

**Numeracy, Literacy and
ESOL: Evaluation of Entry
and Level 1 Awards**

**NATIONAL
REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
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**THE
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FUNDING COUNCIL***

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Summary

During the past 20 years a range of awards has been developed to meet the demand for external validation of students' achievements. Since the introduction of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* (the Act) there has been a particularly sharp increase in the use of external awards to accredit the achievements of students wanting to improve their literacy and numeracy, and those wishing to improve their spoken and written English. It is often mistakenly thought that external awards are necessary to meet the requirements of schedule 2 of the Act, to secure funding from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), and to meet the requirements of colleges' own information systems. Most students now study for an award. This inspectorate national exercise was devised to evaluate those awards which are frequently used at entry level and level 1 in numeracy, literacy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and to judge the impact of these qualifications on the curriculum, teaching and learning, and on students' achievements.

Most awards for numeracy, literacy and ESOL have the potential to provide the basis for an appropriate curriculum framework and structure for organising learning. The number of awards is unnecessarily large, and there is considerable overlap and duplication between them, without tangible benefit to providers or students. The awards are not accurately aligned to the levels used for national qualifications and many do not have clearly specified performance criteria or outcomes. Some awards have no defined standard and the award of certificates for them has little meaning. There are significantly different rates of achievement for awards with similar formats and assessment modes. Colleges are increasingly developing their own accreditation frameworks as a response to perceived inadequacies with existing awards. The current focus on basic skills qualifications has a potentially narrowing effect on the curriculum. The aims of some awards do little to support the development of lifelong learning. They emphasise short-term vocational learning needs and functional skills at the expense of broader educational aims and generic skills.

Numeracy, Literacy and ESOL: Evaluation of Entry and Level 1 Awards

Introduction

1 This report evaluates the quality of awards which are frequently used at entry level and level 1 in literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The evaluation is of FEFC-funded provision during 1996-97 and 1997-98. It assesses the impact of these awards on teaching and learning and students' achievements. The report is based on evidence from an analysis of the most commonly used qualifications, inspections of provision within programme area 10 between September 1993 and May 1998, meetings with practitioners, external agencies and awarding bodies, and visits to colleges to gather further information about the use of the qualifications. Qualifications data used for student enrolments are from the individualised student record (ISR) for July 1997 and July 1998; data for achievement and retention rates are from the December 1997 ISR which were the most recent available at the time of preparing the report.

2 The inspectorate national survey report, *Basic Education*, published in April 1998, identified weaknesses relating to the use of some qualifications. The weaknesses included: the lack of an overall national structure to show how the many different pre-foundation and foundation level awards relate to one another; the use by teachers of such qualifications as a substitute for curriculum planning; students studying for awards which are inappropriate for them; course content which is inappropriate or poorly designed but meets the requirement of an award. Some of these issues were also identified in the inspectorate report, *Basic Skills Summer Schools* published in January 1999, and in *Basic Education: Making a Difference* published in September 1999.

3 This report seeks to explore these and other related issues in more detail. The aims of the inspectorate's national exercise were to:

- review and analyse the content of the awards being used in 1996-97 and 1997-98
- assess their value and currency
- evaluate their impact on teaching and learning
- comment upon their relevance, effectiveness and fitness for purpose
- report on best practice.

4 During the last decade, and particularly since 1993, there has been a growing trend in the use of external awards in literacy, numeracy and ESOL at entry level and level 1. Before these developments, most provision at these levels comprised courses which were developed by staff in individual colleges or by groups of staff working together at a local or regional level. Few of these courses were externally validated. In order to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of students who were not entered for externally validated tests or examinations, many colleges devised their own certificates and presented these to students in recognition of the progress they had made in their studies. In addition, some colleges used records of achievement to describe and validate the progress students had made.

5 The growth in the use of such external awards at these levels can be attributed to a number of factors. The introduction of the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools provided a framework within which there was parity of esteem and equality of opportunity for all pupils. Some teachers in further education colleges tried to ensure that their students had parity of esteem by providing them with opportunities to gain qualifications. The Act also resulted in an increased demand for accredited qualifications for students wanting to improve their numeracy, literacy and ESOL. Many colleges mistakenly thought that it was necessary to provide courses leading to accredited qualifications to meet the requirements of schedule 2 of the 1992 Act, to

secure funding from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and to meet the requirements of colleges' own information systems. The FEFC has issued guidance to colleges, in Council Circular 99/10, *Schedule 2*, confirming that funding for provision for students with learning difficulties, those wanting to improve their basic skills and those wishing to improve their spoken and written English is not dependent upon the students studying for qualifications. However, many staff, including senior managers, continue to believe that qualifications are necessary to secure FEFC funding.

6 Awarding bodies responded to requests from institutions to provide external awards at entry level and level 1. Some were able to adapt existing awards while others introduced awards to meet the new demand. Few had previous experience of developing awards at entry level. The awards were developed in isolation from each other with a range of different standards and progression ladders. This has led to a plethora of different awards, supposedly at the same level, but in reality requiring very different skills, competences or understanding. Many teachers welcomed the structure provided by the requirements of the awards. However, inspection evidence has raised concerns about the adverse effect which such awards have on the learning experience of some students. The inspectorate curriculum survey report, *Basic Education*, describes the standards in basic education compared with other programme areas and provides a commentary on the comparatively lower standards. Some deficiencies are attributed to the inappropriate use of external awards at entry level and level 1 in numeracy, literacy and ESOL.

7 This report has been compiled at a time when there is a particular focus on basic skills provision. The report of the committee chaired by Sir Claus Moser, *Improving Literacy and Numeracy: A fresh start*, sets out clear priorities for the further development of provision in these subjects. One recommendation is that:

there should be a new basic skills curriculum for adults, with well-defined standards of skill at entry level, level 1 and level 2. Only basic skills qualifications based on this new curriculum should be funded from the public purse. Whether assessed by coursework, test or a mixture of both, they should use a common set of standards laid down by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Existing qualifications should be revised to meet these new standards.

