). Again, these versions of masculine and feminine are viewed as stable (Saugeres, 2002: 382).

Masculinities and femininities are cut across by other categories of identity, including age. Again, little has been written on rurality and age, but Harper (1997) argues that older people

are commonly understood as completely different to the non-aged (Harper, 1997: 183). The conception of the aged as separate, specific and different is explained, Harper suggests, by particular, Western understandings of the bodies and minds. The idea of the physical body, Harper claims, has been replaced by ideas of the 'metaphorical body', imagined in nostalgia, and the 'social body' through which those in later life are marginalised. Harper argues that the rural and the elderly are constructed in an 'interactive relationship'. The 'metaphorical body' emphasises the nostalgic, and in later life the theme of the rural is often invoked (Harper, 1997:182). In the 'social body', physiological changes are seen as making older people unsuitable for mainstream activities. Older people then learn to accept this constructed self-image (Harper, 1997: 191–192). Finally, retirement and moves to rural areas construct the rural and the elderly as social and culturally marginal despite their growing numerical importance in many rural areas.

In this section we have tried to outline some of the recent work exploring aspects of rural identity – particularly constructions of rural femininity and masculinity. We suggest that issues of personal and community identity may provide helpful signposts to increasing participation in adult literacy and numeracy programmes among some groups of rural people.

### 1.5.2 Rural culture/habitus

Introducing a collection of anthropological studies of 'British rural cultures', Cohen writes of rural culture:

*...one's culture is at the forefront of consciousness and social process. Of course I do not suggest that people are aware of it as 'culture': they are aware of it through their identities as Whalsay folk, as Tory Islanders, as Kilbroney Protestants. But their capacity to be so aware both explains to them why they behave as they do (that is, why they behave differently from others) and may also incline them consciously to engage in certain kinds of behaviour. Cohen, 1982: 3*

Cohen hints that rural culture is not wholly thought through (Cohen, 1982: 4). It is this understanding of (rural) culture that Pierre Bourdieu's work helps us to explore. Bourdieu argues that self-understanding in individuals and in societies is mainly practical, rather than conscious, or intellectual. From birth, people participate in and experience their circumstances, developing what Bourdieu terms 'practical sense' (Jenkins, 1998: 69-72). The sum of this practical sense is 'habitus', a non-conscious understanding of and competence in, social reality.

Social reality occurs in particular 'fields'; practice is produced in a dialectical relationship between habitus and field. Bourdieu likens habitus to a reactive, bodily competence in a game (Bourdieu, 1998: 80). Because habitus is a non-conscious, practical correspondence between individual (embodied structures) and environment (objective structures), life tends not to be contemplated. Self and world are taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1998: 81). Habitus is acquired in experience, in doing, by taking part and once formed, the 'dispositions' of habitus are durable, a reflection of their foundation during the early years of life. In other words, children grow up to see the world in the same way as the older generation of the primary group (Mahar et al. 1990: 11). Although dispositions are durable, they are also adjusted in relation to new, various fields (Jenkins, 1998: 80). The relationship between habitus and field is explored more fully below.

Bourdieu uses the metaphor of the 'field', or 'marketplace', to describe particular areas of

social reality. A field is a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources, defined by what is at stake – cultural goods (life-style), housing, intellectual distinction (education), employment, land, power (politics) and social class, prestige (Jenkins, 1998: 84). Bourdieu terms these stakes ‘capital’. Jenkins suggests (Jenkins, 1998: 85) that Bourdieu recognises four kinds of capital – economic, social, cultural and symbolic. The field is a highly spatial, relational way of understanding social reality. Individuals occupy positions in social space; the positions exist as relations of power and as differences (Bourdieu, 1998: 6). Bourdieu writes that there is a relationship between social positions, dispositions (or habitus) and position-takings (prises de position); that is, the ‘choices’ made by social agents (Bourdieu, 1998: 6).

We would not dismiss a conception of rural culture as conscious, and Cohen’s analysis of rural closeness and defensiveness informs this study. However, we use Bourdieu’s work to think beyond the explanations given by respondents. We argue that a respondent’s answer to a question may also be interpreted as suggestive of a non-conscious form of self-understanding or interest. The explanation of a respondent may relate to the effect of something which needs to be explained (habitus; relationship between habitus and field; field position; possession of capital).

We also argue that a theoretical model expressed through the language of economics (marketplace, capital, interest) would be especially suited to the small businesses which form our object of study. A central question is whether, in the fields and marketplaces of Lincolnshire and Rutland, adult literacy and numeracy (as defined by DfES) are an attractive form of capital. Within small businesses, is there interest (in Bourdieu’s sense of the word) in adult literacy and numeracy? If habitus receives legitimacy from those who share the habitus – rather than the dominant position – what implication has this for promoting adult literacy and numeracy in some sections of the rural population?

### 1.5.3 Generalisable rurality

We return to Cohen’s collection of anthropological studies of ‘British rural cultures’, discussed earlier in this section. Cohen’s vision of rural cultures as mainly self-conscious and aware suggests that the studies are intended to show that the similarity of social forms in different places is more apparent than real (Cohen, 1982: 9). Although a kind of comparative insight might follow, the focus is on particular examples of rural culture (Cohen, 1982: 9). Cohen argues that a recognition of the particularity of rural communities should inform politics and the formulation of public policy (Cohen, 1982: 9).

Our project, though focused on a particular county, aims to produce knowledge useful to policy-makers about the effect of rurality, of rural culture, on developing interest in, commitment to and valuing of, adult literacy and numeracy skills and training. We argue that Bourdieu’s theory of social practice allows us to engage with a specific field or fields (small businesses in rural Lincolnshire; particular small business sectors in rural Lincolnshire), while also investigating general processes of rural culture. We are interested in the specific, but also in what Bourdieu calls ‘the invariant, the structure in each variable observed.’ The ‘structure’ is the pattern of social space, the dialectic between habitus and field, the relation of field positions and so on, described above.

It is with these methodological ideas in mind that the project’s design is next discussed.

## 2 Methodology

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The following describes the design of the sample, the questionnaire and interviews.

### 2.1 Sampling

A total survey was not possible. It was necessary to identify a sample of businesses that would represent or reflect small businesses in rural Lincolnshire and Rutland. Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry could not release business names and addresses. Lincolnshire Development was not prepared to supply names and addresses because it was concerned that further questioning of small businesses in Lincolnshire and Rutland would, by 'research fatigue', reduce the response rate in its annual 'Employer Survey'. However, the organisation kindly allowed us to view the 'sampling frames' used in the survey. These frames attempt to make the sample of 1,000 businesses representative of Lincolnshire and Rutland by ensuring that it follows the pattern of employment structure (expressed through the Broad Industrial Groups, 1–9) across the 10 Travel to Work Areas of Lincolnshire and Rutland; and across four business size bands.

We bought from Lincolnshire and Rutland Business Link the names and addresses of 40 small businesses in each of the 10 Travel to Work Areas of Lincolnshire and Rutland: Louth, Skegness and Mablethorpe, Horncastle, Gainsborough, Lincoln, Sleaford, Grantham, Boston, Spalding and Holbeach, and Stamford (see Appendix 1). Sample size was set by the need to approach sufficient businesses to be able to expect a useful number of replies and by practical issues regarding the cost of data and the time that it would take the single researcher to send out questionnaires and reminders.

The businesses were selected from Lincolnshire and Rutland Business Link's 'client database'. This client database is described by Business Link as including 'many more small businesses (particularly non-limited organisations, e.g. sole traders, partnerships) than any other available source'.

The businesses were selected randomly, although within the structure of our specified criteria. The businesses are 'small' in the sense of having less than 50 employees. Within each of the Travel to Work Areas, their addresses lie outside the principal urban centres. The businesses chosen in each of the TTWAs reflect or match the employment structure of Lincolnshire and Rutland, expressed through the Broad Industrial Groups, 1–9 (see Appendix 2). The data on employment structure for Lincolnshire was extracted from Lincolnshire Development's publication **Drivers for Change** (2002c) and the data on employment structure for Rutland was supplied by Rutland County Council. These were collated and forwarded to Business Link to inform the search.

We chose this structured but random sample, rather than attempting to identify businesses through key informants or organisations involved in training such as ABSSU, the LSC, FE colleges and others, because we wished to study businesses that are not necessarily involved in training activities. In other words, the structured but random sample allows us to study relationships between rurality and both involvement in and lack of involvement in literacy and numeracy training.

## 2.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire (see Appendix 3) was designed to reflect two key concerns: a concern to maximise the likelihood of recipients completing and returning it; and a concern effectively to question recipients on relationships between adult literacy and numeracy, small business and rurality. The questionnaires were used both as tools for the collection of key quantitative and qualitative data, and as initial assessments through which research questions and themes could be identified. Certain questions seek what might be regarded as basic information about, for example, numbers of employees, the gender of employees and numbers of employees known to be engaged in literacy and numeracy training. Other questions ask employers/business owners to record their awareness of the *Skills for Life* agenda and particular forms of local promotion and provision. Others encourage employers/business owners to make brief arguments about the value of literacy and numeracy training and about who should be responsible for it.

The questions asking employers/business owners to assess the literacy and numeracy levels of their employees include a definition of 'literacy' and 'numeracy' taken from the introduction to the **Adult Literacy Core Curriculum** (2001):

*Literacy covers the ability to:*

- *speak, listen and respond*
- *read and comprehend*
- *write to communicate.*

*Numeracy covers the ability to:*

- *understand and use mathematical information*
- *calculate and manipulate mathematical information*
- *interpret results and communicate mathematical information.* (DfES, 2001: 3)

The inclusion of these definitions is an attempt to overcome what we see as a potential problem in previous surveys that have asked employers/business owners to assess or value literacy and numeracy, with no strategy for being able to claim confidence about what those employers/business owners take these labels to mean (see above). Follow-up interviews allowed us to more fully explore employer/business owners' understanding of what is meant by 'literacy' and 'numeracy', including their conceptions of what constitutes useful, desirable forms of literacy and numeracy in relation to specific work contexts and practices. Are there, for example, particular kinds of business in rural Lincolnshire and Rutland through which literacy and numeracy training can claim social, cultural and economic capital?

The questionnaires were sent to people conducting business in non-urban parts of Lincolnshire and Rutland. Therefore, the responses can be treated as presenting specifically rural evidence. Furthermore, one of the questions included in the questionnaire asked employers/business owners to reflect on relationships between rurality and adult literacy and numeracy:

*Q: What would you say is special about supporting adult literacy and numeracy in a rural setting?* Question 11, Appendix 3

Especially when followed up in interviews, responses to this question help us to understand ways in which employers understand literacy and numeracy training in relation to their own conception and experience of their rural setting.

### **2.3 Interviews**

Analysis of the questionnaires identified particular themes and questions for further investigation; each theme was pursued through interviews with certain small businesses (see Section 3.1). Interviews were conducted at 15 small businesses with 17 individuals. Given the focus on conscious and non-conscious self-understanding, together with individual and social identity, it was crucial that the interviews were in-depth and only 'semi-structured'. The interviews were transcribed in full and are presented in this report, as a separate volume.

## 3. Analysis

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### 3.1 Questionnaire analysis

We received 84 completed questionnaires. This is a response rate of 21 per cent. In other words, more than one in five recipients filled in and returned the questionnaire<sup>1</sup>. In this section we analyse responses to each question. It is written in a very particular style; we present arguments and analysis, but also present in quotations selected responses to each question<sup>2</sup>. Although this results in some lengthy quotations, it is a way of preserving the original 'data' for use by other researchers and policy makers<sup>3</sup>.

Note that quotations from the questionnaires have a reference code. The code expresses the employment sector and Travel to Work Area of the response, as follows:

*A = Agriculture and Fishing, E = Energy and Water, M = Manufacturing, C = Construction, D = Distribution, Hotels and Restaurants (incl. Retail), T = Transport and Communications, B = Banking, Finance and Insurance, P = Public Administration, Education and Health, O = Other Services. SL = Sleaford, ST = Stamford, SK = Skegness and Mablethorpe, SP = Spalding and Holbeach, G = Grantham, GA = Gainsborough, L = Lincoln, LO = Louth, B = Boston, H = Horncastle.*

Therefore, for example, the code MSL1 refers to a response from a manufacturing business in the Sleaford Travel to Work Area. A different manufacturing business in the same Travel to Work Area would have the code MSL2 or MSL3 and so on. U refers to a questionnaire that has been filled in and returned without a name or address; the employment sector and Travel to Work Area are unknown.

We conclude the section by emphasising the key themes, findings, constructions and links identified by the questionnaire analysis. These themes are explored further in the subsequent interviews and interview analysis.

#### 3.1.1 Respondents' views of employees' literacy levels (q4)

Only 4 per cent of respondents claimed to regard their employees' literacy levels as 'poor'. While 15 per cent claimed to regard literacy levels as 'adequate', 44 per cent claimed to regard literacy levels as 'good' and 38 per cent claimed to regard literacy levels as 'excellent'.

#### 3.1.2 Respondents' views of employees' numeracy levels (q5)

Only 6 per cent of respondents claimed to regard their employees' numeracy levels as 'poor'. Otherwise, 20 per cent claimed to regard numeracy levels as 'adequate', 49 per cent as 'good' and 26 per cent as 'excellent'.

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<sup>1</sup> A return rate of 21 per cent sounds low but is actually higher than many other questionnaire-based surveys in this field. See for example the Federation of Small Business (2001) survey shown earlier in this report which achieved a 14 per cent return rate and the ST+MC (2000) survey which achieved an 8 per cent return rate.

<sup>2</sup> The complete set of transcripts is available for other researchers from [chris.atkin@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:chris.atkin@nottingham.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> The quotations used are generally verbatim except where the transcribed text makes the meaning unclear.

### 3.1.3 Respondents' views of employees' literacy levels by employment sector (numbers)

	'excellent'	'good'	'adequate'	'poor'
Agriculture and Fishing	2	3	2	0
Energy and Water	0	1	0	0
Manufacturing	6	9	1	1
Construction	1	3	2	0
Distribution, Hotels and Restaurants (incl. Retail)	8	7	2	1
Transport and Communications	1	1	0	0
Banking, Finance, Insurance	3	2	0	0
Public Administration, Education and Health	6	9	1	0
Other Services	5	2	2	1

### 3.1.4 Respondents' views of employees' numeracy levels by employment sector (numbers)

	'excellent'	'good'	'adequate'	'poor'
Agriculture and Fishing	2	2	2	1
Energy and Water	0	1	0	0
Manufacturing	4	11	1	1
Construction	1	3	2	0
Distribution, Hotels, Restaurants (incl. Retail)	6	6	5	1
Transport and Communications	1	1	0	0
Banking, Finance, Insurance	3	1	1	0
Public Administration, Education and Health	3	11	2	0
Other Services	2	5	1	2

### 3.1.5 Access to support in literacy and numeracy by employees (q6)

None of the respondents indicated that employees were accessing support in literacy or numeracy. The majority (92 per cent) claimed to know that employees were not accessing such support; 8 per cent answered that they did not know whether employees were accessing such support.

