



Northern Ireland Audit Office

# Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy



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Northern Ireland Audit Office

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland

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# Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy



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K.J. Donnelly  
Comptroller and Auditor General

Northern Ireland Audit Office  
9 December 2009

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# Abbreviations

CAL	Centre for Applied Learning
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DEL	Department for Employment and Learning
DETI	Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment
EGSA	Educational Guidance Service for Adults
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
JBO	Jobs and Benefits Office
LEMIS	Local Employment Intermediary Service
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PSA	Public Service Agreement
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
S2W	Steps to Work
WEA	Workers' Educational Association

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# Executive Summary and NIAO Recommendations



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# WHY LITERACY AND NUMERACY SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT

**1 in 4 adults in Northern Ireland have poor literacy and numeracy skills. For an individual the impact is profound. For example, they are<sup>1</sup>:**

- **four times more likely to be unemployed**
- **if employed, more likely to be in a low-skilled, low-paid job**
- **less likely to have had promotion, or work-related training**
- **more likely to suffer from ill-health and depression**
- **more likely to be dependent on state benefits**
- **more likely to be in poor housing**



- **less able to get the most out of healthcare services.**

Research suggests that around 250,000 people of working age in Northern Ireland have very low literacy and numeracy skills. The reasons for this are partly due to the large number of young people that leave school without a good qualification in English or Mathematics. People who did not learn to read, write and carry out simple arithmetic in childhood are then often reluctant, unwilling or unable to improve their skills as an adult.

Literacy and numeracy underpin virtually all the other skills needed in everyday life. People with the lowest levels of skills can experience practical difficulties in carrying out various daily tasks. For example, they may not have the ability to understand what is being said in text or how to use the internet. They may also experience transport problems in not being able to sit the driving theory test. In addition, not being able to articulate what they want to say can also mean that their opinions and views are seldom heard.

However, improving literacy and numeracy skills can deliver a range of benefits. For example, those participating in Essential Skills courses have reported:

- **Increased confidence** – Essential Skills increased their confidence to apply for jobs, leading to increased chances of employment; it also gave participants confidence to try new things, such as reading a book or joining a library.
- **Employability** – participants were able to complete forms, letters and CVs confidently; it provided increased job security for those already in employment, as well as the ability to apply for new jobs and promotions.
- **Improved quality and security of employment** – participants were able to secure more highly-paid jobs with better prospects and greater sustainability.
- **Educational engagement and progression** – some participants had signed up for college courses while others were learning how to help learners with Essential Skills, for example as classroom assistants.
- **Educational support** – participants were able to help their children with schoolwork, as well as being able to read them bedtime stories and promoting a more positive attitude towards education.
- **Positive personality changes** – participants began to feel more confident and sociable; feeling more positive about the future.
- **Greater engagement in society** – participants were more willing to go out and were less frightened of road signs, taking the bus, and dealing with money in shops.
- **Reduced stigma and fear** – participants were willing to ask for help if stuck with something; tell people they were going to Essential Skills classes and were not embarrassed about it; and championed the courses to family, friends and colleagues.

<sup>1</sup> Based on research carried out by DEL; the National Research and Development Centre; and 'Every Child a Reader' (a collaboration between charitable trusts, the business sector and Government).

# Executive Summary and NIAO Recommendations

## Adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland

1. An International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), carried out in 1996, showed that around 1 in 4 (or 250,000) people of working age in Northern Ireland had levels of literacy and numeracy below those expected of school leavers. People with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy skills can experience practical difficulties in their everyday lives. They may be unable to read and understand signs and instructions or check whether they have received the correct change when shopping. Many will be unemployed, on benefits, and may suffer from relatively poor physical health and mental wellbeing. They are also least likely to be home owners.
2. The IALS results showed that the incidence of the problem in Northern Ireland was higher than in all but one of the 14 countries participating in the Survey. Older age groups in the working age population performed the worst, although there was no significant variation between men and women. Over a third of those who fell into the lowest of the five bands of performance were unemployed.
3. Since 1996, there has been no objective measurement of literacy and numeracy levels in Northern Ireland. The Department of Education has reported that around 4,000 young people are leaving school each year without the appropriate basic literacy and numeracy skills and research has indicated that the number of working age adults in Northern Ireland who have

no qualifications is the highest in the UK, by some margin.

4. It is now more than a decade since the first, and only, adult literacy and numeracy survey carried out in Northern Ireland. However, during our review, in November 2008, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) decided that it will participate in the next International Adult Literacy Survey in order to obtain a clear picture of the current state of literacy and numeracy skills among the working age population in Northern Ireland. Because this is not due to commence until 2011, the results will not be available until 2013. As an interim measure, the Department has commissioned research to model existing data from a range of other sources to inform ongoing policy and assess the impact of its current strategy.