A new set of national standards for basic skills is being developed by QCA and the Basic Skills Agency (BSA). The conclusions from this inspectorate national exercise indicate that clear national standards embodied within awards would benefit students as would a curriculum framework sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of a wide variety of learners. The suggestion that all students should follow a course leading to a qualification based on a prescribed curriculum, however, is contrary to the conclusions of this report for two reasons. Firstly, working towards any qualification is inappropriate for some students and, secondly, effective learning is more likely to occur when teachers have the opportunity to match the curriculum to the needs of their students.

The Range and Scope of Awards

8 The scope of this inspectorate exercise was restricted to awards for numeracy, literacy and ESOL at entry level and level 1. These courses amounted to 65% of the total provision in these subjects. The exercise was based on data for 1996-97 and 1997-98, the last two years for which complete data were available. Although students were funded by the FEFC for more than 50 awards, many had small numbers of enrolments. The awarding bodies providing the most popular awards were:

- City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G)
- National Open College Network (NOCN)
- Associated Examining Board (AEB)
- Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations Board (OCR)
- Pitman Examination Institute (PEI)
- English Speaking Board (ESB)
- London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI)
- Northern Examining Association (NEA).

9 In 1997-98, 29,000 students were funded by the FEFC to work towards numeracy awards at entry level and level 1; 37,000 students worked towards literacy awards and 19,000 students worked towards ESOL awards. More than half of these students were studying at entry level. These numbers apply only to students with qualification aims listed separately within programme area 10. Some awards used with literacy and ESOL students are not within the scope of this survey. These include English as a foreign language (EFL) qualifications and key skills units in communication skills and application of number. An increasing number of students receive awards accredited by the regional organisations of the NOCN. These awards are not listed separately on the ISR and so are currently difficult to quantify and analyse. Data from the NOCN indicate that registrations in these awards almost doubled between 1996-97 and 1997-98 to 46,695, of which it is estimated that around 30,000 were for awards in literacy, numeracy and ESOL at entry level and level 1. Together with the separately listed qualifications, this gives an overall total of about 107,000 enrolments in these subjects at these levels in 1997-98. A summary of some relevant enrolment data is shown in annex A; this excludes NOCN awards and some literacy and ESOL awards for the reasons explained above.

10 Most awards have been developed to meet the needs of post-16 and adult learners in the context of work, everyday life and/or education. One or two awards also claim to be appropriate

for pupils of compulsory school age and have Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) recognition. All awards state as a main aim the recognition of achievement in relation to the skills defined within the scheme content and/or syllabus. Some awards have multiple aims and the aims of others have been changed in recent years. Several emphasise confidence building as a response to the needs of 'second chance' or otherwise disadvantaged learners. One award has the major aim of 'rewarding positive achievement'. The aims of the awards include the following features:

- flexibility to adapt to individual needs
- confidence and motivation building
- progression - as a basis for further study or employment
- practical application and relevance to work and/or everyday life.

The breadth of these aims emphasises the importance of the numeracy, literacy and ESOL curriculum in providing an entry, or re-entry, for students to lifelong learning and not merely as a means of developing competence for functional citizenship. The aims also reflect the need for local interpretation of curriculum objectives to meet the needs of students within different learning contexts.

Content and Structure of Awards

Generic awards

11 An increasing proportion of students are having their achievements accredited by Open College awards. The awards are generic and apply across numeracy, literacy and ESOL provision. These awards, as NOCN acknowledge, are not qualifications. Open College Networks (OCNs) provide accreditation for students' achievements through a credit framework. A unit within the framework is defined as 'a coherent set of learning outcomes'.

Each unit is aligned to one of four levels, each with clear descriptors, within the framework. The flexibility with which they can be used to meet local situations has made them a popular choice. Each regional OCN has considerable autonomy to provide accreditation for locally developed programmes. This has led to inconsistent interpretation of the level descriptors, especially at entry level and level 1. This is acknowledged by the NOCN which is developing improved quality assurance procedures in collaboration with regional OCNs.

Numeracy awards

12 Some numeracy awards aim to test number skills applied to work and/or everyday life, but such contexts feature more in some schemes than in others. C&G 3794 numeracy (Numberpower) aims to certificate 'numeracy skills needed at work and in everyday life'. The RSA numeracy certificate is designed to test skills, concepts and application in one of the following three contexts: everyday life; business and commerce; and caring services. It is also designed to equip candidates for entry into employment. Other qualifications, including the C&G 3750 numeracy certificate, focus more on mathematical concepts without reference to particular contexts. The AEB achievement tests in numeracy are based mostly on the performance of technical skills rather than application to everyday life. The awards enable teachers to help students to develop number skills in different contexts.

13 C&G Numberpower has detailed the underpinning knowledge required, including key terms, performance criteria and range statements. The same three elements are covered at each level, namely: handling data, applying number skills, and measuring. The scheme is potentially relevant to a wide range of realistic contexts. It does not require conceptual understanding or spatial awareness but does require the ability to do simple calculations without a calculator and the ability to estimate.

Other qualifications state the learning objectives without defining clear assessment criteria. C&G numeracy describes 'sample content'. The RSA numeracy scheme has a skills-based approach but objectives for concepts and skills are expressed less clearly than in some other schemes. The scheme includes assessment of concepts at the lowest levels, for example, averaging, ratio, area and percentages. AEB achievement tests are based on the performance of technical skills. Teachers have a good understanding of the differences between the qualifications and are able to take account of these when selecting qualifications for their students.