### 3.1.6 Respondents' views of the government's Skills for Life agenda (q8)

More than half (52 per cent) of respondents claimed not to be aware of the *Skills for Life* agenda. About a quarter (26 per cent) claimed to be aware of it and view it as valuable, while 12 per cent claimed to be aware of it and are critical of it.

#### Criticisms include:

Not relevant to the world of work: 'Not relevant.' (DG4)/ 'Not relevant to our business.' (DST3)/ 'OK – I know about it, but I'm not sure the rest of the local community do.' (OH2)/ 'I wonder if it will target the people who need it. However, generally, I feel it is

adequate.’ (OL1)/ ‘Very little. It would appear that government is more intent and believes everything can be done via the internet without a need for basic skills in providing for ourselves as a country.’ (MG2)/ ‘Somewhat inadequate.’ (MH2)/ ‘Rubbish – completely out of touch with reality of the real work environment. Simply cheap words to satisfy political ambition and gain votes from the masses!’ (BL02)

It’s a problem with schools: ‘Too late for many. I don’t know much about it other than far too many teenagers leave school illiterate – many of whom don’t care enough to get help!’ (DSP3)/ ‘I think that if more money and resources were ploughed into providing a good-quality provision at school, *Skills for Life* wouldn’t be required.’ (PLO2)/ ‘If children cannot get to a reasonable standard in these skills by 16+, what makes us think they can learn as adults.’ (U3)

#### Approvals include:

Useful for individuals and business: ‘Any scheme of this type is of benefit to individuals and companies alike.’ (CLO1)/ ‘A great idea. We employ a number of contractors who would benefit from improving these skills.’ (CL1)/ ‘I think it is beneficial to people/employers and gives them somewhere to turn if they are having difficulties.’ (DST1)

Useful for those who missed out at school: ‘Fulfils need and provides a starting point for those who were unable to take advantage of earlier education. Provides the basis for a much-needed skills pool.’ (DGA1)/ ‘I feel it is a good step forward, but can be a little too late; building confidence is a slow process.’ (PSP1)/ ‘Very worthwhile – however, more needs to be done earlier, i.e. in schools.’ (PLO2)/ ‘Very important and needed; now more is known about ADHD, and adults who didn’t fully benefit from school due to this can now have a further chance.’ (OSK1)/ ‘Good idea, if people are leaving school without these skills.’ (MG4)/ ‘Very good for our parents as language skills of children beginning at our school are extremely poor in general.’ (PB1)

A great idea: ‘Good idea.’ (MB1)/ ‘Valuable service.’ (MSL1)/ ‘Very supportive.’ (PST2)/ ‘Essential!’ (PSK1)/ ‘Although not particularly relevant in our setting, this is undoubtedly an important issue for those with literacy and numeracy problems.’ (PST3)/ ‘Good and relevant.’ (PSP2)/ ‘Any initiative to improve basic skills should be encouraged.’ (OL2)/ ‘It is a positive approach.’ (PH1)

Generally a good idea, but ...: ‘OK as far as it goes. Needs to be better publicised.’ (PGA2)/ ‘Plays an important part in improving standards to enable people to function at work effectively.’ (OSL1)/ ‘Good intentions. But I’m not sure the people who require these skills accept it themselves or would do anything about it.’ (ML1)/ ‘We have the basic skills award!’ (PL1)/ ‘Useful for many businesses, but not really relevant to us.’ (OG1)/ ‘Excellent initiative but, in my view, inadequate infrastructure to support it.’ (OH3)

#### Responses indicating non-awareness include:

‘I have no opinion – I am aware of the LSC but not aware of the *Skills for Life* agenda.’ (DG3)/ ‘Not aware.’ (ASL1)/ ‘Not aware of it.’ (PLO1)/ ‘Not seen any information on it.’ (ASL2)/ ‘Know nothing about it.’ (MGA1)/ ‘No idea.’ (AH1)/ ‘Not actually aware of this

specific initiative.' (PSK2)/ 'Do not know about it.' (DST2)/ 'Not aware of what the government is doing.' (DSL1)/ 'Never heard of it.' (EL1)/ 'No (sic) nothing about it.' (AG1)/ 'Never heard of it.' (BLO1)/ 'Don't know about it – all employees are very well qualified.' (MST1)/ 'Had no information and don't require it now.' (DB1)/ 'Not aware of it.' (DSK1)/ 'Don't know anything about it.' (AST1)/ 'What is it!' (MG1)/ 'Knowledge is limited.' (MH1)/ 'Not really come across it.' (MH3)/ 'Have no knowledge of it.' (ML2)/ 'Never heard of it!' (MSL2)/ 'Do not know of it.' (ML01)/ 'Have not seen agenda.' (MSK2)/ 'What; do not know anything about it.' (MG3)/ 'Not aware.' (CSL1)/ 'Not familiar with it.' (CSK1)/ 'Know nothing about it.' (CGA1)/ 'Never heard of it.' (DSP1)/ 'Don't know about it.' (DG1)/ 'Not aware of its content.' (DH1)/ 'Not aware of it.' (DSP2)/ 'Don't know. Never heard about them.' (DG2)/ 'Can't say I have heard of it.' (DSL2)/ 'Have no knowledge of above.' (BB1)/ 'I'm not aware of it so I'm unfortunately unable to comment.' (PGA1)/ 'Not involved as such, no information. Do not know anything about it – cannot comment.' (PG1)/ 'Sounds good, but I don't really know much about it.' (OSP1)/ 'Know nothing about it!' (OB1)/ 'Not known as never heard or seen anything about it.' (TGA1)/ 'No idea.' (BH1)/ 'Unaware of the details so cannot comment.' (OH1)/ 'We have not experienced any problems with staff and have little knowledge of the agenda.' (U2)/ 'Know nothing about it.' (AST2)/ 'Unaware of it.' (TL1)

### 3.1.7 Respondents' awareness of local initiatives supporting adult literacy and/or numeracy (q10)

About a quarter (26 per cent) of respondents claimed to be aware of local initiatives supporting adult literacy and/or numeracy. Around two-thirds (65 per cent) claimed not to be aware of such initiatives. Those who were aware responded with the following. Some responses suggest a casual, uncertain awareness:

'The libraries help.' (ASL2)/ 'Courses at Lincoln College.' (ML1)/ 'Saw something in Casterton Community College prospectus.' (MST1)/ 'I believe Business Link is available and there are several colleges catering for this.' (DST1)/ 'Course at Horncastle College?' (DH1)/ '...to refer anyone to adult education centre.' (DSP3)/ 'Technology College in Holbeach holds evening classes. Spalding has advertised various classes.' (PSP1)/ 'Basic skills; local college initiatives.' (PL1)/ "Lifelong learning. Access classes.' (PST1)/ 'Local colleges/some schools/businesses.' (PSK1)/ 'I am aware of various centres/learning establishments which are able to assist with basic skills. I am also aware that basic skills courses are usually free.' (PSK2)/ 'Local "Learn Direct" courses.' (PLO2)/ 'Stamford College courses?' (PST3)/ '...local groups, local providers, e.g. 1st College, A43, Louth College, etc.' (PLO2)/ 'I have knowledge of course's (sic) and help being available within the college (sic).' (OSK1)/ 'Only local courses.' (OL1)/ 'Have seen/heard publicity details.' (U2)/ 'Courses at local college. Learn Direct.' (OH2)/ 'Local college.' (TL1)

One respondent questioned the value of leaving leaflets in libraries:

'I have seen leaflets in the library – but would I a) be there or b) be able to read them if I could not read?' (DGA1)

Another claimed experience of helping to provide support/training:

'Presently none. We ran an initiative in Fulbeck with access to IT/internet and free advice – in the pub – but this failed through lack of interest!' (DG3)

In some responses, there is a sense that not being aware of local initiatives is connected to the respondent's self-understanding as someone who does not need to be aware, as someone

(in Bourdieu's terms) who is not 'interested':

**'None – but that doesn't mean there aren't any. My employees don't need it and I don't live locally.'** (PH1)/ **'Not had to access any support so not aware of initiatives in area.'** (OSL1)/ **'None. No requirement personally or within the company.'** (MB1)/ **'Have not had to investigate.'** (DG4)/ **'Not really aware of any as we or employees have not required any such initiatives although we're sure they exist.'** (CLO1)

### 3.1.8 Respondents' views on what could be done locally to improve literacy and numeracy (q9)

A large number of respondents (18 per cent) connect the activity of improving literacy and numeracy in the locality, with school education. For example:

**'Improve standards of literacy and numeracy in primary schools and through secondary schools.'** (CSK1)

Some argue that it is easier or more appropriate to learn literacy and numeracy skills at a young age:

**'It's difficult to fix later in life. Get it right early when it's easier to learn.'** (EL1)/ **'Concentrate much earlier on the three "Rs"!' (MH2)**

Some claim for schools the responsibility for local literacy and numeracy:

**'(1) Primary schools should have to certify that all 11-year-olds reach basic standards. (2) Adult literacy and numeracy can only be taught voluntarily.'** (CSL1)/ **'Educating children properly in the first place. All those not getting five A-Cs at GCSE are put in the bottom division at age 16, and will find it difficult to gain promotion.'** (DSL1)

And:

**'Don't let them leave school without those skills – i.e. more effort sooner.'** (DST2)

Many responses comment on the content of school education. Only one directly mentions numeracy and literacy; numeracy is presented as being able to calculate without a calculator, and literacy as being able to spell:

**'More emphasis should be placed on spelling and basic numeracy at schools. People are too reliant on spell checkers/calculators, etc.'** (DH1)

In others, adult literacy and numeracy are implied as projected outcomes of 'better' school education:

**'Better education at school level, but often people only learn if they want too (sic).'** (MH3)

'Better' education might be achieved in various ways:

**'More money into education at school level.'** (PL02)/ **'Proper investment in secondary/grammar education.'** (U3)/ **'Allow teachers more freedom to teach. Ensure teachers are trained in communication skills.'** (DSK2)/ **'More incentive to stay in education.'** (DG2)

Two respondents argued for improvements in education focused on practical, vocational subjects:

**'Schooling should look after practical pupils better and stop using them as academic statistics as they are today, and use the education to encourage them better and in**

**turn this will give them a better education.’ (AG1)/ ‘Greater attention to vocational aspect of education.’ (BL01)**

The question, ‘What could be done to improve literacy and numeracy?’ prompted comment on local people:

**‘Not sure with the older employees.’ (ASL1)/ ‘From my experience as a voluntary helper in adult learning I found enthusiasm for improving literacy/numeracy sadly lacking in the students.’ (PL01)/ ‘People need to be made aware of how much more enjoyable life can be with adequate literacy and numeracy.’ (PSK2)**

Though varied, these responses all comment on a lack of interest in literacy and numeracy. Certain people do not see literacy and numeracy as worth pursuing. One respondent observed that another form of capital would have to be at stake for numeracy to become interesting:

**‘An improvement in attitude would be a first step. We are generating a nation that wants everything without working for it. Numeracy skills appear very good when seeking the opportunity to take up solicitors’ offers of no win no fee!’ (MG2)**

As Bourdieu and others are clear about the importance of school and family in habitus creation/maintenance, it will be interesting to see if the current focus given to literacy and numeracy in schools – particularly in primary education – will be maintained into adulthood. Responses tend to identify individual rather than social responsibility for learning. If accepted, this further reinforces the need for particular rather than general policy responses.

Many responses focus on (rural) peoples’ awareness of support for adult literacy and numeracy:

**‘Raise awareness/I am not aware of what support there is locally to improve adult literacy and numeracy...’ (MSK1)/ ‘More awareness of the help available.’ (ML01)/ ‘Make people more aware of what help is available.’ (MSK2)/ ‘Improve awareness of courses etc. local colleges offer; possibility of more evening classes.’ (DSK1)/ ‘Keep up the awareness. Encourage people to take up assistance on offer.’ (ML1)/ ‘I am convinced that my local community is unaware of any agenda or initiatives so communication is at the top!...’ (DG3)**

Ways in which awareness could be improved are recommended:

**‘Free classes and blanket adverts.’ (MGA1)/ ‘Better advertising within local papers instructing what, where and when help is available and how easy it can be.’ (OSK1)/ ‘More publicity to make people aware of help available and make it easy to access. It’s no good using internet or newspapers.’ (PGA2)/ ‘More mail shot information...’ (CGA1)/ ‘Use imaginative and encouraging advertising on, say, local radio.’ (DGA1)/ ‘More publicity of schemes available – maybe leaflets available or distributed in post office and supermarkets.’ (OH2)**

A very large number of responses argue or imply that adult literacy and numeracy may be improved locally through provision of support/training. A few simply suggest some or more provision:

**‘Where do I start? Anything would be better than nothing!’ (PL1)/ ‘Offer classes for support/training.’ (OH1)**

However, most of the responses suggesting more provision recommend particular kinds of provision:

'Easily accessible classes – linked with computer classes (reduce stigma).' (PLO2)/ 'In-house education at work. Classes for unemployed.' (DSL2)/ 'More classes at a variety of times, i.e. mothers could have classes whilst children at school. It can be hard for people to attend evening classes. Classes held in other places than schools or colleges as some people have very bad memories of such places.' (PSP1)/ 'Continued development of local "lifelong learning" and "access" classes.' (PST1)/ 'Improve resources to deal with problem that is still incredibly sensitive (and always will be!). More informality needed I think.' (PSK1)/ 'Family learning sessions.' (PB1)/ 'Working within schools but an adult tutor provided, not left to the school to set up projects and deliver them. We're too busy already!' (PSP2)/ 'Stigma and misinformation needs to be lifted to make the courses very accessible and widespread.' (OL1)/ 'We have not been made aware of any action locally. Any courses should be in a relaxed atmosphere, as many people left school and went straight into a working environment because they did not enjoy school.' (OL2)/ 'Evening classes.' (MG4)/ 'Change in assessment process – i.e. plain English, not just advocating it but using it! More "locally" driven opportunity for self-improvement directed and initiated from within the community.' (BLO2)/ '...I assume that anonymity is quite important in encouraging people to enrol, and small villages do not offer this. Evening courses (free) in centres of population but for rural attendance only may help!' (DG3)/ 'More in-house support for employees.' (OH3)

Many responses focus on access to support/training:

'...more locally based rural training centres.' (CGA1)/ 'We are in the depths of rural Lincolnshire. Not many local access points for any initiatives.' (MSL1)/ 'Better access in rural areas. Particularly the numerous small villages in Lincolnshire.' (CL1)/ 'Course's (sic) in village hall which is more accessible to those without transport.' (OB1)/ 'More support more accessible to the rural communities.' (OG1)/ 'Better access to learning – transport difficulties deter people.' (OSL1)

A number focus on the cost of support/training:

