
Our approach to research and development

We are committed to ensuring that our research is methodologically rigorous and grounded in the needs of learners and practitioners. We make every effort to reflect this in all stages of the research and development process, particularly by involving policy and practice communities in the planning and delivery of projects.

We will identify connections and create synergy between related projects and programmes. We seek to ensure outcomes are applied as widely as possible to address the relevant policy and learning issues. Impact is integral to all we do and not just a linear process of 'what we do with the results'.

Subject areas: literacy, reading and writing, numeracy and ESOL

We will conduct research into literacy and language (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and numeracy as discrete but overlapping elements in basic skills. We will explore how best literacy, numeracy and English language needs can be integrated into vocational and academic programmes of learning, taking into account the increasing importance of ICT as a crucial medium and set of skills.

The diversity of learners

Our work will seek to include all types of learners with literacy, numeracy and English language needs and to address their diversity and range of learning needs. We recognise that some learners need to develop in a single domain, while others require support across the *Skills for Life* curricula. Our work will address the needs of particular groups in the population, including those with disabilities and those with learning difficulties, including dyslexia.

The range of learning environments

We will ensure our work encompasses learning in context. The diversity of learners' needs demands a relevant and focused response from the supply-side. Contexts include urban and rural settings; multi-cultural communities; large and small businesses etc. We will include learning which takes place at work, in colleges, learning centres, families, neighbourhoods and communities; prisons and ICT-supported provision.

Communication and impact

To achieve our aims we must influence policy positively and maximise the impact of our research and development on practice and outcomes for learners.

We will communicate actively with those who can help us achieve influence and impact. Dissemination of information is an important part of this process. We are developing website and email communication and a range of publications, but cannot simply rely on these alone.

We are also working to develop channels for effective two-way communication with policy makers, adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL practitioners and learners at all appropriate stages. We will ensure our activities reach and engage professionals working directly with learners. Through development work, networking and trialling results we will work to transform research into better practice.

We will also work with other organisations to build up a resource of information on effective practice and policy interventions.

Engaging practitioners in research and development

We will engage practitioners to ensure our work is relevant and geared to the needs of adult learners, and that its value is recognised by teachers. This will increase the sense of ownership of and commitment to the research itself, and to teacher development and other policy and practice proposals based on the research. Involving tutors and managers in conducting the research will also contribute to their professional development and build research capacity.

Learners, teachers, leaders and managers have important contributions to make at each stage of the research process. They will be most affected by the outcomes of the research, and by the processes of data collection. They are also the best equipped to collect and interpret many forms of data, as the colleagues and peers of those whose views are being sought.

Contacting us

For further information on NRDC and/or a copy of the full Strategy 2003-2007 please visit our website or contact:

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National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy



Strategy 2003-2007

Generating knowledge and transforming it into practice

About NRDC

This is a summary of the Strategy 2003-2007 of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). The full strategy is available on our website or from the address on page 4.

NRDC is an expert research and development consortium established by the DfES Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU) in 2002 as part of *Skills for Life*: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. It was created in response to the report of the committee chaired by Lord Moser, which highlighted concerns about the high number of adult with basic skills needs. We are funded by the DfES for five years. The consortium partners are:

- Institute of Education, University of London
- Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University
- School of Continuing Education, University of Nottingham
- School of Education, University of Sheffield
- East London Pathfinder Consortium
- Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership
- Basic Skills Agency
- Learning and Skills Development Agency
- London Language and Literacy Unit, South Bank University
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
- King's College London

We work with a wider group of contributors, drawing on the best research and development practice in the field.

Vision

Our vision is to become within five years an internationally recognised centre of excellence for research, development and effective practice in adult literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL).

Our strategic aims

Developing practice and policy

We aim to improve practice, inform policy and identify further research needs in literacy, numeracy and ESOL. We will achieve this through generating new, useful and reliable evidence and knowledge, and developing it so that it can be used for positive change. With the active encouragement of ABSSU, we are engaging with, refreshing and helping to take forward the *Skills for Life* strategy in the future.

Creating synergy through innovation and a range of methods

We will create evidence, theory, scholarship and innovative thinking by engaging multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Our programmes use a wide range of research methods appropriate to the topic. We are creating a strong international dimension to our work, learning from and interacting with colleagues across the world. We are building synergy and interaction between projects and across our programmes so that we can address key problems emerging in policy and practice, drawing relevant knowledge from a range of sources.