Literacy awards

14 Most literacy awards have a functional approach to learning. C&G 3793 in communication skills (Wordpower) aims to give recognition to the communication skills needed by adults at work/in everyday life. Each of the levels comprises three units, subdivided into elements as follows: read and respond to textual and graphical material; communicate in writing; and talk to one other person. There is a helpful emphasis on real, everyday materials and activities. For example, those suggested include form-filling, giving information on the telephone, making extracts from newspapers, and using advertisements. AEB achievement tests in literacy emphasise technical competence and accuracy. Dictionaries are not allowed and some marks are lost for miscopied spellings. Teachers make the content of schemes relevant through topics, for example 'family' and 'months of the year'. However, this is not required by the competence statements. Other qualifications used for accrediting achievements in literacy include the RSA spelltest and spelltest (general). This scheme tests spellings (including correct selection from homophones) from a bank of about 750 common or work-related words. The test features some dubious homophones including: 'accept/except'; 'personal/personnel'. There is no rationale given for the choice of

words. Some common words from the world of business are missing; for example, 'corporate', 'mission', 'resource' and 'estimate'.

15 Some literacy awards, including Wordpower, closely specify the underpinning knowledge required and this gives direction to the content of the scheme. It may also help inexperienced teachers to plan a curriculum. The award is relevant to students' development of communication skills. It tests oracy as well as literacy, and students can negotiate the content/topics that they are tested in. It does not develop conceptual understanding. Some awards include interactive skills; for example, the ability to 'talk to one other person'. Most include the skills of reading and interpreting graphical material, reflecting the broad aim of functional adequacy in work and everyday life. The emphasis on the transactional value of language, for example the vocabulary of work and education, is an attempt to make literacy relevant to the needs of students. However, the current emphasis on literacy may have marginalised the value of oracy as a communication skill. Some adult students may be disadvantaged by schemes which focus entirely on literacy. The separation of literacy from oracy runs counter to practice in the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools and to general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) English and other post-16 key skills developments. In the AEB tests some questions integrate a number of different competences while others assess discrete competences. The reduction of language into discrete competences for assessment purposes may encourage a mechanistic and non-communicative approach to teaching. Literacy awards provide a narrower range of options for teachers than numeracy awards, and few are useful in preparing students for progression to higher levels of English.

ESOL awards

16 ESOL awards vary in their curriculum coverage, but all adopt a communicative and/or functional approach to some extent. Most awards test the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, and oral interaction or talking as an additional skill. Some awards, including the ESB certificates and the PEI spoken English, are intended to accredit only oral skills. These awards are skill based and the separation of spoken English from oral interaction/listening is artificial. This reflects more the needs of overseas students for whom the qualification was originally designed than the needs of students in United Kingdom colleges. The RSA ESOL profile certificate is aimed exclusively at United Kingdom residents and covers the four skills listed above together with oral interaction. It gives guidance on the choice of relevant topics and the use of authentic materials. The scheme is designed to assess the learning outcomes of a taught curriculum. For example, it requires that all skills must be taught, though not all need to be assessed, and it advocates a particular approach to teaching and learning based on student autonomy and negotiation. The range of topics encourages relevance and makes it easier to match learning activities to the students' interests and needs than some other schemes. However, teachers report that few of the current ESOL awards are appropriate for their students because either the content or assessment mode does not meet the learning needs of the students. This has resulted in a large increase in the use of OCN accredited schemes which can be designed for particular groups of students.

Levels and Standards of Awards

17 Many of the awards reviewed by inspectors lack clear assessment criteria. They also differ extensively in their intended outcomes and the range of contact covered. This, together with

the range of different teaching methods used, makes judgements about standards difficult to reach. Some awards leave much to the discretion of the providers, subject to moderation by awarding bodies. Evidence from inspections indicates that this leads to differences in the comparative levels of the awards and their relationship to national qualification levels. In many colleges, the level descriptors are used inconsistently, and some rationalisation of their use may be helpful to students, teachers and employers. Some entry level awards test such a low level of achievement that they are of dubious value to the student. None of the awards which were evaluated during this national exercise have been accredited by QCA as entry level qualifications. While recognition of learning is important in marking progress, entry level awards have little meaning to anyone other than the individual student. The level of some awards is so close to the next level that a formal award seems unnecessary and unhelpful. Where teachers make their own assessments of students' achievements, they have records of learning that are more useful to the teachers for planning progression for their students than the achievement of some entry level awards.

18 Evidence from inspections shows that there are differences in the standards achieved by students working towards awards which, although different, are supposed to be at the same levels. This is also true of the standards achieved by students working towards the same awards and levels in different colleges. Little development work is currently being undertaken by awarding bodies to address this. Procedures for external verification by awarding bodies require further development and greater rigour. More comprehensive training is needed for verifiers to ensure greater consistency of standards. Inspectors have identified cases of basic skills awards being externally verified by teachers whose own college programmes have received poor inspection grades for basic skills provision.

19 The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) framework was established in 1990 to develop a European framework for language qualifications. ESOL awards are increasingly provided within this framework of nine notional levels, though these are not linked directly to the national levels. ALTE has drawn on the work of the Council of Europe in developing its Waystage (level 1) and Threshold (level 2) levels. Some awards are aligned to these levels, including the PEI certificates which are offered at 'basic', 'elementary' and 'higher' levels, where 'elementary' is equivalent to level 1 and 'basic' is below level 1. The RSA profile spans entry level to level 1, or around level 1 in the ALTE framework.

20 Some awarding bodies have attempted to link their 'levels' to other external standards for literacy and numeracy awards. These include:

- C&G numeracy linked to GCSE grades
- C&G Wordpower and Numberpower linked to national vocational qualification (NVQ) levels
- OCN schemes linked to GCSE grades and NVQ levels.

Most awards, however, need more rigorous assessment criteria before they can be linked to any common standards that might be agreed. Some are tightly specified, but others are subject to wide interpretation. The basic skills curriculum area lacks the equivalent of an independent National Training Organisation that could have responsibility for framing the curriculum and setting national standards.

21 Among the characteristics which distinguish levels and standards in literacy and numeracy awards are the following:

- in both literacy and numeracy: the predictability of the assessment task
- in literacy: the range and complexity of language as in the amount of vocabulary, the complexity of syntax, the ability to handle multiple functions and the 'transactional' value of language in, for example, work or educational contexts

- in numeracy: the complexity of numbers, the understanding of ‘concepts’ as well as the mastery of technical skills and the application of problem-solving.