'Free classes...' (MGA1)/ 'Free courses.' (MSL2)/ 'More levels of learning should be more readily available without people having to go back and pay for adult learning.' (DL1)/ 'I'm not aware that it is a major problem. However, I would suggest free further education for adults. And additional focus in school for children.' (BL1)/ 'More free classes available to those that wish to attend.' (CLO1)

Again, a number of respondents replied in a way that marks out interest in literacy and numeracy support/training from their habitus, their understanding of themselves:

'Ask the government. We are running a golf centre.' (DB1)/ 'Not relevant to this business.' (MB1)/ 'I have not thought about it. Generally in the circles in which I move I do not come across the problem.' (BH1)/ 'No need.' (AH1)/ 'No views.' (DSP1)/ 'Not a concern with us.' (TL1)

Other marks and responses might also be interpreted as a form of distancing; a disengagement and reluctance to comment:

'Don't know.' (MH1)/ 'Don't know?' (PSP3)/ 'Have insufficient contact and knowledge to be able to offer constructive comment. Sorry.' (ML2)/ 'I don't know.' (MG3)/ 'No comment.' (DST3)/

### 3.1.9 Respondents' views on what is 'special about supporting adult literacy and numeracy in a rural setting' (q11)

'Special' means 'particular', but has positive or at least neutral connotations. However, respondents tended to assume that we were asking, 'What is especially difficult about supporting adult literacy and numeracy in a rural setting?' Some responses indicate that literacy and numeracy are thought to be weak in rural areas:

**'Essential requirement.'** (ML01)/ **'Haven't really thought about it. Is the circumstance influenced by the lack of mobility in the community, through generations, thus diminishing the influence of meeting more numerate/literate people from more populated areas?'** (CSK1)/ **'There is a perception that literacy and numeracy abilities are lower in rural areas, and this should be addressed and overcome if it is true.'** (BL1)

A large number (35 per cent) of responses argue that a rural setting is special, in relation to adult literacy and numeracy provision, because it presents a difficult geography, difficult to access, to travel to and within. The word 'access' recurs:

**'Travel.'** (DSL2)/ **'Easy access.'** (DG1)/ **'To find places easily accessible and on a transport route.'** (PSP1)/ **'Undoubtedly, there are issues about accessibility in rural settings, and people with these needs should have equality of access in the same way as town dwellers.'** (PST3)/ **'Access to outreach education not readily available in the community itself.'** (PSP2)/ **'Accessibility.'** (BH1)/ **'Access, i.e. living far away.'** (DG2)/ **'Make help more accessible in small communities.'** (MSK2)/ **'Important in any setting, but not the same facilities available in rural locations – transport problems, etc.'** (DH1)/ **'People who need this kind of support need it on their doorstep.'** (CL1)/ **'Sometimes it's difficult to travel into a main town – expensive and time-consuming – would be better if the tutors could use the local school.'** (MG4)/ **'Geographically it's more difficult to do as the population is spread.'** (OG1)/ **'Economies of a scattered community provision must make for difficulties both in transport and where it is based – but personal face-to-face is needed.'** (MST1)/ **'? Could be problems of excessing [sic].'** (OH2)/ **'Access and transport.'** (DG3)/ **'Difficulties in getting people together into groups – therefore delivery needs to be one-to-one in the workplace or home.'** (OH3)/ **'Access to support for small numbers of people at a time.'** (TL1)

Questions of access are linked to representations of the rural setting as one of individual or social isolation:

**'Very important to combat the feelings of isolation already felt by many.'** (PB1)/ **'Isolation is a problem. Those most in need are more likely to not have access to their own transport, and public transport is at best sporadic.'** (PH1)/ **'Isolation – many people have to do a variety of tasks for themselves and may not be able to call on any help.'** (AST1)

Access is, in some responses, explicitly linked to poverty, inequality and deprivation:

**'Easy access is essential to provision of support and for classes. There are pockets of rural deprivation in seemingly middle-class villages and outlying areas. Therefore, classes should be of reasonable cost and there should be ease of access.'** (PST1)/ **'You have to take the courses/assistance to the people. The person who would benefit does not always have the knowledge or "money" to get into towns to access courses.'** (ML1)

Within conceptions of the 'rural setting' as cut off or isolated, there are different visions of the usefulness of the internet. Compare the following:

'Training in rural locations fails to take into account exactly that "it is rural", i.e. no buses, trains, planes, no internet café, no digital telephone system providing suitable internet access; i.e. restricted access to the greatest learning tool on the planet!!'  
(BL02)

And:

'Ease of access essential. Online availability of support. High profile.' (PST2)

Some responses echo the geography of distance and closeness discussed earlier. A rural setting might be special in presenting both distances and dispersal, but also social closeness:

'Resources/communications to target those in need sensitively.' (PSK1)/ 'As with any other rural service, access by way of transport is always an issue. This area is also one that needs privacy because people are embarrassed to admit they need help, therefore home help initially would be useful with later tuition probably in small groups so people can meet others with similar problems.' (PGA2)/ 'Travel is a big problem for a client base that may very well not have transport. There is a need for teaching to be in the rural areas or by distance learning. Also privacy could be an issue; people tend to know their neighbours and there is still a stigma attached to lack of basic skills.'  
(DGA1)

Others comment separately on rural closeness:

'Rural settings are often close as communities; support should be a priority, raising awareness about groups, etc.' (MSK1)

A significant number (20 per cent) of respondents claimed to regard a rural setting as socially or culturally special. People (as individuals or as social groups) are the focus of the response:

'Remote areas – greater pride – resistance to recognise a problem. Perceived as not needed.' (ASL1)/ 'Many young people in a rural environment grow up with a "blinkered" attitude to careers and further education. Therefore I feel they go through the system with few ambitions and little confidence and therefore would benefit from extra tuition when they need it, not necessarily at the time of "formal" education.'  
(OL1)/ 'The people need to be encouraged to come forward and show (sic) how better literacy and numeracy can help them with other activities outside work. It needs to be made more a fun activity than a stigma of not been (sic) able to read and write well. A lot of rural people have been brought up (in the past) of seeing earning money as the main reason to work and as long as you can do the job it doesn't matter what leave (sic) your education.' (ASL2)/ 'Majority of adults requiring improvement of numeracy/literacy do not wish to improve.' (DSK1)

A number of respondents commented that rural settings are 'special' in the sense of being economically special:

'Less opportunity in the job market, so important to have the basic skills to compete.'  
(OSL1)/ 'Maybe a view that manual skills and knowledge are more appropriate therefore adults do not push for these to be more widely available.' (DST2)/ 'Rurally people can get away more without these skills due to the amount of farming and manual jobs, so more would be needed.' (MH3)/ 'A vocational aspect.' (BL01)

There are claims to awareness that the rural economy is changing:

'The rural areas depend mainly on farming and this is becoming increasingly difficult to make a living. Therefore people are having to retrain in different areas.' (DL1)/

**'Small numbers. In the past not the necessity it is today because of the type of work available, e.g. farming.'** (PLO2)/ **'Important to educate rurally so people skills are kept in rural areas rather than moving to city areas.'** (CGA1)/ **'We need to help people who were deprived of a "school" education for whatever reason. It is more and more necessary to be able to read and write in a modern society. Children should be helped more in school.'** (DSP3)

A sense of the economic specificity of the rural setting seems to inform criticism of education in schools:

**'The people are all good people who work hard, but the education system has let them down because the teachers do not understand the problems of rural life.'** (AG1)/ **'Education in schools locally could be much improved, with more emphasis on subjects relating to the area.'** (MSK1)

The 'rural setting' is seen by some to involve, be partly constituted by, an existing lack of support for adult literacy and numeracy:

**'There are probably hundreds of people who are having difficulties and don't know where to go or who to turn to, especially in rural areas.'** (DST1)/ **'No real services here yet.'** (MSL1)/ **'Any initiative would be good.'** (OL2)/ **'There are a lack of college's (sic)/universities even close to areas such as Skegness, Lincoln and Grimsby being the closest.'** (MSK1)

One respondent interpreted 'rural setting' in a purely physical sense:

**'On health and safety ground, a rural area is possibly likely to present risks and hazards not found in an urban environment.'** (MH2)

This could be dismissed as a misunderstanding, an outcome of the rather physical connotations of the word 'setting'. However, it may be significant that the respondent did not assume, think, consider that we were asking whether he thought that there was anything socially or culturally special about a rural setting, in relation to adult literacy and numeracy. This might connect to many other responses in which the social, economic, cultural specialness of a 'rural setting' is questioned or denied. For example:

**'I am not sure why this should be special just because of the setting. I would assume that access to resources may be an issue.'** (MB1)

In the above, the respondent again turns to a physical sense of rural difference. In other responses, the concern not to be seen as special has a defensive tone:

**'Even people in rural settings attend school, college, etc. There's (sic) nothing special about it. Just because you live in a rural areas doesn't make you disadvantaged.'** (EL1)

And:

**'That it should not be classed as special just because you are talking about rural settings. There should be the same availability offered.'** (MGA1)

Some connect the question with an urban-rural comparison:

**'It is as necessary as in an urban setting.'** (ML2)/ **'As important as city or major town support.'** (DSK2)/ **'No difference between rural and towns. Creating self-worth/confidence. Communication.'** (U2)

Others disagree with the notion of rural settings as special within national space:

**'No different to any other area – we are talking about basic skills for everyone in the UK.' (DSL1)/ 'Nothing special. It should be provided on a national level. No one area should be deemed more or less important.'** (PL1)

Other respondents altered the meaning of the question, perhaps deliberately to avoid engaging with the notion of rural settings as 'special':

**'The special part of this support is for confidence of the adult and of course the learning obtained.'** (OSK1)/ **'Giving people the opportunity and having the opportunity. Most of all having people with the desire is quite special.'** (MG2)

Finally, there were other responses such as...

**'?' (CSL1), '?' (PSP3) and even '/' (AH1), '/' (DST3), 'No opinion.'** (MSL2), **'Don't know.'** (U3) and **'No views.'** (DSP1)

...might be read as an effect of a self-understanding (habitus) that is not compatible with the notion of rural as 'special', or different.

### **3.1.10 Respondents' views on who should provide adult literacy and numeracy support/training (q12)**

Respondents were most likely to indicate that colleges should provide adult literacy and numeracy support/training (33; 40 per cent). Educational institutions, more generally, are suggested:

**'Schools. Colleges.'** (PST1)/ **'Education establishments are in the best position to achieve this.'** (BL1). **'Government-funded schemes/colleges.'** (CLO1)/ **'Colleges – they have skills – resources.'** (OH2)

Headteachers, answering the questionnaire as small employers, tend to offer accommodation:

**'Colleges, etc. More use could be made of rural primary schools in isolated rural communities such as ours.'** (PH1)/ **'Colleges, voluntary sector – perhaps making use of schools/community buildings.'** (PST2)

There is a tendency, then, to write 'colleges' in response to the question. This answer may not result from careful, conscious thought<sup>4</sup>. Literacy and numeracy are connected with education, with educational establishments; 'colleges' is one of the suggested answers on the questionnaire. However, there is a sense that some respondents begin to question the appropriateness of colleges, and other educational institutions, as sites of literacy and numeracy training for adults. For example:

**'Difficult one! Perhaps colleges – but there may be little interest in a formal approach from those in need of the training.'** (CSK1)

In the above, the respondent claims that 'colleges' imply a kind of formality that might repel, or at least not attract, potential trainees. A similar questioning of obvious or traditional kinds and sites of provision seems behind responses (18; 21 per cent) arguing for mixed, varied, joint and co-operative provision:

**'The more agencies that provide this help the better. Adults may find it easier (less embarrassing) to go to some venues than other. Choice is vital.'** (PSK2)/ **'If it was a**

<sup>4</sup> An example of Bourdieu's 'taken for grantedness'.

joint partnership, people might feel more relaxed about accessing any training.' (OL2)/  
 'More government funding to be available to begin more rural-based initiatives, but must be non-threatening.' (PB1)/ 'A mixture of people who understand the needs of the people they are trying to help.' (ASL2)

Other responses arguing for joint provision include:

'All.' (MG2)/ 'I think it should be a mixture and a joint effort.' (DST1)/ 'Everyone.' (DG2)/  
 'A co-ordinated approach by all three.' (MH2)/ 'I think it should be a mixture and a joint effort.' (DST1)/ 'A combined + co-ordinated effort of all.' (DSL2)/ 'Any that can – but it would require good organisation and those who do would probably require training.' (CL1)/ 'All.' (BB1)/ 'I feel it should come from a variety of means; here at work we encourage our own workers with training sessions in ? and written work is guided and help is available on a 1-to-1 session.' (PSP1)/ 'A combination of all, working with a sustainable framework of operation and support activities, i.e. take it to the people and sell it, stop waiting for a knock on the door.' (BL02)/ 'Wherever it is likely to succeed! Providing the funding is available, why pigeonhole it!' (DG3)/ 'All of the above but under the guidance of the LEA.' (DGA1)

In one response, colleges are explicitly ruled out:

'Local training providers – not colleges who generally only think of bums on seats in classrooms.' (OH3)

Only five respondents (6 per cent) indicated that they feel that businesses should provide support/training. Only one of these suggests that businesses alone should provide support/training:

'Local businesses.' (PSP2)

Respondent PSP2 is the headteacher of a primary school (responding as an employer). The other four respondents suggested that businesses should be involved in training, but in conjunction with colleges:

'Combination of local business and colleges.' (DST2)/ 'All businesses should provide their staff with the ability to train further through NVQs, and local authorities should help to go back to night school for those willing and on a low income.' (DL1)/  
 'Business/college.' (BL01)

One is explicit about the secondary role of businesses:

'Local businesses should provide support and opportunities for staff to participate, but training should be provided by colleges. The voluntary sector could assist by providing learning in a less formal sense, e.g. interest groups.' (OSL1)

The majority of respondents, then, rejected the notion of businesses involving themselves in support/training. The question offered three suggestions – local businesses, colleges, and the voluntary sector (such as clubs, etc.). Some answered by crossing out the 'local businesses' suggestion (U2), by circling one of the other two suggestions, or by repeating the other two, for example:

'Colleges or voluntary sector.' (EL1)

And:

'Colleges, the voluntary sector, although those needing help must be prepared to put something in too.' (AST1)

Some respondents argued against the involvement of local businesses:

**'I would have thought that education was the responsibility of the government. I do not think it fair to further increase pressure on local businesses.'** (MB1)/ **'FE colleges. Small business have no capacity, resources or time.'** (U3)/ **'Schools/colleges – business people are not trained to teach.'** (MST1)

Arguments against the involvement of businesses often assert that national and local government, rather than businesses, are responsible for education (including literacy and numeracy):

**'Government – they have failed to provide proper education in the first place, so why should employers have to make good government's deficiencies?'** (DSL1)/ **'If taught properly in schools, there wouldn't need to be adult literacy or numeracy support.'** (DSK2)/ **'The government!'** (PL1)/ **'The local LEA, because they are the ones who have failed the people to start with.'** (AG1)

These arguments occasionally develop into wider criticism of local education:

**'The new people who have moved into the area are more skilled at getting what they want from education, and this does not help the local country people who get left behind at school, because nobody is interested in the farming way of life, and therefore cannot understand the children who want to drive tractors, etc.'** (AG1)

Again, some left the question unanswered and others indicated that they could not answer:

**'?'** (OSL1)/ **'No views.'** (DSP1)/ **'Q8 (which reads) "Not involved in such, no information. Don't know anything about it – cannot comment."'** (PG1)/ **'No comment.'** (DST3)

### 3.1.11 Conclusion

Employers in rural small businesses in Lincolnshire and Rutland who returned questionnaires tend not to regard the literacy and numeracy of their employees as 'poor'. None indicate that employees are accessing training in literacy and numeracy<sup>5</sup>, and most are unaware of both the *Skills for Life* agenda and local initiatives supporting adult literacy and/or numeracy.