A strong professional identity

We are contributing to the establishment of a strong professional identity for teachers and other practitioners supporting *Skills for Life*, through new training and development frameworks. This will also help build reflective practice, career development and research capacity, through the systematic engagement of teachers and other practitioners in our work.

Communication and impact

We will communicate our findings and messages in powerful ways so that they can be embedded in practice and inform the development of policy. Our aim is to have a strong and positive impact on the success of learners. We are working closely with stakeholders and partners at local, national and international levels. The most important are ABSSU and the wider DfES, Department of Work and Pensions and other government departments, the Learning and Skills Council, providers, researchers and key national organisations.

Engaging users

We are actively engaging with the users of research, particularly teachers, leaders, managers and the wider *Skills for Life* workforce, employers and unions and agents of change in communities and the wider social context. To make this effective, we are working across the Consortium to devise new ways of transforming research and development, so that they are widely and routinely used to develop policy and practice.

What we stand for

- ensuring that the needs of learners are the central focus of our work
- addressing equality and diversity in all our activities
- engaging practitioners in all stages of our work
- exemplifying good partnership working, within and beyond the consortium
- working in accordance with accepted ethical frameworks for research
- making our operations as transparent as possible
- working towards a world-class standard in our research and development.

Developing NRDC's programmes

In our first year of operation, we have completed a series of reviews of research across our areas of interest and carried out several exploratory data-gathering projects. We have also consulted with practitioners, policy makers and a wide range of stakeholders. We have looked at literacy, numeracy and ESOL research strategies in other countries, particularly the USA, Canada and Australia. On this basis, we have reviewed our draft strategy and priorities.

As a result, our **Strategy 2003–2007** is organised into the five programmes summarised here.

Many research issues and questions covered in one programme area are also relevant to others. Our approach will be to ensure interactivity, information sharing and coherence across all our programmes and projects. While each programme has a central focus, synergy between programmes will be actively created to triangulate and secure the validity of findings. This will support depth of understanding of key issues and effective communication and embedding of findings in practice.

Delivering the Strategy

NRDC's Strategy will be delivered through a delivery plan as part of **Skills for Life**, annual operating plans and reports. These will be publicly available on NRDC's website.

The effectiveness of the Centre's work will also be evaluated over its life.

Programme One Economic development and social inclusion

KEY QUESTIONS

- What are the economic and social consequences of literacy, numeracy and ESOL problems for individual adults and for society?
- What are the economic, social and personal benefits of literacy, numeracy and English language skills?

The strong links between socio-economic variables and literacy and numeracy skills are well established and underlie **Skills for Life**. Cohort studies show that over the last 20 years adults with literacy, numeracy and English language problems have faced increasing difficulties gaining and maintaining work.

These processes may be exacerbated among particular groups and in particular locations. People from non-English speaking backgrounds, adults with learning difficulties and those with disabilities, teenage parents and people living in disadvantaged areas are more prone on average to basic skills problems and the predisposing conditions for social exclusion.

Raising skill levels will enhance not only employability, but productivity. Nonetheless, it has proved complex and challenging to engage employers and raise commitment to lifelong learning for their employees, particularly the low-skilled. Self-employed people and small businesses find this even more difficult.

Major research topics include birth cohort studies with an intergenerational component, a longitudinal study of young people and a resource for detailed ethnographic research on literacy, language and numeracy in adult learners' lives. Other research is identifying effective workplace basic skills strategies for enhancing employee development and productivity and the returns to ESOL learning for learners' lives and the economy.

The outcomes of research in Programme One will provide resources for further projects in this and other NRDC programmes. They will feed back to government and other agencies the implications for policy development and offer evidence for the improvement of practice.

Programme Two Participation: motivation and engagement

KEY QUESTIONS

- How can we attract more learners and enable them to persist and succeed in learning?
- How do people cope with, use and develop their literacy, numeracy and English language skills in daily life?
- What impact does participation in learning have on learners' lives and how can this be assessed?

Adults are voluntary participants. They have widely varying objectives, complex lives and commitments, and may learn in patterns that are different from the largely set menus of the 'supply side'. Not all adults recognise any need to participate in learning. Literacy, numeracy and language are a means to an end in people's lives and most adults with a weaker grasp of them have learned to get by.

Motivation to improve skills is often a by-product of work needs or helping children learn. And turning this into formal learning may not be easy.

To meet the **Skills for Life** targets, we must discover the extent to which current provision motivates people and how providers can respond to the complex needs of potential learners.