22 The terminology used by awarding bodies is confusing, inconsistent and, in many instances, not related to national levels or standards. For example, some awards are described as being provided at ‘levels 1, 2 and 3’, but these do not equate to national levels 1, 2 and 3. This leads to difficulties of classification so that, for example, a ‘level 3’ award in numeracy is used as an entry level scheme. For some awards, gaining a certificate is not linked to a pass standard and so the notion of a ‘level’ is not relevant.

23 Some certificates can be awarded on the basis of only one correctly spelled word or one correct arithmetical answer. The RSA spelltest certificate is awarded, with a score, for those spelling one or more of 75 words from the list correctly. No standard is set beyond spelling one word correctly, so the possession of a certificate is no indication of the ability to spell adequately or well at any particular level. The AEB achievement tests are unrelated to standards of competence. The credibility of this award is undermined by the absence of defined standards. All students taking the tests receive a certificate regardless of their level of performance; the certificate states a percentage mark but there is no pass or fail. A student answering one question correctly receives a certificate.

24 The levels used by awarding bodies are broad bands and, therefore, imprecise measures of performance. For example, level 1 awards included in this report were found to have standards equivalent to a level just above foundation to near GCSE and so could be said to represent the skills level of about half the population of England. Some items in achievement tests, used as entry level awards, are below entry level. Other awards, offered as level 1, have content that would indicate higher

levels. The establishment of some intermediate steps between the lower levels may assist in a more precise definition of performance. For literacy, numeracy and ESOL, the range of awards and levels at present ensure that all students are capable of inclusion, with the exception of some students with cognitive impairment. It will be important for the new qualification framework to maintain this inclusive approach for basic skills provision.

Assessment, Achievement and Progression

Assessment

25 Most awards are based on the assessment of coursework. Some have a combination of coursework assessment and testing, and a few require only externally set tests. Students are more likely to achieve an award on courses that have flexible assessment frameworks, and where teachers are able to match the assessment style to students’ learning needs. Some awards incline providers towards using an individualised workshop approach at the expense of more productive classroom activities, or of missing opportunities to ensure that the learning takes account of the needs of the learner.

26 Assessment for the Numberpower award is by a portfolio of evidence and personal achievement record. Other awards, including the C&G numeracy certificate, have a combination of written test paper and assessed coursework. An interesting feature of this award is the option for teachers to ‘mix and match’ assessment modes, providing some flexibility for teachers and students. The profile report is potentially useful as a diagnostic and curriculum planning tool. Some awards, including RSA numeracy, are based on examination papers. The RSA award requires students to pass two papers in the same series. The first is based on basic numerical skills

including the ‘four rules’ and some general problem-solving. The second paper relates numerical skills to a chosen context: everyday life, business and commerce or the caring services. Results are awarded at pass, fail, credit and distinction levels. The AEB achievement tests in numeracy are based on formal one hour tests with multiple-choice questions. The level of difficulty is tightly specified. The same topics are covered at each of the levels which are determined by the complexity of the calculation. Sample questions are lightly contextualised as problems. For example, ‘Three brothers share 63 pence between them. How much does each get?’.

27 The main literacy award, C&G Wordpower, is assessed by a portfolio of evidence and personal achievement record. There is clear progression from entry level to level 1. Students complete a personal achievement record in addition to a portfolio and units can be entered separately enabling the students to ‘pace’ their learning. AEB achievement tests in literacy are formal, timed examinations and are aimed at ‘all ages and many types of organisation’. The level is very low: ‘level 1’ is pitched at pre-entry level, and has items such as ‘show awareness of alphabetical order and be able to sequence letters’, ‘better candidates can write short sentences’. The RSA spelltest is a test of spelling from a selected list of words.

28 ESOL awards have more formal approaches to assessment than many of the literacy and numeracy qualifications. The PEI schemes have assessment by examination and there is a clearly defined set of standards. ESB schemes are also assessed by examination but standards, described as learning outcomes, are not well defined. The examination consists of a talk, a prepared reading and impromptu speaking. Guidance provided for teachers is limited to the expectation that they should prepare candidates for the examination. Where formal examination procedures are used, for example, with cloze tests and prepared reading

tests, the context of the assessment may not be one which is familiar to students.

29 The C&G awards have clear competence-based performance criteria in which the standard of performance and conditions of assessment are specified. Other awards have performance criteria that are not competence-based, including the AEB tests and the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES) schemes. OCN schemes give a clear indication of what students are expected to be able to do through the specification of learning outcomes, assessment criteria and through generic level descriptors. The performance criteria of other qualifications are implied by the assessment mode. This may, for example, be through the length of time allowed for the examination, the type of tests used (multiple-choice; cloze test), allowing or not allowing calculators and dictionaries to be used and the guidance on the amount of help a candidate under assessment may be given. In such cases, too much is left to the professional judgement of the examiner and to the moderation processes. For example, one award requires examiners to make a judgement about the ‘relevance’ of points made in a persuasive essay.

Achievement and progression

30 Some awards may be achieved without students making significant gains in learning or developing skills. These awards do not, in themselves, require that learning takes place. The requirement is only for the demonstration of competence or the completion of assignments or tests, all of which could be successfully performed without students learning anything new. This could apply to the AEB tests and the RSA spelltest, amongst other schemes. The skill of the teachers is essential in carrying out effective initial assessments, designing appropriate learning plans and programmes and then engaging students in a process of learning. This could, and does, take place effectively outside of a qualification framework.

31 Students registered for separately listed awards in 1996-97, the last year for which achievement data are complete, showed significantly different pass rates for awards with similar formats and assessment modes. This is shown in annex B. For example at level 1, the LCCI Wordpower stage 1 certificate had an achievement rate of 92%, while the similar C&G Wordpower stage 1 certificate had an achievement rate of 44%. Particularly low rates of achievement were found for some ESOL awards. For example, 21% for the PEI spoken English certificate. Low levels of achievement in ESOL awards reflect, to some extent, the low levels of literacy that some students have in their own languages. The range of achievement rates for numeracy awards was between 25% and 71%; the average rate being 50%.