In questionnaire responses, the rural setting is constructed as 'special' in relation to literacy and numeracy in terms of geographies of distance, dispersal, lack of access, social isolation and social closeness. It is understood by some as a particular kind of (changing) practical economy. Some respondents claim to regard rural areas as not 'special', as simply part of national space, not marked out.

Questioning on adult literacy and numeracy prompts many employers to criticise school education. Employers make familiar points about access to adult literacy and numeracy provision in terms of cost and rural geography. Suggestions for provision question the appropriateness of schools and colleges and value particular kinds of mixed, various provision. Employers tend not to regard literacy and numeracy training as their responsibility.

Respondents argue that many employees (and local people) are not 'interested' (in Bourdieu's sense) in literacy and numeracy. Lack of interest is related to youth and age. Several

<sup>5</sup> Although it is difficult to generalise on the levels of disclosure in small businesses, it is not difficult to imagine the reluctance of employees to seek advice/support from their employer.

respondents indicate that they do not need to be aware of or involved in literacy and numeracy training; that it is not relevant, outside their field.

Informed by the analysis of questionnaires and conclusions, we identify a number of issues to examine through interviews and select certain small businesses to interview in relation to these issues:

- A lack of interest in employees (and local people) in literacy and numeracy (PL01; MG2).
- The effect of youth and age in relation to this 'interest' (ASL1; OL1).
- The novelty of rural economies in relation to literacy and numeracy and school education (DL1; AG1; MSK1).
- The construction of rural areas as not 'special', novel or distinct (MGA1; MB1).
- The valuing of particular kinds of provision of adult literacy and numeracy training (PGA2; PSK2; PSP1; OL2).
- The understanding of literacy and numeracy training as not the responsibility of business (DSL1); and not relevant, not important in relation to self-understanding (AH1).

### 3.2 Interview analysis

The numbers after the references in the quotations below refer to entry numbers in the interview transcripts. The transcripts are available – to other researchers and/or policy makers – and can be requested by contacting Dr Chris Atkin at the University of Nottingham.

#### 3.2.1 Types of literacy and numeracy at work

We asked all interviewees why they ticked a particular box (indicating 'excellent', 'good', 'adequate', 'poor') in response to the requests: 'Please tick the box that best describes your view of adult literacy levels in your employees/business' and 'Please tick the box that best describes your view of adult numeracy levels in your employees/business'. Many interviewees answered with reference to specific work practices in their business; 'literacy' and 'numeracy' were understood in relation to particular forms of work. For example, questioning at a small supermarket near Lincoln proceeded as follows:

I: "You ticked 'excellent' for literacy and 'good' for numeracy in relation to your employees here; can you expand on that and tell me why you ticked those two in particular?"

r: "Well, doing the NVQ and obviously sort of they've got their workbooks and they can fill in their workbooks and they have no problems, but we do have occasional problems with the tills; you know either they're not counting the money out properly, or they're just being sort of negligent, I don't know but, but the workbooks on the whole are, are very good you see." (DL1: 3-4)

The acting manager of an equestrian centre near Lincoln explained his assessment of 'literacy' and 'numeracy' as adequate:

"If, if I asked them to write a report, I knew that I couldn't rely on it. We also, within this business, because we run dressage competitions, there is a lot of scoring to do and I know that there's certain members of staff that I wouldn't be able to ask to do it." (OL2: 19)

The chief executive of a garment wholesaler near Sleaford interpreted 'numeracy' as being able to count, make up quantities and read reference numbers:

**"...numeracy is more important than literacy in general because we tend to have a lot of strings of numbers to deal with (pointing to an example) barcodes, and things like that, and the ability to handle a string of, I think there's 10 digits there, is important."  
(DSL1: 6)**

Other interviewees claim to have assessed the 'literacy' and 'numeracy' of their staff through a general sense of their 'intelligence' or the extent to which they are 'educated'. Literacy and numeracy are understood as part of, or following from, 'intelligence' or proper education. For example, this is from the chairman of a disability awareness organisation:

**I: "You ticked excellent for literacy and numeracy; can you tell me what you were thinking of?"**

**r: "Well they are all educated people that are, that are my volunteers, the volunteers in my group, they're all educated people so literacy and numeracy doesn't enter into it."**

**I: "So you see literacy and numeracy as part of a wider education that they have?"**

**r: "Oh yes, yes, they're all educated people."**

**I: "People often think of literacy and numeracy in relation to something specific about their business; numeracy as accounts, for example. But you're talking very generally about a general ability."**

**r: "A general basic ability, yes, yes." (PL01: 11-16)**

Similarly, a senior administrator in a clothing manufacturer near Skegness explained indicating literacy levels in employees as 'good to adequate' and numeracy levels as 'good' on the questionnaire:

**'...(pause), I ticked those boxes because they all seemed to be of a certain, mmm (pause) intelligence with literacy and numeracy, but not many people in the company actually hold qualifications of any kind...which is why I just ticked good to adequate.'  
(MSK1: 16)**

Decisions are made here, then, through rather vague assessments of general ability and 'intelligence'. The implication of all the above is that 'literacy' and 'numeracy' are understood in different ways and not through standard curricula.

### **3.2.2 Rural habitus: appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy**

Asked about her assessment of staff numeracy, the director of an exhibitions company near Lincoln explained that:

**"...the numeracy has to be of a standard that, that ensures that we stay in profit and the client stays happy. ...accounts basically, yes, so I would say numeracy in that sense that we can, we can work things out... I wouldn't say that either Sally's or my numeracy is brilliant but...it's usable. Yes. If you asked me to do logarithms I'd be struggling (laughs)." (OL1: 24)**

The implication is that logarithms, standing for more advanced mathematics, would not be

valuable in the business. Here and throughout the interviews literacy and numeracy are valued in relation to its application. Interviewees articulate or imply that literacy and numeracy are only valuable at certain levels, in relation to what people do. We asked the owner of a farm (arable and sheep) near Horncastle why he ticked 'good' for both literacy and numeracy. He replied:

**"Oh well, because they can write better than me, and write neater, not that that matters so much, and as far as numeracy's concerned they can add up. And they are very competent at transferring hectares to acres and using the calculator. It's no big deal." (AH1: 6)**

Asked to clarify whether there are any areas of literacy and numeracy difficulty in the workforce, he replied: 'None whatsoever'. We speculate that he wouldn't be interested in introducing literacy and numeracy training. He said:

**"No, it would be totally embarrassing, especially as they know full well they write better than me. I mean, I mean once you can read or write, I mean what's the big deal after that?" (AH1: 10)**

Literacy is not seen as valuable beyond a certain practical, applied, appropriate level. The question, 'What's the big deal after that?' might be interpreted in Bourdieu's language as revealing that the interviewee is not part of the 'message' of *Skills for Life*, does not think that 'the stakes created in and through the initiative are worth pursuing' (Bourdieu, 1998: 76–77). Other interviewees expressed a similar valuing of only a certain level of literacy and numeracy, appropriate to a certain field. We asked a senior administrator in a clothing manufacturer near Skegness whether the business conducts training in literacy and numeracy. She replied:

**"I mean, they have to have a certain amount just to be able to pass their NVQ really and it's adequate for what, for what we need them to do." (MSK1: 34)**

The implication is that literacy and numeracy are pursued only in relation to an NVQ in 'manufacturing sewn products' (MSK1: 32). Similarly, the managing director and contracts director of a structural steel factory in Ancaster values literacy and numeracy through notions of appropriateness in relation to the manufacture of steel objects:

**r2: "We have a skilled workforce; it isn't necessarily intellectually great. You have to be numerate, but they don't have to be academically qualified and they don't have to be particularly literate." (MG2: 9)**

This level of numeracy thought to be appropriate is limited but directly linked to the *Skills for Life* agenda. Asked whether employees would benefit from training in literacy or numeracy, the contracts director replied:

**"They're adequate, they're adequate for what they're doing at the minute." (MG2: 15)**

Office literacy is assessed in a similar way by the managing director:

**"There's always a need to improve isn't there, but to get along in what they're doing no, it's not too much of a problem." (MG2: 25)**

The words, 'there's always a need to improve' do not imply a commitment in the business to literacy and numeracy training, although it could signal a general acceptance. Asked whether employees would benefit from such training, the contracts director replied:

**"It's not really a requirement for the effective running of our business. ...We have semi-skilled people in there (the factory); they don't need to be particularly numerate." (MG2: 68)**

Both managing director and contracts director claim to value the practical skills gained by employees at college or on technical apprenticeships, but that:

**“In terms of an ongoing specifically literacy and numeracy training, it doesn’t really affect us I don’t think.” (MG2: 83)**

Literacy and numeracy are not kinds of capital that these small business managers, in their field, view as valuable.

The director and contracts manager in Ancaster, discussed above, suggested that employees themselves have no interest (illusio) in literacy and numeracy:

**“We have trouble getting them to go to college to learn the skills that we need them to do, let alone if, I mean if there was another training scheme, I don’t think it would work, you know. ...unless it was a statute, and that’s not going to happen is it.” (MG2: 77)**

Similarly, the supermarket manager responded to the suggestion that certain employees attend literacy and numeracy training with the following:

**“I don’t think it would benefit, because I think they’ll only do what they want to do and we do offer the NVQ and not everybody wants to do that either, so I think it’s sort of, only if you can get them to do it and whether they want to do it.” (DL1: 6)**

The suggestion that employees have little or no ‘interest’ in literacy and numeracy training raises questions about their habitus or field, their non-conscious sense of what is valuable. Some interviewees argued that practical, low-paid employment in the locality makes up a rural economic field in which literacy and numeracy are not attractive forms of capital:

**r: “...our particular locality, although Lincolnshire is rural, we’re on the coast and there’s a high degree of seasonal jobs for which people don’t need literacy and numeracy necessarily.”**

**I: “In the tourist industry?”**

**r: “Fastfood industry, cleaning caravans, there’s that sort of thing. So I don’t know if that has an impact or not.”**

**I: “You mean that that might affect people, that might make people think, ‘I don’t need literacy and numeracy?’”**

**r: “Yes, ‘cause they get along without it, mm.” (PSK2: 34–38)**

The explanation, ‘they can get along without it’, refers to what Bourdieu means by habitus as a practical, non-conscious competence in particular areas of social reality (fields). The interviewee quoted above responded to our question, ‘Do you sense that there are people in the locality that tend not to perceive literacy and numeracy as valuable?’ with:

**“...erm (pause) I think people without that level of literacy don’t maybe realise quite how much they’re missing out on. You know, I think until they realise what doors it can open, I just don’t think people realise.” (PSK2: 26)**

This response might be restated, in Bourdieu’s terms, that people with a low level of literacy are not able to engage in the message of literacy, to feel that it ‘is worth the effort’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 76). Other interviewees supported this interpretation. We asked the manager of a care

home for the elderly near Fleet Hargate how literacy and numeracy training would have to be presented to interest her employees; she replied:

**“Well to make it as interesting as possible, and it make it something that was going to improve their life, you know that they could see that that was going to happen, because if they think something’s a waste of time, time is busy, you know, lives are busy. So it’s got to be something that was interesting, something that they could see what they were going to get out of it.” (PSP1: 13)**

Similarly, the chairman of a disability awareness organisation in South Elkington argued, of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties, of the need to:

**“...arouse their interest by showing them the advantages of being able to read, write and do basic arithmetic... personal advantages... not economic... you know, if you can learn to read and write, you can read this book, you can write something down that somebody else can read.” (PLO1: 57-59)**

In the quotations above there is occasional reference to relationships between lack of interest in literacy and numeracy, and rurality. This connection was stressed by the director of an exhibitions company in Washingborough. She argued that Lincolnshire and Lincoln itself, presents a kind of closed, homely social, economic and cultural environment which comforts but suppresses aspirations:

**“My daughter’s 15 at the moment; talking to her friends... the majority of them still haven’t thought in terms of actually leaving Lincoln, or haven’t thought about going to university or wanting to further themselves or some of them are actually... said quite categorically that they don’t want to leave their area, even their estates. ...I mean I lived in a city when I was at university myself (and) I know that certainly there’s much more information, there’s much more probably vitality, there’s much more a diversity of events, so that probably spurs people on to maybe want to try different things, or to see different things. It’s like galleries, I mean we don’t have a good art gallery here, we don’t have things that would probably make people aspire to anything further.”**

**I: “Are you talking about Lincoln not being as diverse as London, or about the rural area not being as diverse as Lincoln?”**

**r: “I think, I think Lincoln not being as diverse, say, as, multiculturally or in terms of events and communication, and then I think one step back from that is rurally, you know, and that goes down to, to transportation, networking, the fact we haven’t even got a motorway that comes here, I mean we’ve just only got a dual carriageway that, you know, comes in so everything’s... isolated and in actual fact it’s, it’s a marvellous thing in a way because it cossets, cossets you... but I think in terms of education, and probably things like literacy and I think that maybe sometimes that would hold them back. ...I think there’s a lot less contact, less stimulation.” (OL1: 46-52)**

This description of matching aspiration with surroundings might be read as the formation of a particular habitus in relation to a particular field. People employed locally are pictured as satisfied, content, not ‘interested’ in literacy and numeracy training:

**“I think at that point it’s actually not relevant. I think the ones that stay here would probably not aspire to move on particularly and therefore they would be quite content to stay at whatever level they were. So therefore I don’t think that they would; I don’t think they would probably move on.” (OL1: 58)**

On the questionnaire, she described this as a 'blinkered attitude', suggesting an inability to see the point or value of literacy/numeracy training:

**'Many young people in this area grow up with a blinkered attitude to careers and further education.'** (OL1: questionnaire response)

In the interview she confirmed that people tend to carry on, to function, to practice without thinking, without observing themselves:

**"...or, I mean it's like any form of education, you know, you either decide at some stage because you need it to further your job prospects or because you have to move...that's the only time that you actually re-evaluate your own education and decide whether you're going to go further or not. Other than that, you plod on and if things happen they happen don't they?"** (OL1: 58)

Echoing Bourdieu's notion of habitus as stable and robust, she suggested that it might be difficult to persuade people to be interested in their own literacy and numeracy:

**"If you're kind of like content and you're moving through your life and it doesn't become apparent that you need to change the standard that you're at at the time, then I don't know if you would, I don't know how relevant it would have to be and I don't know whether opening people's horizons and saying that is something that you can promote; it's almost self-awareness that you have to decide for yourself whether you want to go on."** (OL1: 66)

There is a defence of the right to make do, to cope:

**"I mean to a certain extent reading is important and so is numeracy obviously important but only relevant to that person and their needs. ...if people can manage with what they've got, then I think that they would, the money would be better served elsewhere in the community."** (OL1: 66)

In particular, this interviewee regards lack of interest as bound up with lack of cultural opportunity in rural areas:

**I: "The government is trying to promote literacy and numeracy as a benefit beyond; it opens up a world of culture."**

**r: "Yes."**

**I: "But?"**

**r: "If the culture's not already here...what's the point really?"**

**I: "Yes, so you need a vibrant culture that people want to access?"**

**r: "Yes. I would be inclined to say if there was a set amount of money that the government was prepared to spend within this Lincoln radius... then I would say they would be better spent on, on making a good venue to listen to live music and culturally, to build a nice, a good exhibition centre that they could have different elements of the world coming to them and seeing things or having a good gallery of, of different aspects of art... so that it's multicultural, so that there's people that are then triggered off to want to go on to see more or to do more, but people will only I think concentrate their mind on what they're doing at that time... so therefore to make something accessible will in itself generate enthusiasm."** (OL1: 67-72)

The argument might be restated: a multicultural, artistic field would produce new forms of habitus in which literacy and numeracy are sought and understood (non-consciously) as valuable, attractive.