Programme Two aims to inform demand-led strategies for attracting new learners. If 1.5 million adults are to have significantly improved their literacy and numeracy by 2007, learning needs to become more compelling for people who may currently feel it is 'not for them', or who encounter external barriers. The education and training system – the 'supply side' – needs to understand better what motivates or inspires adults of all ages to engage in learning so that they can reshape learning opportunities.

The programme also prioritises research and development on numeracy and mathematical literacy as a critical national educational priority and seeks to enable informed estimates of demand for ICT skills.

Programme Three

Effective teaching and learning

KEY QUESTIONS

- How can teaching, learning and assessing literacy, numeracy and language be improved?
- What factors contribute to successful learning?
- How is learners' progress to be measured and recognised?

Although there is a great deal of research and theory about how people learn, it is largely derived from studying children and school-based learning. In post-16 learning, much less is known in general, and about adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL in particular. Pedagogy is even less well-developed.

The programme will seek to develop a body of evidence on effective practice in the teaching and learning of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, in a variety of contexts and with different groups of learners.

It aims to provide outcomes that can be developed into effective guidance for teachers and others who support teaching and learning.

The centrepiece of research in Programme Three is a series of linked observational studies of 'what makes a difference?' – in effective teaching and learning in each of the key subject areas of *Skills for Life*:

- reading
- writing
- numeracy
- ESOL

The studies will aim to improve programme design, teaching and learning strategies, application of theory and techniques. The subject areas are interconnected in teaching, learning and everyday life. We will both study them as distinct topics and ensure there is synergy and interconnection between them.

A related study will look at ICT in adult literacy, numeracy and language: it will use a series of trials and identify effective design guidelines.

Other studies will consider the relationship between teaching and learning, the national 'crisis' in numeracy and maths in the post-16 population; learning styles; and contextualising literacy, numeracy and ESOL in vocational and community settings.

Programme Four

Professional development and the 'Skills for Life' workforce

KEY QUESTIONS

- How can improving initial training and the professional development of the *Skills for Life* workforce enhance learning?
- How do we build sufficient high-quality capacity to develop the workforce?

Skills for Life has set out a challenging new agenda for creating a new framework and professional identity for teachers and others engaged in the delivery of literacy, numeracy and language in post-16 education and training.

The *Skills for Life* workforce encompasses a wide range of professionals, including teachers, leaders, managers, support assistants and many others whose work brings them into contact with the needs of staff supporting learners within both discrete and embedded provision.

Programme Four aims to build capacity and to develop a fully professional workforce with recognised career structures that are sustainable for the longer term. This involves collaboration in strategic development work with key national bodies, to contribute to the establishment, implementation and development of provision offering the new qualifications.

Research will include evaluation and dissemination of good practice from a range of professional development programmes in literacy, numeracy and ESOL and an investigation of the characteristics of effective teacher training in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, and of the pedagogy of teacher training programmes.

A fund for regionally based research or development projects, led by practitioners, will invite bids each year. This programme of work will promote and share developments in literacy, numeracy and ESOL initial teacher education, through cohesive support nationally to local and regional networks.

By 2007, NRDC will have made a significant contribution to well-embedded comprehensive provision for the *Skills for Life* workforce.

Programme Five

The infrastructure of provision

KEY QUESTIONS

- In the context of *Skills for Life*, how do systems, structures and strategies for planning, funding, delivering and evaluating provision help or hinder learning outcomes?
- How do individual learners best interact with systems and structures to maximise achievement and progress?

The context in which literacy, numeracy and ESOL learning takes place, and the systems, structures and policy initiatives that support that learning, have the potential to impact powerfully on its effectiveness. We know that some types of organisation or setting can attract or deter some groups of learners. We know that some approaches to funding can encourage or discourage the involvement of providers. But there is a lack of systematic evidence on how mechanisms for planning, funding and organising support for learners impact upon different groups in different contexts. This programme will seek to synthesise what is known, including an international comparative dimension, and commission new work to fill important gaps.

Programme Five will focus on how the infrastructure, financing and costs of learning – as well as the wider environment and significant economic, social and educational trends and developments – can impact on learners and learning, now and in the future. The programme will also explore how the 'supply side' can respond most effectively to learners' and employers' needs.

The overall aim is to increase understanding of how the policies, systems and structures through which learning is planned, delivered and evaluated impact upon learning for different groups of learners.

Research outcomes will inform guidance for providers and planners about learning infrastructures and provide evidence of how the context and infrastructure of provision impact on learners' progress. Policy makers and managers will be advised on strategies to improve achievement and other indicators of learners' outcomes. Evidence will be generated on how current performance measures are impacting on provision.