32 Careful interpretation is required for some awards. For example, all students who enter AEB achievement tests receive a certificate, but the achievement rate for the numeracy test is 71% and for the literacy test is 61%. This is because the rate is measured as a percentage of students completing the course, and a significant proportion of students complete the course but do not enter for the test. Achievement rates are generally higher for OCN awards and others that are designed by individual institutions. This may be the result either of the successful matching of curriculum and assessment to learners or of a less rigorous approach to assessment and verification. Retention rates are also higher for these awards which may indicate higher student satisfaction with this style of learning.

33 Some awards are specifically designed for the purpose of progression either to employment or to more advanced courses. For example, the RSA numeracy certificate has content related to vocational contexts and the C&G numeracy certificate includes mathematical concepts that make it suitable for those students seeking progression to GCSE mathematics. Most awards, however, facilitate progression only to

higher levels of the same, or similar, awards and are not necessarily useful in helping students to gain employment. Colleges report that employers generally do not have knowledge of awards in numeracy, literacy and ESOL and rarely request from students evidence of awards in these subjects. Qualifications at entry level, by defining the achievement of low level skills, imply a lack of the higher level skills that are sought by employers.

The Impact of Awards on Teaching and Learning

34 With the exception of NOCN, few awarding bodies attempt to influence teaching methods on course length, or even demand the pre-requisite of a course leading to the award. NOCN influences teaching by defining 'notional' hours for each unit of credit and by requiring explanatory information to support scheme submissions. Other awards which require internally assessed portfolios of evidence are expected to be linked to taught courses. Some awarding bodies offer advice about how students should be prepared for awards. For example, the ESB expects centres to 'prepare candidates for the examination', while the C&G numeracy scheme advocates an 'individual workshop/assignment approach'. Successful learning in numeracy, literacy and ESOL usually occurs as a result of matching students with an appropriate award together with the provision of effective teaching; not merely one or the other.

35 The combination of the mode of assessment and the suggested or perceived method of teaching has an impact on students' learning experiences. Depending on the type of awards chosen, students may either be prepared for tests or be helped to develop portfolios of work. They may be taught in classes or work mainly individually. For example, C&G numeracy is usually taught as an individualised scheme based on task sheets and individual

teaching. Teachers, however, usually teach the similar RSA numeracy scheme to whole classes of students, although the actual content of the schemes for these two awards is similar. Both of these schemes are perceived by colleges to be more academic than some other schemes based on skills development. Some colleges use an individual approach with particular schemes that are provided as whole class teaching in other colleges.

36 The contextualisation of skills in some awards is helpful in making the learning and assessment meaningful and accessible to the student. This is especially important for literacy and ESOL, and has been a fundamental principle of effective language teaching for many years. Some awards set out the underpinning knowledge required and this helps to clarify the assessment framework and criteria for teachers. The better awards contextualise skills without defining curriculum content; this is left to the teacher to design in response to the learning needs of the students. These awards have clear learning outcomes combined with flexibility of content.

37 Colleges are increasingly interested in designing their own curriculum and accreditation frameworks as a response to the perceived inadequacies in many of the current awards. A significant increase was noted in local, often college-based, awards between 1996-97 and 1997-98. A large general further education college in London introduced such a framework at multiple levels in literacy, numeracy and ESOL. This framework, which is accredited by the OCN, provides useful guidance to teachers on teaching and assessment methods and has clear internal progression opportunities. Students may, in addition, achieve other national awards. A tertiary college in Yorkshire and Humberside implemented a similar framework as long ago as 1993. Initially introduced as a key skills framework, it forms a continuum with basic skills at the lower levels and this framework is also accredited by the OCN.

38 In colleges where several different awards are used, curriculum managers have a clear rationale for their use. Choice between awards is highly valued by teachers and managers. Many colleges have agreed criteria for matching available awards to the needs of individual students. For example, a large community college in the North West has criteria written into tutors' handbooks and these are discussed during the induction of new teachers and made part of regular training and development days. Examples of the use of assessment criteria and of the evidence suitable for portfolios are provided to support teaching. In the best practice, curriculum managers have a good awareness of the purpose and content of the different awards and provide summaries of the awards for teachers. At a large general further education college in Yorkshire and Humberside, considerable work has been undertaken to relate standards to the national levels for courses and to match performance criteria accurately to these standards. Standards in most colleges are maintained through a system of internal and external verification. This arrangement can be a source of staff and curriculum development, as it provides a forum for discussion by teachers of standards and of assessment procedures. In some colleges, the assessment procedures within awards are used for further needs analysis and/or curriculum planning.

39 Colleges value the flexibility that OCN awards allow, and programme managers believe that these awards come closest to meeting the needs of their students. This is because the awards are developed and designed by course teams who then write a scheme submission that is scrutinised by an OCN assessment panel. Where this works successfully, it generates curriculum and staff development in a way that rarely happens where other awards are used. In the best practice, curriculum ideas developed in relation to OCN awards, for example course assignments and assessment tasks, have a beneficial influence on teaching methods on other courses.

40 At the moment, there is little relation between the national curriculum at key stage 4 and the curriculum of most numeracy and literacy awards. In addition, the differences between short-term vocational learning needs and ‘lifelong learning’ skill needs of students are not sufficiently taken into account either by awarding bodies or teachers. The basic skills curriculum is narrow in comparison with the lifelong learning skills curriculum and is in danger of further disenfranchising students, many of whom are already disadvantaged. The current focus on ‘basic skills’ has resulted in a narrowing of curriculum opportunities. College managers report that the current distinction between key skills and basic skills is unhelpful in planning the curriculum and helping students to gain awards. An increasing number of students following numeracy and literacy courses are working towards key skills units. Inspectors have found students on vocational courses who were working towards literacy awards to improve their communication key skills. The concept of ‘basic skills’, developed during the 1960s and 1970s, does not assist in defining strategies for developing numeracy and literacy skills in the future.