Other interviewees argued that recent changes in the economy of their rural area may affect ways in which literacy and numeracy are valued. This is particularly so in the fields of care work and agriculture. Interviewees spoke of the new forms of recording and literacy linked to mechanisation and chemical sprays. We asked the owner of a farm near Horncastle whether literacy and numeracy is becoming more important in farm work. He replied:

**“Oh, f\_\_\_ing hell, yes it is. I mean I’ve just delivered sheep this morning and spent ages sorting out the bloody paperwork. ...yeah they do need it unfortunately. The red tape is completely; well you know. Get the same impression from every other farm. Bloody waste of time.” (AH1: 12)**

Others talked about ‘failing’ agriculture, of retraining in different fields (DL1), and the effects of a smaller, more skilled workforce in farming:

**“I think that’s probably so because (pause) the way things have turned out now, I mean, where a farm round here would employ probably 10, 12 labourers, now that sort of job is done now by 1 or 2 people because of the mechanisation. I think that has a lot to do with it and as such there aren’t the sort of jobs that people who are illiterate could, there aren’t the opportunities for them in that respect, yes.” (PL01: 45)**

Similarly, the managers of residential homes speak of care work becoming more literate because carers are increasingly asked to write reports on residents (PGA2; PSK2; PSP1). For example:

**“Carers have got more input these days into written work than they ever have had to before. ...with the new care standards and various other things, they’re now expected to be more responsible for their own, for their own care requirements and recording.” (PGA2: 6–8)**

The manager of a nursing and residential care home near Skegness argued that, until recently, staff have managed with poor literacy and numeracy:

**“I think that has been the case in the care field for a good number of years, that people could come into care homes and do this sort of work without, but, things move on all the time and standards change and we expect people to be able to access NVQ training and it’s no longer the case that we can cope with people with... degree of difficulty.” (PSK2: 38)**

The idea of ‘coping’ with low levels of literacy and numeracy in rural areas is explored in the next section, in relation to social constructions of old age and ageing.

### 3.2.3 Habitus: age, coping

Within the interviews there is a discourse of older employees having coped, managed or made do with low levels of literacy and numeracy for such a long time that training now seems absurd, inappropriate or ‘not worth’ presenting to them. For example:

**“I think it would be more difficult to get an older person to do it; I mean it’s the same thing isn’t it, they’ve managed for years without, why should they bother now? They’ve always managed to get through with the way they’ve done it, so why, why bother. But that’s the same not only with that but with any sort of training.” (PGA2: 43)**

The director of an exhibitions company linked rurality, social visibility, age and coping:

**“If you have somebody, so my age, sort of 40 that can’t read or write, the chances are that if they’ve got away with it for the last, you know, 25 years, or ‘x’ amount of years, that it’s much easier to carry on like that than it is to actually come up and do anything about it so.” (OL1: 44)**

And that:

**“...maybe if somebody gets to a certain stage in their life then...they maybe don’t think that that’s a problem.” (OL1: 66)**

The manager of an ‘elderly care’ home near Fleet Hargate, speaking of a female workforce, said:

**“The over 40s feel that they’ve, probably not worth bothering with. ‘I’ve had that.’ ‘It’s a long time since I’ve been at school, I can’t possibly learn anything new’, that type of comment. But they surprise themselves. I’ve got two ladies at the moment in their 50s and one’s going through an NVQ and she has sailed through it, after her first element, now that she’s got the confidence, she’s rocketing and the other lady is blossoming on this infection control course, not done any writing for a long, long while, you know, or any studying for a long, long while but they’re both blossoming, but I do find people seem to think, ‘Oh it’s not worth it, I’m such and such an age’, whereas for the girls out of school, sometimes school has been a bad experience, but they will give things more of a chance, you know, they’ll have a go.” (PSP1: 23)**

The idea of especially older people coping, making do or getting by with low levels of literacy and numeracy was offered especially by farm owners and managers. The director of a farm near Sleaford, discussed one employee in the following way:

**“Well, I’m very conscious that we have, out of the four arable men, and they’ve worked here, well they’ve all been long-standing but one of them never fills his time sheet in; his wife fills it in. And it’s only when you explore slightly deeper that you realise actually he probably isn’t capable of filling it in. ...(he) also has never bothered to take his driving test, he runs around on L-plates, driving his wife, who has passed her test. ...this man...is aged 59 and I really do not think; in a way it would almost be an insult to say, ‘Look, you need to be able to write better’. Do you see that from an employer’s angle it might be a good thing but how you motivate that man to get there, I don’t know, I’ve had a similar problem with him and the doctor. In the end I actually said, ‘You’ve got to go.’” (ASL1: 8–12)**

This response clearly shows a desire to help if only the employer knew how. We asked, a number of times, how literacy and numeracy training would have to be presented to these employees in order to interest them. There are comments about obvious social awkwardness: ‘I’m not sure it isn’t almost akin to venereal disease, without being unkind’ (ASL1: 18).

However, we would argue that this is not simply about embarrassment and a kind of male reserve, it is about breaking with habitual, unarticulated ways of coping (*habitus* or *field*). The farm director answered in ways that reveal both his own difficulty in articulating something that is non-conscious, and especially his understanding of his employees as living lives that are practiced rather than contemplated:

**“...they’ve coped for so long and compensated...actually the proprietor is dyslexic and he’s always struggled...but he wouldn’t want to do anything. He’s 72 now so why bother. Just can’t read his writing. ... It’s all very well saying how do you rectify it and how do you get them on something. ...they’re all now keen to earn and do their full**

week's work and there isn't a lot of spare time. Sometimes, on the arable side it's a bit more seasonal, I'm absolutely convinced none of them would want to flag up that this was happening. This recognition." (ASL1: 22)

The director's sense that suggesting literacy and numeracy would be a break with taken-for-granted, non-conscious ways of working and doing is linked to a certain social construction of age:

**I: "Is age...likely to create resistance (to literacy and numeracy training)?"**

**r: "Yes...it's this pride in their own being, and I was always taught everybody is entitled to their pride and as a manager you must never take, chip away at that pride because actually you then lose the best you know out of them. It's the manager's role to try and get as best out of them, the strength out of them, and give training where training is possible. But if I said to either of these two, 'Right, I want you to go on a one-day or a series of five-day, one-day courses to improve communication', let's call it that, then that's a bit better; well, they'd look at me gone out, and I'd really struggle and they would not see the value of it." (ASL1: 29-30)**

He noted that low levels of literacy and numeracy present problems in modern farm work. Increasingly technical equipment and new forms of reading and recording in relation to harvesting, spraying and irrigating involve reading, writing and calculating. Other interviewees, outside farming, have noted these changes. Certain older employees have and present difficulties:

**"If they're driving a sprayer...(literacy is) absolutely imperative because you have to follow the instructions on the can. ...although this man is quite capable maybe of doing all of these jobs, he actually hasn't kept pace because his literacy skills aren't up to it. Now, you know, to have one of the four that can't really write is quite a problem...only this week we were loading lorries with grain and passports have to be filled in. Every load of grain that goes away from the farm, someone has to write down the number, the vehicle, the bin, the variety, and all that sort of thing, and this man actually said, 'Well I'll load the lorry, but I can't do the ticket'. But that is actually quite a burden to an employer." (ASL1: 10)**

While the farm director recognises that new, young employees in farming will need a new set of skills, including literacy and numeracy, he does not know how to present training to older employees who have developed strategies for coping, making do:

**"I could probably put some pressure, but I don't know if that's the right word, I don't want to pressurise people into doing it, but it is frustrating. ...all these old people...(t)hey've managed to gather together the skills to cope. The new people coming into the industry are going to have to have reading, writing, IT skills, computer...but how you...treat that need (in existing employees) I am not sure, because I think it comes down to the individual's pride, and whilst the aims are absolutely excellent to try and improve it, I think it's a really hard nut to crack. ...I actually don't see an easy answer to it." (ASL1: 62-74)**

His only suggestion is to combine literacy and numeracy training with technical training, to hide it in lessons on specific technologies.

The owner of a farm near Ancaster referred to older farm workers coping, making do. On being asked whether the employee would be interested in literacy training, the owner replied

that, 'Well, he's getting on a bit' and that he did not know whether it was 'something he would want to do'. He suggested that the employee copes and is coped with:

**"He's quite a craftsman (but we) cannot put him on anything that involves reading instructions." (AG1: 5)**

The farm manager confirmed that three of the main farm staff 'can't read very well' and that he has developed ways of coping with their difficulties:

**"These chaps out here. They can drive the, operate the, equipment but it's all the regulation stuff you see now which, you know, I have to keep it right for them." (AG1: 24)**

He noted that reading and writing associated with applying chemicals to crops has become more extensive, complicated and formalised. Employees need to read instructions for spraying and to 'fill in the log', the 'crop advisory report', a table with headings such as 'spray', 'start', 'finish', 'weather', 'soil', 'wind speed' and 'wind direction'. The manager is aware that two employees are unable to read, but rather than suggest literacy training, he develops ways of coping:

**"There's two could never do this... and, you know, those chemicals there, if they put the wrong can in on the wrong field it could kill it. You know, so it's, it's very, very awkward. ...they've always known that they can't read when they've come here, I know they can't read so I work round it because they have good skills that I know about. You know, so, I work with them, and I, I must never embarrass them on a job that they can't do; I never have done. ...I've more experience of this than probably a lot of people could ever imagine and I've had these guys with me for a long time so I don't, I know I'm not doing too much too wrong." (AG1: 79–83)**

We asked whether he would encourage these particular employees to go on a literacy training course. He replied in a way that suggests an inability to conceive of this as appropriate conduct. He seemed unable to articulate around the idea:

r: **"That's out of my (pause) you know I don't know, I'm not, I have to say I'm not skilled in that sort of thing as to how it does on (laughs)."**

I: **"But you're skilled at getting round it?"**

r: **"Yes I can do that but as for..."**

I: **"You wouldn't want to be the one to have to."**

r: **"No." (AG1: 85–89)**

We would argue that the idea of introducing literacy and numeracy training runs up against, and jars with, a particular habitus or field. Similar questions prompted similar, halting, uncertain but negative replies:

I: **"Would it be difficult to get them to improve their skills in literacy and numeracy?"**

r: **"I don't know, I don't know. It's not my remit. I'm here to run a farm and make the best of (pause) good, reliable people, loyal people." (AG1: 72)**

And:

I: **"Is there a difference in age of employee, in terms of whether they'd be likely to be**

interested in training in literacy and numeracy or whether they'd seek help or...?"

r: "I don't know, I really don't know, it's a very, these people will manage. One you see, he's got a very, you know, his wife works in the bank, so she does it all. Another lad well he's, he steadily manages you know because his mother's pretty bright so, yeah."  
(AG1: 102–103)

In these quotes the farm manager is talking about a particular form of masculinity on the farm, centred on managing, adapting, practicality and reserve. This construction of maleness and others, is examined in the next section.

### 3.2.4 Rural masculinities

In the interviews, there are a number of references to a particularly male lack of interest in literacy and numeracy. For example, the chairman of a disability awareness organisation observed of his experiences as an adult education volunteer in Louth:

"I would say that the majority who were less interested were male." (PL01: 34)

There are also more common allusions to a kind of male reserve in relation to literacy and numeracy. The acting manager of an equestrian centre near Lincoln said:

"I would say probably men are more shy and would not tend to admit anything."  
(OL2: 40)

The manager of an elderly care home near Fleet Hargate believes that her husband would 'find it difficult' to go to a literacy and numeracy class:

"...because it's not, I think because he wouldn't feel it was macho to go off and do something like that... he would think, he wouldn't want to look silly or stupid." (PSP1: 55)

She argued that this is reflected among other men:

"...in the farming community... which is, he belongs to, yes." (PSP1: 63)

Male lack of interest and reserve might be interpreted as reflecting the dominance of certain constructions of rural masculinity, centred on practical work. The director of an exhibitions company in Washingborough recognised recent economic change, but argued that:

"I think that, that, that there is certainly a social erring towards, I mean certainly when I was at school the boys had a choice of farming, factories or forces; it was that kind of mentality. Now I know it's changed slightly and I know certainly careers and things have changed and everything but there is still... there are still not the same expectations on people as there probably are within a city when there's much more diversity of amenities. So maybe people's aspirations aren't as high." (OL1: 46)

There is, she argued, a tendency to the self-construction of 'traditional' masculinity. This is associated, she argued, with the persistence of practical employment, though in new forms. Although 'it's changing and the small number of large Lincoln companies have folded', replaced by smaller, more numerous 'units':

"...they still err on the practical, on manufacture of practical. Although I'm just trying to think really, there are certainly companies within Lincoln which are very, very high-tech. Ultimately, I'd say the vast majority are working on the production of something."  
(OL1: 95)

In farm work specifically, the director of a farm near Sleaford argued that mechanisation has produced a particular kind of isolated, reserved and 'prideful' masculinity, resistant to training:

**I:** "We... asked, 'What's special about supporting adult literacy and numeracy in a rural setting', and you mentioned 'remote areas, greater pride', which you've explained, 'resistance to recognise a problem, perceived as not needed.' ... what is specifically rural about that?"

**r:** "...I perceive that men start work at 7, 7.30 in the morning and work through, long hours, sometimes it's 8, 9 o'clock at night in harvest time. They are quite lonely people; they'll sit on one machine all the time... I think, I think it's just (pause) our staff have been with us a long time and they've evolved through agriculture, through the local schools and started at the bottom on a farm and have just grown in, and their skills have developed as they've gone along and I think that is, if you like, what I mean probably by remoteness."

**I:** "So a personal remoteness as much as a...?"

**r:** "Absolutely yes; I mean the guy that sits on our big crawler will start work, he'll probably do an 18-hour day, he'll only ever see someone maybe first thing in the morning if he, when he comes to fill up, but he's the sort of bloke that will be in before anyone else so he's first away." (ASL1: 49–52)

The manager of a farm near Ancaster connects criticism of the local education system, craftwork and rurality in a particular construction of practical masculinity. When speaking of employees with literacy and numeracy difficulties, he stressed that they have other, practical skills that should impress the researchers, that should be valued:

"Two people can't really read very well, another one he's not very good at reading and they're very, very slow on the uptake and I see a lot of lorry drivers come here, I can tell by their writing, what they're like, but... they can get a big Scania up and down the country in no time, it's much quicker than you could... they'd make you look silly."  
(AG1: 12)

And:

"One person restores vintage tractors. Restores them! I could take you to his house. You'd be staggered." (AG1: 89)

Speaking as the father of three children (one boy) and a school governor, he argued that schools are not interested in, do not value agriculture 'and the allied industries to it...they think it's all alien':

"They're not interested... they won't bring the kids to see the farms or anything, you know, the whole scenario. It's, it's all wrong." (AG1: 36–40)

Craft work, he suggested, is not taught adequately, not emphasised. Of his son's schooling, he said:

"He's in the local comprehensive and he's middle of the road... He came home and he was in his third year, the other week, he made two book-ends with simple halving joints, nicely done. When I was at school, I did those in my first year. We are two years behind." (AG1: 26)

The farm manager's arguments about his son's schooling oppose masculinity to a particular, traditional construction of femininity:

**"We've had nothing back from metalwork, we've never got a bit of copper, we've never panel-beaten it, done anything with it. Bloody sewing! Sewing! What, you know, they do sewing. What is the point!" (AG1: 52)**

More importantly, these arguments oppose two forms of masculinity: practical and intellectual:

**"The education system is certainly letting people down; it's alright Blair thinking everybody goes to the London Oratory; they don't all go to the London Oratory." (AG1: 16)**

And:

**"They're not being trained to do it (woodwork). They're mucking about doing French! What point is French, to them! None whatsoever! You don't need it. You can make do." (AG1: 26)**

And:

**"I mean my boy had a SATs exam on Shakespeare. What the bloody hell do we want to know about Shakespeare for? Let the Oratory people, and those who go to study literature, do it. We don't need Shakespeare! What do we want it for? ...why worry about Shakespeare for a lad who's in the middle stream of the local comprehensive. ...what is it going to prove? Is it going to prove to him how to go to the bank, borrow some money to finance buying a lorry and set about employing himself? ...they have missed the point (laughs), sadly (laughs). You know, these lads are going to drive diggers, tractors, they're going to do things on the motorways, that's what interests them, boys." (AG1:105-111)**

This particular kind of practical masculinity is opposed, then, to scholarship, to the literary, to examinations and to a lack of competitiveness:

**"There's no team spirit; this crap that they talk about, you mustn't be competitive, it's a load of rubbish. You know, you've got to get back to basics: turning up to play for your school in a team game. You know, you've got to learn to beat somebody. The day you beat a side, because I've done it, is the sweetest day in the year. ...they, they, they've set them into exams after exams at school, so that they can't hardly face another exam. You know, SATs, SATs, SATs and SATs. You know, it's just ridiculous. As I say, the sport's gone out the window and the craft has." (AG1: 32 and 64)**

He argued that a connection between practical work and rurality persists, in spite of social and economic change. For example, he suggested that there is a demand for craft skills in a new commuter countryside:

**"People are moving into the countryside to get away from the city...and they want quality, and they will pay, so people need the quality skills. ...you know these people come, they think nothing of 20,000 quid for a kitchen. ...you know, they want high-quality things doing, so that they've got one up. But if people can't see a nice piece of mahogany or English oak and work out how to make the joints on it, they can't do it." (AG1: 56-58)**

The implication, as he sees it, of these arguments about modern rurality and practical masculinities is that literacy and numeracy should be taught within masculine, practical subjects.

**I: “What about if literacy and numeracy were taught within practical subjects? Would that help?”**

**r: “Yes, exactly and I can quote, my son went to the local young farmers with my daughter the other week and JCB came to give the talk for half an hour, three-quarters. And he came home and he regurgitated every minute detail of what he heard by the guy from JCB, how they made the brochures, how they made the tractors, how they test the tractors, how they do everything. He told me everything. I’ve never had a discussion ever before from him and it’s simply because the schooling doesn’t actually turn them on. You know, they just think that they’re going to, they’re all coming, going to the London Oratory with Blair’s kids. But it, it, of course they need to do these things but they’re missing the point.” (AG1: 47–48)**

It is within a particular field of practical, mechanical masculinity that literacy and numeracy might be positioned as valuable stakes. The ‘London Oratory’ stands for a literacy field of intellectual masculinity in which, as this interviewee argued, many local men are not engaged.

### 3.2.5 Rural femininities

Questions about potential engagement in literacy and numeracy training are connected, by some interviewees, to particular understandings of femininity. The manager of a nursing home near Gainsborough argued that women conduct their lives closer to children, school and learning:

**“I think, well, I haven’t got anything to base that on, but I mean I would have thought probably males would be more embarrassed about it (literacy and numeracy training) than females because females do have an opportunity to actually learn from their children, you know, if, if you’ve got children at school, if you’ve got a problem with something, you can actually help yourself a little bit by following through what they’re doing at school, whereas Dads tend to not have that sort of interaction with the school the same, so therefore, whereas Mums may at least be able to pick up odd bits and pieces which help, Dads probably don’t. And (pause) you know like on the adverts if they’re being asked, then they probably would say go and ask Mum.” (PGA2: 41)**

In other words, femininity is constructed as different from masculinity, partly through a different relationship to studying – studying not necessarily as a personal or academic ambition but as an extension of a traditional maternal role.

Other interviewees discussed other constructions of rural femininity that act against intellectual ambition. However, it is worth remembering the points made earlier about rurality limiting the scope to enact personal ambition. For example, the director of an exhibitions company near Washingborough suggested that in the local, rural area:

**“I think probably the female... her aspirations are probably slightly higher (than men’s), but I would still say within this area, on a broad brush, you would probably be looking in terms of nursing, clerical and probably shop and retail. As a general broad base.” (OL1: 56)**

The argument is that persistent, traditional social constructions of rural femininity involve certain kinds of feminine work. Nursing is one of the occupations listed. Rural nursing homes, then, might be expected to present elements of this traditional, occupational

femininity. Speaking of her employees (all female) the manager of an care home for the elderly near Fleet Hargate commented:

**“The older carer, sort of ladies coming out of having their children, coming into something, they lack confidence, they’ve got the numeracy and the literacy there, but because of the lack of confidence of maybe staying in the home, being downtrodden in some cases, you know, by everything. ...erm, once you build the confidence through some courses and different things, they’ve got it there.” (PSP1: 5)**

The interviewee built on this vision of rural femininity throughout the interview. A lack of social and intellectual confidence is seen to result from participation in a particular kind of rural, domestic habitus or field:

**I: “Is the resistance to literacy and numeracy affected in any way at all by a rural location?”**

**r: “It could possibly, I mean (pause) I do find that a lot of people have stayed at home to look after Mum or they’ve stayed at home to look after siblings and I think that possibly in a rural area, I don’t know whether it’s right to say ‘you get away with it more’, but that seems to happen more, you know, there’s... and definitely with the older ones, you know the older girls or ladies will say, ‘Well, I was the oldest and I had to stay at home to do this or that, or I had to work on the land’ and those things happened more... if it was harvest they helped through the summer rather than went to school through the summer and things like that, so obviously those skills didn’t always get met. I don’t think it’s as bad now because schools are quite good at keeping people in there.”**

**I: “But you think it still exists to some extent?”**

**r: “To some extent and I do feel that pupils can get left aside, you know, if there are problems they can get left aside.” (PSP1: 24–27)**

Once formed, this domestic habitus or field is durable:

**r: “(pause) Really my experience with the older ladies, you know, that it does take time, you know and very often confidence can only be built; I mean I know a lot of people that would not go to a class. If it was a formalised class and they’d got to walk in a room with people they didn’t know, they would find that difficult.” (PSP1: 39)**

She stressed that this lack of social and intellectual ‘confidence’ (or competence in Bourdieu’s terms) is linked to traditional constructions of rural femininity:

**r: “Well, I think the experience I’ve got of the ladies that I’m talking about are that, it sounds awful but, they’ve been told right from young that you’re a women and it doesn’t matter, you know, just get on with it. You do your bit, it doesn’t matter and even in marriage, I’ve got two ladies here that in marriage even that’s what their husbands tell them, you know. They’ve come out to work now and they have gained confidence but it’s took (sic) a long while because they’ve been, ‘you’re the woman, get to the sink’ and that type of attitude and I think that is a rural attitude.” (PSP1: 43)**

She compared this construction of femininity in marriage to other, urban kinds of conjugal femininity:

**“...mmm, there is a very traditional attitude in the areas. I mean I have got sisters that have married men from London and things and that is not the way they are.” (PSP1: 47)**

While she accepts that this 'old-fashioned attitude that the woman should be at home to look after the children' is 'changing obviously' in the area, the care home manager argued that it persists, especially in older women. Her imaginary conversation with these women hints at the non-conscious, usually un-contemplated nature of their habitus:

**"I find it so frustrating that women are tied down like this, that, 'Ooh, I couldn't go and do that.' 'But why couldn't you?' 'Well, I couldn't, you know, I just couldn't walk in there or do something like that, it isn't me'." (PSP1: 49)**

A new set of dispositions has to be formed if these women are to access literacy and numeracy training. It would require,

**"...a whole new approach, before you start with any learning you've got to start with social skills, you know, that people know how to interact with other people and don't feel inferior and that, you know, confidence levels." (PSP1: 51)**

### 3.2.6 Positive/defensive rurality/non-rurality

Several interviewees argued against an understanding of the 'rural setting' as different or 'special' in relation to adult literacy and numeracy. The chief executive of a garment wholesaler near Sleaford wrote: 'No different to any other area – we are talking about basic skills for everyone in the UK' in response to the question in the questionnaire, 'What would you say is special about supporting literacy and numeracy in a rural setting?' Asked to expand on this answer, he said that apart from issues of distance and access:

**"I don't see huge problems; some of our staff are local, have been local all their lives. The majority of us working in this business come from outside, right outside. ...we've been here six years; the business has been going nine years... so we're more Lincolnshire than anything else." (DSL1: 24)**

The chairman of a disability awareness organisation compared his experiences of policing a 'very urban area' of Lancashire for 30 years with more recent experiences as a 'voluntary helper in adult learning'. He noted that young adults in Louth tended not to be interested in learning:

**"It was (pause) a bit frustrating in a way because you never kept a student for any length of time. There were some that were more or less compelled to come who hadn't the slightest interest in it whatsoever and they just came and went through the motions." (PLO1: 20)**

We asked whether this non-interest was affected by forms of rurality:

r: **"Don't think so. No, I don't think there's any difference between rural or urban."**

I: **"You think this would be exactly the same in an urban area?"**

r: **"I would imagine so, yes, from my experience of people in an urban aspect. ...I was a policeman for 30 years in a very urban area of Lancashire and I used to come across people of course who couldn't read or write or do anything, and from that aspect I don't think there's any difference between the rural or urban." (PLO1: 28–32)**

A senior manager in a clothing manufacturing company near Skegness claimed not to regard rural areas as special in relation to literacy or numeracy training:

**"...mmm, I don't, I'm not too sure really. I think you'd sort of know about it more because it would obviously be publicised in the local paper rather than a sort of**

**national paper I suppose. Other than that I'm not sure really." (MSK1: 24)**

The quotations above, then, argue for a kind of non-rurality, a construction of rurality as not special or novel.

Other interviewees understand the rural setting as positive in opposition to a construction of negative urban. In response to the question in the questionnaire question, 'What could be done locally to improve literacy and numeracy?', the owner of a farm near Horncastle, wrote: 'No need'. We asked him to expand on that answer. He said:

**"Well, I mean people round here can read and write. Of course they can. So I don't see any need for it at all. Yes, I know there are people in the middle of Horncastle that I don't come into contact with because they're probably, well, wouldn't get into contact with them, they probably can't read and write, have no idea." (AH1: 14)**

Later he commented in response to a question about the distinctiveness of rural areas:

**"Well, I would have thought generally speaking they're more literate in the country than in the city, the inner cities, but I don't really know." (AH1: 18)**

Similarly, the director of a manufacturing and distribution company in Swineshead spoke against a vision of rurality as centred on practical, manual work and low aspirations:

**"It's an easy stereotype to drop into. We've got a lady that works here who looks after our credit control. She's a farmer's wife, she has two sons... both at university, both high achievers academically. ...having said that, I can take you down the bar of the Wheatsheaf and show you... any number of 17-year-olds who have no aspirations at all. ...I've not seen evidence that would suggest that just because we live in a rural area there is more tendency for young men, say, to go into manual work." (MB1: 20-24)**

He employs mainly local people and presents positive versions of rural employment. He associates rurality with staff loyalty and he opposes a rural work ethic against a culture of unemployment in the nearest town:

**"(If) you come from an area like this where traditionally the people have worked the land: if you can't get a job in an office, you can't get a skill, then I think there would probably be pressure from within families here to keep scaling down until they find a job that you can do. And if that's, if that's working on the land or working in a pack-house or whatever, rather than they sit at home watching TV all day, drawing down on the dole each week. ...I don't know of many young lads around here that don't have employment. I know young lads in the village have sporadic employment where they'll be working for, you know, one ganger one day, and a week later they'll be working somewhere else, and they sort of move around. ...If you go to Boston you've got certain areas there: Chinatown, in Boston, where you would probably, even though it's still fairly rural, you'll be getting the same sort of conditions that you would find in a city, where you'll have families there that are maybe second, maybe even third-generation unemployed." (MB1: 24)**

There is an element of the defensive in these responses, a weariness with discourses of rural deprivation and 'backwardness'.