41 In selecting a particular award, teachers make decisions about what is taught and how it is taught. Students respond more effectively to some course content and learning styles than others. The judgement of teachers is critical in matching the learning needs of students to the range of available awards. Some features which support effective learning in numeracy, literacy and ESOL are:

- a strong match between students’ needs and assessed skills and knowledge
- assessment outcomes that provide an opportunity for further needs analysis and curriculum planning
- the opportunity to adapt the context to individual students’ needs (for example, to negotiate aspects of the assessment)
- arrangements for recognising partial achievement

- the engagement of teachers in the assessment process.

Conclusions and Issues

42 Issues arising from the national exercise are:

- a small number of awards accounts for a high proportion of enrolments, and there is an unnecessarily large number of awards with small numbers of enrolments
- there is considerable overlap and duplication between awards without tangible benefit either to providers or to students
- awards are selected with integrity by colleges for use with their students, but managers in different colleges often have similar reasons for choosing different awards, for example the flexibility, relevance to the learning needs of students, and assessment modes
- the names and descriptions of some awards do not reliably indicate the actual levels of the awards
- differing standards between awards, which are notionally at similar levels
- colleges are increasingly developing their own accreditation frameworks as a response to perceived inadequacies in existing awards from awarding bodies
- programme managers in colleges are increasingly using key skills units in communication and application of number at foundation level with basic skills students; they are also continuing to use basic skills schemes to develop key skills in students on vocational programmes at level 1
- the distinction between ESOL and EFL is considered by providers to have become blurred, but few awards provide the basis for effective learning for both
- oracy is of decreasing importance, in contrast to GCSE practice and key skills developments

- few awarding bodies provide guidance on how the curriculum is to be taught and few require any specific curriculum or staff development before a college offers their awards
 - some awards are perceived by teachers as being more appropriately taught to whole classes while others are seen to be more suitable for individualised learning.
- 43 Awards in numeracy, literacy and ESOL at entry level and level 1 are most effective when they:
- provide an appropriate curriculum framework and structure for organising learning
 - define standards accurately and align them to national levels
 - specify learning outcomes and performance criteria
 - have assessment linked to the standards
 - ensure consistent application of standards through rigorous verification
 - provide opportunities for dual accreditation of key skills and basic skills within the same scheme
 - encourage the development of both functional and creative language, and both functional and conceptual numeracy
 - allow some flexibility for teachers to match content, context and assessment mode to the learning needs of their students.

Annex A

Student Enrolments For Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL Awards at Entry Level and Level 1, 1996-97 and 1997-98

Awarding body	Award title	Level	Total enrolments 1996-97	Total enrolments 1997-98
Numeracy				
C&G	C&G 3630 in numeracy - foundation level	0	276	466
AEB	Achievement tests in numeracy - levels 1, 2 and 3	0	4,379	5,554
C&G	C&G 3794 in numeracy (Numberpower) - foundation level	0	8,719	8,114
			13,374	14,134
C&G	C&G 3640 numeracy	1	397	443
NEA	Certificate in the application of number	1	627	1,163
AEB	Basic test in numerical skills	1	1,196	1,698
RSA	Numeracy 1	1	2,180	1,957
C&G	C&G 3794 in numeracy (Numberpower) stage 1	1	4,060	4,520
C&G	C&G 3750 in numeracy stage 1	1	5,908	5,938
			14,368	15,719
Total			27,742	29,853
ESOL				
ESB	Certificate in basic skills	X	972	1,501
ESB	English as an acquired language (pre-foundation/foundation)	X	776	1,657
			1,748	3,158
PEI	Spoken ESOL (basic)	0	843	1,401
RSA	ESOL profile certificate	0	1,958	1,567
PEI	ESOL (basic)	0	7,657	7,738
			10,458	10,706
PEI	English for business communications (level 1)	1	363	644
PEI	Spoken ESOL (elementary)	1	362	759
PEI	ESOL (elementary)	1	3,336	3,832
			4,061	5,235
Total			16,267	19,099
Literacy				
UCLES	Certificate in communicative skills (CCSE) level 1	0	1,407	235
RSA	Spelltest and Spelltest (general)	0	830	1,430
AEB	Achievement tests - literacy 1/2/3	0	5,374	8,230
C&G	C&G 3793 in communication skills (Wordpower) foundation	0	16,153	14,808
			23,764	24,703
UCLES	Certificate in communicative skills (CCSE) level 2	1	398	136
LCCI	Wordpower level 1 (communication skills)	1	939	927
C&G	C&G 3793 in communication skills (Wordpower) stage 1	1	10,674	11,918
			12,011	12,981
Total			35,775	37,684
Overall total			79,784	86,636

Source: 31 July 1998 ISR (1997-98), 31 July 1997 ISR (1996-97)

Coverage: includes all further education colleges in England

Note: includes FEFC and non-FEFC funded awards; excludes awards with fewer than 200 enrolments, OCN schemes and those specific to a single provider

X = mixed levels

Annex B

Retention and Achievement Rates for Numeracy, Literacy and ESOL Awards at Entry Level and Level 1, 1996-97