Weariness with, annoyance at, negative constructions of rurality partly inform a more developed interview response. The office manager of a multi-utility and mains laying company

near Hemswell Cliff, and former lady-mayor of Kirton and Lindsey, responded to the question in the questionnaire, 'What would you say is special about supporting adult literacy and numeracy in a rural setting' with:

**"...that it should not be classed as special just because you are talking about rural settings. There should be the same availability offered." (MGA1)**

Asked to expand on this response, she said:

**"I was quite angry about the fact that you pulled it out as special like it's something out of the ordinary for a rural setting. I think that's, that's, basically the problem is that what you're offered in towns and cities are not what necessarily you can get locally. For example, our local comprehensive school occasionally runs various small, very basic levels of computer literacy or numeracy and things like that, whereas I think that there should be more, they should have more courses available that are at a much higher-level than that. Because, as you've just pointed out, people do have to travel but it shouldn't be brought out as special, you know just because we're kind of in a rural community." (MGA1: 12)**

She explained that she interpreted our use of the word 'special' as implying 'disadvantaged'. She connected constructions of rurality as special in the sense of 'disadvantaged' to the nature of local adult education provision. Transport, poverty and childcare restrict potential students to local courses. The available courses are, she suggested, not ambitious enough:

**"But for people such as in full-time employment or part-time employment, the only thing really available to them to work alongside work is something of an NVQ standard, and I don't feel that's enough, and I think if they want to take evening classes to better their standard of mathematics or English or English literature, something like that. I think that should be more readily available, and not classed as special just because we're out here." (MGA1: 16)**

She characterised the current local provision as reflecting and producing a traditional rural culture of local scientific societies and craftwork. In particular, she suggested that learning is set up in relation to specific, dated social constructions of rural femininity:

**"The kind of things they offer are all flower arranging or baking or something like that. It's very much geared towards, I feel, the 30, 40 years ago in mentality and the way that they expect rural people to still think. You know what to mean? Whereas there's very intelligent, single parents, particularly single mothers, young single mothers, very intelligent, you know, have one child or two children, so they're on benefits, social DHSS or whatever, and particularly in towns such as Kirton in Lindsey... there's no way that these parents have access to outside education, outside of particularly our town." (MGA1: 24)**

Two related suggestions follow from these arguments. The first is that literacy and numeracy should be taught within ambitious local courses: 'mathematics or English or English literature', 'higher than NVQ level'. She suggested that:

**"If there was to be a list of courses posted on the town (Gainsborough) notice board at a much higher level than is currently offered by the government... they would be snapped up, absolutely snapped up." (MGA1: 34)**

The second suggestion is that people living in rural areas should be consulted on what kinds of adult education they would like, rather than rural areas being defined as 'disadvantaged' through basic provision:

**“What angers me is that the availability in rural areas is not as great as it would be in cities. Obviously that’s down to economics and things like that, but I still think that perhaps a kind of a mail-shot, or something like that, in other words, what do you, what courses would you like to take, you know, in this area, rather than them putting on the usual standard, you know, GCSE mathematics, GCSE English.” (MGA1: 18)**

We discuss provision more fully in the following sections.

### **3.2.7 Provision: cultures of rural work**

Different kinds of workplace present different cultures of training. Care work, or nursing, appears to operate with a culture of care extended to employees. A mix of formal and informal training operates to support care staff:

**“We run various training courses, or have people participating in training courses, and of late an awful lot is via distance learning and we get workbooks for people to work through and anyone that’s got difficulty with their literacy... we try to pair them up with someone who’s willing to assist. ...it’s like support rather than training.” (PSK2: 26)**

And, in another ‘elderly care’ home near Fleet Hargate:

**“We have had varying skills really and mainly if someone hasn’t been able to write too good, what we’ve done, as senior carers, we’ve sort of gone alongside them, helped them with reports and they’ve learnt to spell. We have dictionaries and things and done that sort of thing.” (PSP1: 5)**

And:

**“We had one girl that was dyslexic that we helped as well... there’s key words in the care industry that are difficult to spell and we had those wrote (sic) down in the back of her book and people learn that way really.” (PSP1: 9)**

Although the manager of a nursing home near Skegness felt ‘from a business point of view’, that ‘if you’re going to be providing this sort of training... I think the business needs to be reimbursed in some way for using that time’ (PGA2: 45), this culture of care extended to employees does seem to operate in the three residential homes studied.

What might be seen as more ‘business-like’ small businesses (wholesale, distribution, manufacturing, etc.) claim to have a more expedient attitude to skills. The chief executive of a garment wholesaler near Sleaford explained that people with ‘poor’ literacy and numeracy are either not employed, or made redundant:

**“...frankly anybody who was poor we have no space for, because they wont be able to perform their duties. ...we can’t have people picking stock if they can’t count. If we want ten items we want ten, we don’t want nine or seven... We want an accurate count and it’s a fact that those who can’t count don’t stay with us.” (DSL1: 6)**

Two senior managers were asked to leave because ‘they couldn’t handle basic grammar and syntax, and if you can’t do those you can’t communicate clearly’ (DSL1: 30). Employees having difficulties would not be encouraged to access training in numeracy; instead, ‘we’d tend to find new staff, yes, it’s as simple as that’ (DSL1: 8). Similarly, the director of a manufacturing and distribution company in Swineshead noted that although the fitters of smoke alarms are given ‘specialist training’, ‘related to the job’ and health and safety and office workers might be trained in particular computer packages:

**“What we don’t do at the moment is take people who are lacking in any particular literacy or numeracy skills... it’s just that the people that apply to work in here generally come along with a set of skills already, and what we’re doing is sort of improving or tailoring the skills that they come with, and... sort of making them more appropriate for what they’re doing here. ...generally speaking they’ll all have completed a secondary education... the majority of them will have gone on then to enhance their skills and take on things like word-processing, accountancy, which makes them more attractive to an employer. But we’re not involved in, we’re not involved in bringing on those skills; we’re more a sort of user of those skills.” (MB1: 12–14)**

Again in this vein, the contracts manager of a structural steel factory near Ancaster spoke of local applicants:

**“Some of them do struggle ...some of the youngsters, their spelling, etc. isn’t particularly brilliant, you know just basic skills, but... we don’t tend to probably employ those anyway, we don’t have a position for them, and it’s not that we’re, we’re weeding those out, we just obviously if they... don’t have an ability to read and write particularly well in the first instance then they’re going to struggle with the apprenticeship, so they don’t actually get into the position.” (MG2: 78)**

It is these ‘business-like’ businesses that tend to argue against employer involvement in literacy and numeracy training. For example, the director of the manufacturing and distribution company in Swineshead spoke against the voluntary involvement of small businesses in such training:

**“Everything gets loaded on small business at the moment. ...we pay taxes, national insurance, we’re providing everything and I think any suggestion that local businesses should then also be roped into providing what should have been, you know, a fundamental right of ...people in this country to receive education... and if they’re not receiving adequate education at school, then I think it should be the government then that is responsible for following up on that.” (MB1: 28)**

He suggested that it is ‘not fair’ to make literacy and numeracy training a responsibility of small business, but that the government could offer incentives:

**“At the end of the day it will boil down to money, whichever way, shape or form, you know, yes, whether it’s ...tax breaks against resources put in, or whatever.” (MB1: 32)**

Asked whether small businesses should be involved in helping to improve levels of literacy and numeracy, the owner of a farm near Horncastle answered, ‘well not local businesses’.

Asked to explain why not, he said:

**“Well first of all I have no personal need whatsoever in my small business for any help in that at all. Secondly, there’s enough bloody government people hanging around doing very little, and I think they need to get out there and do some work. I’m very cynical about what local government people do. ...I mean they roll into work at 9 o’clock, have their frigging cereals when they can; I mean by 9 o’clock today I’d been to Skegness, delivered; never mind what I’d done, I’d done two hours’ work by 9 o’clock this morning and they’re swanning into work and getting their cereals because they haven’t had time for breakfast for God’s sake. I’ve seen that in Lincoln. I have no, I mean, just get off their arses and do some work. So, it’s the local government, without employing any more people, if they really do find problems they need to sort it out themselves. ...no I’m fed up with actually working long hours, admittedly I don’t pay a**

**lot of tax 'cause I don't earn much, but I work long hours and I have no intention of helping anybody else, I'm helping myself, and the nice people who work for me. Literacy is not my problem."** (AH1: 24)

Many interviewees argued that literacy and numeracy should be taught to children in schools rather than to adults at work. The chief executive of the garment wholesaler near Sleaford wrote on his questionnaire that 'local government should do it; why should employers make up government's deficiencies?' (DSL1) Asked to expand, he said:

**"I firmly believe that if kids at the age of 11 have not got sound, and I mean sound, numeracy and literacy skills, they will fail from there on in life, and my answer was mainly around the need to get the resources into primary schools before numeracy and literacy becomes a problem."** (DSL1: 16)

In particular he argued that schools have a responsibility to ensure that children should not leave school, should not become adults, without proficiency in literacy and numeracy. The director of a manufacturing and distribution company in Swineshead argued similarly:

**"OK, so the school has failed these people, for whatever reason... There doesn't appear to be anything there. And I think it's catching people at that point, you know, if the school's failed them, rather than letting them drop and fade away."** (MB1: 38)

### 3.2.8 Provision: secret or open?

Interviewees made familiar, straightforward points about access to training in relation to geography, cost, time, childcare. For example:

**r: "...(If) they've got children, they can do a workshop that's 9 to 3 or something, working in school hours, but is free to mothers, parents or whatever. ...I think most of us now sort of work because you have to work don't you. ...both parents work in a family because... they need to work. So to find the extra money to go out to do extra education isn't always readily available."** (DL1: 12-14)

**"...the parents, it's finding the time when you're a full-time parent as well, to be able to do that in part-time work."** (DL1: 24)

**"...it's travelling again isn't it? It's sort of, the far reach places aren't as easy."** (DL1: 26)

The manager of a care home near Willingham By Stow argued that people 'tend to work longer hours in rural communities' to avoid travelling time; therefore 'when they leave work, they don't really want to be doing anything else when they get home'. (PGA2: 45)

A number of interviewees conceive of rural spaces as spaces of high social visibility. For example,

**"Although we've got villages of 2,000 people dotted around, the staff sort of go in come out, go in come out, and they might just bump in to. ...it's a very small community and farming is a very small community."** (ASL1: 70)

There are two suggested responses to visibility in relation to provision: either secretly teach literacy and numeracy; or attempt to make literacy and numeracy training normal, common and mundane rather than exceptional and embarrassing. The secretive teaching of literacy was suggested by the manager of a nursing home near Willingham By Stow:

**"...we encourage them now to start doing... their NVQs (in care work) and we do in-**

house training, so I mean if it was brought in, that type of thing, I think they would accept. I think what is always the case with adults, you have to be careful, you don't make them feel that they're showing they're inadequate to the other members of staff. I mean, I think there has to be a certain amount of confidentiality with it and that probably, in this sort of environment, if they were being tutored on a mentorship system or something like that it would be easier, because other people wouldn't need to know exactly what they were doing then." (PGA2: 14)

Similarly, the director of the farming company near Roxholme suggested that difficulties in interesting employees in literacy and numeracy training might be partly overcome by inserting such training into existing training on agricultural machinery and chemicals:

"It certainly needs to be built in and around some of these courses... I mean, we belong to a training group and I think training groups do have a role... it used to be the ATB, Agricultural Training Board, but we pay a sub each year and we... send men on various training courses. The common ones are spraying and JCB or forklift handling, because they've got to have certain paperwork to prove that... they're competent, and I just wonder if ever they take into account (literacy and numeracy)." (ASL1: 12)

The overseeing body is LANTRA and the interviewees expect 'that there are quite a lot of blind spots in that (literacy and numeracy) area'. (ASL1: 32-34)

In some contrast to secretive provision, the manager of a nursing and residential care home near Skegness argued for more open and more varied kinds of provision, claiming that if literacy and numeracy training was thought of as common, everyday, then people would find accessing support 'less embarrassing':

r: "...I think, like I say, a real mixture. I would like to see such courses being offered, or, you know, one-to-one support being offered in libraries, peoples' work places, drop-in centres, anything really. Maybe even local superstores, you know, that sort of thing, so if it's really community-based. I don't know, I think I'd almost like to see it as a drop-in facility... travelling road-shows or something, you know, you get radio vans going round don't you doing travelling road-shows. That sort of thing. You know, for people to drop into, go into shopping centres and it's there, people might see it and be inspired and..."

I: "How do you think that would overcome the embarrassment in relation to say, the traditional sort of place, a college...?"

r: "Yeah, I think it's really just access and it being common, being widely available, not so much of a stigma. There's not a stigma of going to college, but going to college for basic learning skills." (PSK2: 44-48)

The idea of making adult training familiar and everyday is perhaps contained in the argument of the manager of an elderly care home near Fleet Hargate that adult literacy and numeracy should be taught in relation to, or through, a closeness between parents, children and schools:

"Well I do feel that right from the beginning parents should be involved, you know, because I myself I can remember my son doing his GCSEs and I haven't got a clue what he was doing on his computer, or in maths if I'm honest... so if you could be involved and I know this would be difficult, but if there was some way of parents actually understanding what their children were learning... teaching had gone to a

**different way of, a different level, and so parents need to learn how to do that, to be encouraging to their children at home.” (PSP1: 69)**

The idea of teaching literacy and numeracy to adults through connections between parents, children and schools does not imply that school buildings are appropriate sites of provision. The interviewee quoted above pointed out that in rural areas, adults would often be returning to the same school, the same building, associated with negative childhood experiences:

**“I don’t think it happens so much now, but people have been ridiculed... and I’ve had a lot of people from here say this, if they’ve not been particularly good at class, or they have acted and played about because they know, they recognise that they can’t do the lesson, they’ve been excluded or they’ve been ridiculed in front of people. The older ones have been caned or abused in some way and so, you know, it’s very difficult to go back into a building that had so many bad memories for you. I mean it isn’t the case for everybody but for a lot of people.” (PSP1: 73)**

The notion of making literacy and numeracy less ‘basic’, that is to say more ‘ordinary’, cuts into many of the issues raised in the previous sections. We return to questions of provision in the conclusion and recommendations.

## 4. Conclusion and recommendations

### 4.1 Conclusions

The completed questionnaires suggest that interest in and concern for, adult literacy and numeracy among senior personnel (owners, executives, directors, managers, senior administrators) in small businesses in rural Lincolnshire and Rutland is very limited. The majority claim to view the literacy and numeracy of their employees as 'adequate', 'good' or 'excellent'. Only 4 per cent regard literacy levels as 'poor' and only 6 per cent regard numeracy levels as 'poor'.

These very low figures contrast with the Basic Skills Agencies estimates for Lincolnshire, which show:

Literacy	Low literacy	Lower literacy	Very low literacy
Nationally	15	5	4
Lincolnshire	16.3	3.9	3.8

Numeracy	Low numeracy	Lower numeracy	Very low numeracy
Nationally	12	7	5
Lincolnshire	11.1	7	5.3

(Basic Skills Agency Web Site, 2004)

This mismatch between the Basic Skills Agencies estimates and the employers' view may in part be explained by the misunderstanding of what the **Skills for Life** Strategy and of literacy/numeracy level are among small employers. If the employers figures for 'poor' performance – 6 per cent numeracy and 4 per cent Literacy – are compared to the estimates shown in the table above they are close to the levels shown for 'Very Low'. This might suggest that employers consider literacy and numeracy levels in extremes rather than as a series of progressive levels.'