Awarding body	Award title	National level	Sub-programme area	In-year retention rates	All achievement rates
Numeracy					
AEB	Achievement tests - numeracy levels 1/2/3	0	10A	81%	71%
C&G	C&G 3630 in numeracy - foundation level	0	10A	90%	71%
C&G	C&G 3794 in numeracy (Numberpower) foundation level	0	10A	80%	49%
AEB	Basic test in numerical skills	1	10A	74%	47%
C&G	C&G 3640 in numeracy - level 1	1	10A	77%	61%
C&G	C&G 3750 in numeracy stage 1	1	10A	79%	39%
C&G	C&G 3794 in numeracy (Numberpower) stage 1	1	10A	81%	38%
NEA	Certificate in the application of number	1	10A	80%	25%
RSA	Numeracy I	1	10A	69%	51%
			Total	79%	50%
ESOL					
ESB	Certificate of achievement in basic skills	X	10B	92%	78%
ESB	English as an acquired language (pre-foundation/ foundation/intermediate/advanced)	X	10B	72%	61%
PEI	ESOL (basic)	0	10B	71%	38%
PEI	Spoken ESOL (basic)	0	10B	68%	21%
RSA	ESOL - profile certificate	0	10B	73%	62%
PEI	ESOL (elementary)	1	10B	73%	44%
PEI	Spoken ESOL (elementary)	1	10B	56%	37%
PEI	English for business communications (level 1)	1	10B	82%	57%
			Total	73%	50%
Literacy					
AEB	Achievement tests - literacy levels 1/2/3	0	10C	74%	61%
C&G	C&G 3793 in communication skills (Wordpower) foundation	0	10C	77%	44%
RSA	Spelltest	0	10C	89%	77%
UCLES	Certificate in communicative skills (CCSE) - level 1	0	10C	71%	39%
C&G	C&G 3793 in communication skills (Wordpower) stage 1	1	10C	76%	44%
LCCI	Wordpower - level 1 (communication skills)	1	10C	44%	92%
UCLES	Certificate in communicative skills (CCSE) level 2	1	10C	85%	61%
			Total	76%	48%

Source: ISR December 1997

Note: X =mixed levels

Annex C

Organisations and Awarding Bodies Consulted during the National Exercise

Organisations

Association of Colleges

Basic Skills Agency

Department for Education and Employment

Further Education Development Agency

NIACE - National Organisation for Adult Learning

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

SKILL - National Bureau for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

Awarding bodies

Associated Examining Board

Awards Scheme Development and Accreditation Network

CENTRA Education and Training

City and Guilds of London Institute

East Midlands Further Education Council

Edexcel Foundation

English Speaking Board

London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Examinations Board

National Open College Network

National Proficiency Tests Council

Northern Examining Association

Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations Board

Pitman Examination Institute

Description of the Main Awards

Open college awards

1 The aims and structure of Open College awards are generic and apply across numeracy, literacy and ESOL provision. OCNs were developed to recognise formally the achievements of adults on non-accredited courses in further and higher education and community education. These awards are not qualifications. The NOCN was established to represent and co-ordinate OCN work, act as a standard setting and quality assurance body for OCNs and act as a qualifications awarding body. The Open College of the North West (OCNW) has opted to remain outside of the national framework. More than 2,000 organisations provide OCN awards, including most further education colleges.

2 OCNs provide accreditation for students' achievements through a credit framework. A unit within the framework is defined as 'a coherent set of learning outcomes'. Credits are awarded for those outcomes which a learner, on average, might reasonably be expected to achieve in a notional 30 hours of learning. Each unit is aligned to one of four levels, each with clear descriptors, within the framework. Schemes are locally designed, often by individual providers and validated by regional OCN panels. The framework provides accreditation for students that is locally recognised. The NOCN is currently developing a rationale for the basis for national recognition. As each scheme is unique, it is not possible to analyse their features in the same way as for the 'listed' awards.

Numeracy awards

3 C&G 3794 in numeracy (Numberpower) is the most popular numeracy qualification. It aims to certificate 'numeracy skills needed at work or in everyday life'. It is based on standards identified by the BSA in 1995, and overlaps in evidence requirements and

standards with NVQ key skills in application of number. Evidence collected for this scheme may be re-used for assessment against key skills units. Assessment is by portfolio of evidence and personal achievement record. Detailed basic knowledge, including key terms, performance criteria and range statements is given for each of three elements and guidance on assessment is given in the handbook. The same three elements are covered at each level, namely: handling data; applying number skills; and measuring. The scheme is potentially relevant to a wide range of realistic contexts. It does not prescribe teaching methods but does lend itself to individualised workshop teaching. There is little in the content which requires conceptual understanding or spatial awareness. The ability to carry out simple calculations without a calculator and to estimate, are both required. There is clear progression from entry level to level 1. The personal achievement record can be used to facilitate the process of identifying what students need to learn.

4 The C&G 3750 in numeracy aims to develop confidence in handling numbers and mathematical concepts. Approved under section 400 of the *Education Act 1996*, it is aimed at school pupils and trainees in addition to FEFC-funded students. There are four stages; these are claimed to be related to GCSE grades, of which stages 1 and 2 are stated to be below grade G. The emphasis is on concepts, including some spatial concepts. Objectives are given, but assessment criteria are less clear than in some other schemes. The scheme recommends an individualised workshop or assignment-based approach. The 'sample content' and advocacy of an individualised workshop approach promotes the use of worksheets rather than more experiential or interactive methods. Assessment is by written paper or coursework for the first stages, but an interesting feature is the option to 'mix and match' assessment modes, providing some flexibility for teachers and students. Links with

the GCSE curriculum may make it more relevant and attractive to younger students, but may also make it appear more difficult to some students. The 'profile report option' referred to in the scheme is potentially useful as a diagnostic and curriculum planning tool.

5 AEB achievement tests in numeracy, although offered at 'levels 1, 2 and 3' are classified by the FEFC as entry level qualifications. They are aimed at basic skills trainees, to be used as a motivator and confidence booster. The tests are approved under the *Education Act 1996*, section 400. They comprise formal one hour tests based on multiple-choice questions. The level of difficulty is tightly specified. For example, at level 1 there is 'multiplication of 1 or 2 digit number by single digit number'. The same topics are covered at each of the levels which are distinguished by the complexity of the calculation. Sample questions are lightly contextualised as problems. For example, 'Three brothers share 63 pence between them. How much does each get?'. The levels are referenced to other qualifications from the same awarding body, and not to national standards. The content includes the 'four rules', understanding of number, percentages, averages, fractions, decimals and other elements of numeracy. The questions are based mostly on performance of technical skills rather than application to everyday life. They are unrelated to standards of competence. The rationale for these awards is undermined by the absence of defined standards. All students taking the tests receive a certificate regardless of their level of performance; the certificate states a percentage mark but there is no pass or fail. A student answering one question correctly receives a certificate.

6 The RSA numeracy certificate is designed to test skills, concepts and application in one of three contexts: everyday life; business and commerce; caring services. It is also designed to equip candidates for entry into employment.

It is not clear why the testing of skills in these particular vocational contexts has been chosen rather than aiming at more generic work-related numerical skills. The scheme is aimed at schools, colleges and adult centres and is designed to complement vocational courses. Two examination papers must be passed in the same series, one based on basic numerical skills including the 'four rules' and some general problem-solving and the other related to the chosen context. Candidates who pass only paper 1 achieve an OCR certificate in basic numerical skills. Results are awarded at pass, fail, credit and distinction levels. The approach is almost entirely skill based. Objectives for concepts and skills are expressed less clearly than in some other schemes. No links are made with national standards. The scheme includes assessment of concepts at the lowest levels, for example averaging, ratio, area and percentages. This content provides more effective progression opportunities to GCSE mathematics than some other schemes.

Literacy awards

7 C&G 3793 in communication skills (Wordpower) is the most used literacy qualification. It has standards set by the BSA and is aligned with NVQ key skill standards. Its aim is to give recognition to the communication skills needed at work/in everyday life by adults. Each of the levels comprises three units, subdivided into elements as follows: read and respond to textual and graphical material; communicate in writing; and talk to one other person. There is an emphasis on real, everyday materials and activities; for example form-filling, giving information on the telephone, extracts from newspapers and advertisements. It is potentially relevant to a wide range of realistic contexts. The scheme does not prescribe teaching methods but does lend itself to individualised workshop teaching. There is little in the content which requires conceptual understanding. There is clear progression from entry level to level 1. Students complete a

personal achievement record in addition to a portfolio. Units can be entered separately so students can 'pace' their learning. The basic knowledge required is closely specified and gives a tight 'steer' to the curriculum content. For example, one unit requires an understanding of 'different ways of asking questions' and how 'messages are conveyed by body language'. The scheme is relevant to students' development of communication skills. It tests oracy as well as literacy, and students can negotiate the content/topics that they are tested in.

8 AEB achievement tests in literacy are offered at 'levels 1, 2 and 3' but classified by the FEFC as entry level qualifications. These are formal, timed examinations and are aimed at 'all ages and many types of organisation'. They are intended to reward positive achievement, increase self-confidence and motivate students towards further learning. They are similar in purpose to the tests in numeracy. Technical competence and accuracy are emphasised as much as functional competence. Dictionaries are not allowed and marks are lost for misspelled spellings. The relevance of the content can be established through topics, for example 'the family' and 'months of the year', but this is not explicitly required by the competence statements. The level is very low: 'level 1' is pitched at pre-entry level and has items such as 'show awareness of alphabetical order and be able to sequence letters', 'better candidates can write short sentences'. It reduces language into discrete competences for assessment purposes. Issues about the value of the certificates, which can be gained by achieving one correct answer, are the same as those associated with the AEB numeracy tests.

9 The UCLES certificate in communicative skills is designed for adult users of English as a non-native language. In 1995-96 and 1996-97 it was classified by the FEFC as a basic education qualification and used in colleges with both literacy and ESOL students. It was

developed from the EFL schemes. It has been found by inspectors to be used with literacy students at level 1. Separate certificates are awarded in reading, writing, listening and oral interaction or talking. Certificates in each skill are awarded at four levels with 'level 1' being equivalent to entry level. The schemes involve task-based assessment and the use of authentic and relevant tasks and texts. Performance criteria are clearly specified and students are allowed to use dictionaries in the reading and writing of papers.

10 The RSA spelltest is a scheme that tests spellings (including correct selection from homophones) from a bank of about 750 common or work-related words. It is a skills test and not an assessment tool. The test features some dubious homophones including: 'accept/except'; 'personal/personnel'. There is no rationale given for the choice of words. Some common words from the world of business are missing: for example, 'corporate', 'mission', 'resource' and 'estimate'. The certificate is awarded, with a score, for those spelling one or more of 75 words from the list correctly. No standard is set beyond spelling one word correctly, so the possession of a certificate is no indication of the ability to spell adequately or well at any particular level.

ESOL awards

11 The PEI certificates in ESOL and Spoken English for Speakers of other Languages are the most widely used ESOL qualifications. They are offered at 'basic', 'elementary' and 'higher' levels. The English certificate tests performance in listening, reading, writing and speaking. It emphasises authentic contexts for learning. The 'elementary' scheme is equivalent to level 1, while 'basic' is below level 1. A candidate at basic level 'uses a narrow range of language adequate for basic needs and simple situations'. Basic communication is possible with 'adequate opportunities for assistance'. The element of 'communication within a limited range' appears

to relate to the standards of other entry level qualifications. The scheme states that it uses a communicative approach but has some traditional assessment methods such as cloze text and 'composition'. The separation of spoken English from oral interaction/listening is artificial, and reflects that it was originally designed to meet the needs of overseas students rather than the needs of students in United Kingdom colleges. Assessment is by examination for which the standards are clearly defined.

12 The ESB in English as an acquired language is regarded by the FEFC as being at 'mixed levels'. The qualification has the aim of building personal confidence for all whose native language is not English. The levels are not defined. The awarding body is a member of the Association of British ESOL Examining Boards. Assessment is by examination consisting of a talk, a prepared reading and impromptu speaking. It is a skill-based scheme. Guidance provided for teachers is limited to the expectation that they should prepare candidates for the examination.

13 The RSA profile certificate for ESOL is aimed at post-16 speakers of other languages who are resident in the United Kingdom. It certifies the use of spoken and written English in a variety of situations and places an importance on authentic contexts. It profiles competence in reading, writing, listening and oral interaction or talking. Strong guidance is given on the content of topics and on methods of teaching, which emphasises self-assessment, student autonomy, negotiation, maximising classroom interaction and the use of authentic materials. The scheme leads to a statement of individual achievement. The level achieved depends on the individual profile, but ranges from entry level to level 1, or around level 1 in the ALTE framework. It is a flexible scheme to meet a variety of student needs.