None of the respondents indicated that employees are currently accessing support in literacy and numeracy (92 per cent claimed to know that employees were not accessing such support). Just under half (48 per cent) of respondents claim not to be aware of the **Skills for Life** agenda and 65 per cent claim not to be aware of local initiatives to support adult literacy and numeracy. Senior personnel suggest that this lack of awareness and interest is shared by employees. Many suggest more publicity, across local newspapers, local radio and advertisements in shops (rather than libraries or on the internet).

It is not possible to assume a standard or sophisticated understanding among senior personnel in small business in Lincolnshire and Rutland of the status of 'literacy' and 'numeracy'. Most assess literacy and numeracy in relation to specific work practices: letter and/or report writing, bookkeeping, counting stock or through vague, general assessment of 'intelligence'. It is difficult to define levels within the research sample. For business, 'good' and 'bad' appear to be terms derived from functional competencies within the specific rather than the general business context. Literacy and numeracy are not seen as having an inherent

value; they are regarded as valuable only at certain levels, in relation to what employees do. In other words, literacy and numeracy are not seen as valuable beyond a certain practical, applied or appropriate level, in specific fields. This level is below that envisaged by ***Skills for Life*** – usually basic ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ (literacy), reading numbers and performing very simple calculations (numeracy).

Senior personnel claim that employees have little interest in their own literacy and numeracy. Literacy and numeracy are not seen as attractive forms of economic, social or cultural capital; employees have no ‘interest’ or ‘illusio’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 76–77) in being more literate and/or numerate. Lack of interest in literacy and numeracy is described as self-perpetuating, durable and difficult to interrupt, like habitus (Jenkins, 1998: 79; Mahar et al. 1990: 11). In Bourdieu’s terms, those not ‘caught up in and by the game’ of literacy and numeracy cannot see that ‘playing is worth the effort’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 76–77).

Some interviewees linked this lack of interest in and valuing of literacy and numeracy to a rural economy which, though changing, is still centred on low-paid, seasonal, practical and manual work. Others linked lack of interest to a closed, homely, limited society and cultural environment which comforts but suppresses aspiration; a lack of opportunities for cultural consumption (art galleries, theatres, etc.) tends to create satisfaction and contentment rather than curiosity, ambition and intellectualism. In other words, people are unlikely to see the point of literacy and numeracy in a social and cultural world which lacks difference and stimulation.

Lack of interest in literacy and numeracy is linked to specifically rural kinds of ‘coping’, making do and managing. Older people understand themselves and are understood by others, to have coped, managed and made do with low levels of literacy and numeracy for so long that training now seems absurd, inappropriate or not worth presenting to them. This is particularly so in farm work. Farm managers/owners speak of feeling unable to introduce literacy and numeracy training to older employees because it would jar with employees long-standing, habitual, unarticulated and taken-for-granted ways of working, living and coping. Similarly, employers would prefer to cope with, or work round, low-skilled employees, rather than confront, embarrass or confuse them.

Lack of interest in and valuing of, literacy and numeracy among employers and employees should be understood in relation to particular forms of rural masculinity and femininity. Interviewees alluded to and revealed in themselves, forms of male reserve and the persistence of a ‘traditional’ construction of rural masculinity centred on practical, manual work. The individual nature of modern farm work is linked to a kind of lonely, isolated and self-reliant masculinity, resistant to training. One interviewee appeared to construct and value a particular kind of specifically rural practical masculinity in opposition to femininity and to other kinds of intellectual masculinity, associated with Shakespeare, literature, foreign languages, examinations, ‘Blair’ and the ‘London Oratory’. Other interviewees related lack of interest in literacy and numeracy to forms of rural femininity. In particular, ‘traditional’ constructions of rural women as maternal and domestic might contribute to interest in literacy and numeracy through a closeness between mothers, children, schools and studying. However, the persistence of rural domestic femininities are also associated with a lack of social and intellectual confidence.

Certain respondents argued against an understanding of the rural setting as different or ‘special’ in relation to literacy and numeracy. Others constructed the rural environment as

positive in opposition to a construction of the urban setting as negative, disadvantaged, more illiterate and innumerate. There is in some responses a defensiveness, a weariness with and annoyance at negative constructions of rural 'disadvantage'. Positive versions of rurality are presented. Staff loyalty and a rural work ethic are opposed to cultures of unemployment and disaffection in imagined urban environments. One interviewee argued that rural areas are constructed as negative by the provision of limited, basic forms of adult education.

Questionnaire respondents suggested that adult literacy and numeracy could be improved by some or more local adult training provision; most argued for certain kinds of provision. Many made familiar arguments about access in relation to rural geography, cost, classes during school hours for parents (especially mothers) and bad memories associated with formal learning, especially schools. Many suggested 'colleges'; others favoured varied, co-operative, informal and flexible provision – informality and sensitivity in relation to issues of 'stigma'. 'Embarrassment', 'stigma' and awkwardness around adult literacy and numeracy were discussed by respondents in relation to rural geographies of social closeness, visibility and lack of anonymity. Two contrasting solutions were suggested: attempts to make adult literacy and numeracy training private, secret or hidden in other kinds of adult education; or an attempt to make adult literacy and numeracy training widespread, common, familiar and everyday, rather than novel, special and exceptional.

Only five among 84 respondents (6 per cent) indicated that small businesses should provide literacy and numeracy training for employees. Of these, four suggested a joint or secondary role (with colleges) for small businesses. Different kinds of businesses present different, existing cultures of training. In nursing homes, a culture of care is extended to employees. A mix of formal training and informal literacy and numeracy support operates around new forms of recording in care work. Farm managers send their main employees on training courses on new machinery and spraying technologies; these do not focus on literacy and numeracy.

What might be seen as especially 'business-like' small businesses (retail, wholesale, distribution, manufacturing, etc.) claimed to have an expedient attitude to employees and skills: candidates with poor literacy and numeracy are not employed; employees with literacy and numeracy difficulties are made redundant; training is focused on very particular businesses processes/tasks; and employers understand themselves as using, rather than developing, skills.

Employers in these businesses argue strongly against the involvement of small businesses in literacy and numeracy training. These arguments are often connected to criticism of government education policy and school education. Adult literacy and numeracy and child literacy and numeracy are not separated in the imagination of these respondents. Some argue that it is easier or more appropriate to learn these skills at a young age. Others claim for schools, rather than small businesses, the responsibility for local literacy and numeracy. Adult literacy and numeracy are understood as projected outcomes of 'better' school education. These businesses suggest that they would voluntarily introduce literacy and numeracy training only in return for grants or tax incentives.

Although business leaders argued they had little role to play in developing their employees' levels of literacy and numeracy some interviewees recognised the negative effect on the business that underdeveloped literacy and numeracy levels may cause. These were expressed in connection to recruitment policies, highlighting the importance of ensuring only those with

appropriate levels of literacy and/or numeracy were offered jobs and, the limiting consequences of poor skill levels in industries which have become increasingly industrialised and technology dependant. For example:

r: "...numeracy is more important than literacy in general because we tend to have a lot of strings of numbers to deal with (pointing to an example) barcodes, and things like that, and the ability to handle a string of, I think there's ten digits there, is important. ...literacy is slightly different because it really applies to the more, more senior staff who've got letters to write and other communication... On the literacy side, yes I ticked adequate overall but there are a couple of senior managers who have left us this year who were unable to write good, clear business English, despite their position. That's part of the reason why they're no longer with us because they couldn't communicate ideas clearly... We can't have people picking stock if they can't count. If we want 10 items we want 10, we don't want 9 or 7 or, you know, 11. We want an accurate count and it's a fact that those who can't count don't stay with us."

I: "I was going to ask the question, 'would you encourage certain members of your staff to undertake literacy and numeracy training', and I gather that your answer would be that those needing it...?"

r: "We'd tend to find new staff, yes, it's as simple as that." (DSL: 6-8)

The message about recruitment is further emphasised by another interviewee who stressed the difference between small and large local employers. The interviewee believed small employers had to employ people who were largely able to provide an immediate return on their salary unlike larger employers who had the time and resource to invest in human capital development. Health and safety concerns were also expressed as a possible consequence of poor literacy and numeracy levels:

r: "Well, you've got to be able to read all the instructions

I: "On the machine, chemicals?"

r: "The machines, agro-chemicals, fertilisers, all the instructions that I give them. You know I have to write everything down on worksheets, then you see he has to fill in the log."

I: "So it would be a benefit to you if their literacy and numeracy were better?"

r: "Exactly because there's two [employees] could never do this, you see and, you know, those chemicals there, if they put the wrong can in on the wrong field it could kill it. You know, so it's, it's very, very awkward." (AG1: 74-81)

Other interviewees believed literacy and numeracy levels were adequate although some highlighted the specific vocational skill shortage they faced, as an example engineering skills:

r: "Generally we find that people don't have an interest in learning. In our business, I mean 'cause engineering's not sexy, it's not computers. You mix that with the attitude that we come across, it becomes a bit of a non-starter, which is tragic 'cause we've got a skills shortage coming up, it's not there yet. We need to train? You can't go for the academically brighter people because they aren't interested. You set your levels at the highest that you can get an interest, which in our experience is the Cs, Ds and E level isn't it. We have attracted people probably with a bit higher levels before but you find

you don't keep them, because obviously they then want to go on, very much, especially as that's the old adage, when you do employ somebody as a younger, they're going to progress and that progression usually means moving on to somewhere. Our only problem is there aren't a lot of other people training apprentices so of course you haven't got that feedback coming back."

I: "Does that make you slightly reluctant to train in literacy and numeracy because you wouldn't want to lose a skilled person?"

r: "No not at all, we just don't see any benefit, the numeracy side of things is taught anyway if we take on an apprenticeship." (MG2: 70-73)

The interviews are interesting in this respect in that they show a gulf between what employers see as the negative consequences for their business of poor literacy and numeracy levels – largely seen as the 'fault' of schools – and their potential role in addressing the problem. This appears to be different from their role in developing vocational skills in partnership with local colleges and training providers which are seen as legitimate investments in the future of the business. During the interviews businesses pointed out the potential cost – both opportunity and direct – of literacy and numeracy training. What was not mentioned was the potential cost of not investing.

## 4.2 Policy recommendations

We urge policy makers to read the entire report carefully and combine the arguments with their own experience/expertise to produce and refine policy. However, we make the following recommendations:

- Adult literacy and numeracy training should be integrated into existing forms of training, in particular businesses. For example, on farms, literacy and numeracy should be taught within practical training courses offered by agricultural training organisations (such as LANTRA); in establishments such as nursing homes, they should be taught within formal and informal training associated with new forms of recording in care work. Incentives for the introduction of training should be considered.
- There should be a wider and ongoing attempt to make literacy and numeracy training common, widespread, open and familiar, rather than exceptional, unusual or embarrassing. Interviewees suggest numerous, varied kinds of provision in colleges, workplaces and popular spaces (such as shopping centres) and frequent advertising across local radio and newspapers.
- Advertisements for literacy and numeracy training and the training itself, needs to be aligned with particular, often distinct, forms of self-identity in employers and employees. These forms of identity are often connected to particular understandings of rural masculinity, femininity and age and are often habitual, taken for granted and very durable (see especially section 3.2).
- Publicity regarding adult literacy and numeracy should be sensitive to a feeling in rural areas that rurality is constructed as 'disadvantaged' by policy; the novelty or particularity of the rural should not be presented as containing difficulty or disadvantage.

- Discourses on adult literacy and numeracy should not be separated from discourses on school literacy and numeracy. Employers might be more inclined to introduce training if they felt that schools were also taking responsibility for the literacy and numeracy of children and young adults (perhaps this policy recommendation is more of a reminder to policy makers to ensure recent steps to provide a linkage in discourse are maintained. E.g. National Literacy Strategy (1998) and a year later, the National Numeracy Strategy for primary education, the recent focus on early years of secondary education and the *Skills for Life* Agenda for adults).
- Adult literacy and numeracy training should be offered alongside, or within, more ambitious local courses: A-levels, degrees and postgraduate study.
- Adult literacy and numeracy should be promoted in relation to a more general attempt to develop opportunities for cultural consumption in rural areas (art galleries, theatres, etc.).

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### Appendix 1: Travel to Work Areas in Lincolnshire and Rutland



### Appendix 2: Employment Structure of Lincolnshire and Rutland 1998

	% Lincolnshire	% Rutland
Agriculture and Fishing	5.7	3
Energy and Water	0.8	<-1
Manufacturing	20.6	19
Construction	5.2	6
Distribution, Hotels and Restaurants (incl. Retail)	24.2	21
Transport and Communications	4.5	4
Banking, Finance and Insurance	11.0	13
Public Administration, Education and Health	24.1	31
Other Services	3.8	3

Source: Annual Employment Survey 1998; ONS/Census of Agriculture; Annual Business Inquiry

**Appendix three: the questionnaire**

1) Please enter your name and the business details below:

Name:

---

Position within the business:

---

Postal address

---

Telephone number:

---

2) What is the main focus of the business, e.g. farm, local garage?

---

3) How many people does the business employ?

male full-time

female full-time

---

male part-time

female part-time

---

4) Please tick the box that best describes your view of adult literacy (the ability to speak listen and respond; read and comprehend; write to communicate) levels in your employees/business:

Excellent

Good

Adequate

Poor

---

5) Please tick the box that best describes your view of adult numeracy (the ability to understand and use mathematical information, calculate and manipulate mathematical information, interpret results and communicate mathematical information) levels in your employees/business:

Excellent

Good

Adequate

Poor

---

6) Are any of your employees accessing support in literacy or numeracy?

No (Go to Question 8)

---

Yes, literacy     Yes, numeracy

---

Don't know (Go to Question 8)

---

7 a) How many of your employees are accessing support in literacy and numeracy?

literacy       numeracy

---

b) Who provides the support, e.g. further education college?

---

c) How is the support provided, e.g. face to face classes?

---

8) As an employer/small business, what do you think of the government's 'Skills for Life' agenda?

---

---

9) What could be done locally to improve adult literacy and numeracy?

---

---

10) What initiatives are you aware of to support adult literacy and/or numeracy locally?

---

---

**11) What would you say is special about supporting adult literacy and numeracy in a rural setting?**

---

---

**12) Who should provide adult literacy and numeracy support/training? Local businesses, colleges, the voluntary sector (clubs, etc.)?**

---

---

Thank you for participating in this research; if you would like a summary of the findings please tick here .

Please return the questionnaire in the reply envelope to

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Jubilee Campus,

Nottingham, NG8 1BB





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