## Strategies for raising adult literacy and numeracy skills

5. In October 2002, DEL launched the 'Essential Skills for Living' strategy which marked a radical new approach to literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland and began a long-term programme of improvement. The strategy addressed issues of capacity and quality as well as approaches to engagement. It planned for the introduction of a regional curriculum; accreditation for adult learners; and improved tutor qualifications.
6. The strategy had an initial target that, by March 2004, 14,500 Essential Skills learners would have been supported.

Since then, other targets have been set and DEL's current Corporate Plan 2008-2011 shows that 42,000 adult learners are expected to have achieved a recognised qualification in Essential Skills, in the three years ending in March 2011.

7. In February 2006, DEL launched the 'Success Through Skills' strategy which covered many aspects of the Department's work, including Skills and Industry, Further Education, Higher Education and Preparation for Work. It focused on raising the skills of the current workforce, enhancing the quality of those entering the workforce and addressing the employability skills of those not in employment. This encompassed the earlier 'Essential Skills for Living' programme as a component of the strategy.

### Reaching more learners and increasing participation

8. From 2003, adult literacy and numeracy provision was promoted through the UK-wide 'Gremlins' advertising campaign. This has now been replaced by a new, Northern Ireland-specific, promotional campaign, from September 2008, which is targeting the hardest-to-reach groups and employers.
9. DEL has found working with employers challenging, particularly in terms of persuading them of the benefits of literacy and numeracy training for their staff. Voluntary and community-based groups are being used more to engage the hardest-to-reach adults and several

successes, in terms of enrolments and achievements, have been reported.

10. From September 2008, new arrangements have placed Further Education colleges as the principal providers of courses and the non-statutory and private sectors in an engagement and support role. It is the Department's view that non-statutory providers from the voluntary and community sectors are most adept at attracting, engaging with and supporting clients, while the Further Education colleges can best provide the tuition to help adult learners acquire the necessary qualifications.

### Achievements and costs

11. While the Department has made progress in increasing learner participation, its three year target ending in March 2007, that 18,500 people would have achieved a recognised Essential Skills qualification, was 86 per cent achieved.
12. Worthwhile gains have been made by adults attending Essential Skills courses. Between October 2002 and July 2009, just over 54,000 people had enrolled in Essential Skills courses of which just over 34,000 had achieved one or more recognised qualification.
13. An evaluation of the 'Essential Skills for Living' strategy, published in 2006, was generally positive, but pointed to the need to make greater impact with employers and the hardest-to-reach groups.

## Executive Summary and NIAO Recommendations

14. Between 2002-03 and 2008-09, some £40 million was spent on the Essential Skills programme. A significant increase in resources (over £30 million) is planned for the following two years, despite substantial European Union (EU) funding ceasing from June 2008.
15. Inspection of Essential Skills provision in Further Education colleges up to March 2007 indicated that the quality of training was improving but there was scope for further improvement.

### NIAO Recommendations

16. Our recommendations are as follows:

#### On measuring the standard of adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland

1. **The Department should consider how it can obtain an objective measurement of the standard of adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland on a more frequent basis.** It is now some 13 years since Northern Ireland participated in the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey. While we welcome the Department's recent decision to participate in the next International Survey in 2011, it needs to consider how it can best maintain an up-to-date view on an ongoing basis. This is especially important in the context of increased spending on the programme over the next three years (paragraph 2.3).

2. **The Department also needs to build a clearer and more accurate picture of Essential Skills needs at a local level in Northern Ireland.** There are diverse sources of information relating to regional variations in adult literacy and numeracy skills. The Department should develop a programme to bring this information together in a more integrated way to minimise the risk of a mismatch of learning provision and local needs (paragraph 2.9).

#### On reaching more learners and increasing participation

3. **It is important that the Department's new advertising campaign, introduced in September 2008 to encourage more adults to take up further learning opportunities, is evaluated by the Government Advertising Unit at an early opportunity.** This is vital if the Department is to know whether the intended message is being communicated effectively to the intended audience, particularly the hardest-to-reach groups and employers (paragraph 4.4).
4. **The Department should closely monitor the new arrangements in the Further Education colleges to ensure that there are sufficient Essential Skills courses and tutors, and in the right locations.** There has been an inconsistency within Northern Ireland in the provision of community outreach learning facilities. With an expected increase in participation levels, maintaining a comprehensive level of provision represents a considerable challenge. The Department will also need



to ensure that the provision of Essential Skills training remains as flexible as under previous arrangements and that the hardest-to-reach and older people are not being deterred from participating, now that provision has been placed principally within an FE college setting (paragraph 4.8).

5. **The Department should build on the work carried out by the Essential Skills Steering Group and other support networks to identify and share information on what works best in attracting adults into a learning environment.** Regular feedback and its dissemination will help Further Education colleges and their partners to strengthen Essential Skills provision and attract the more reluctant learners (paragraph 4.21).
6. **The Department should continue to work with local employers to persuade more of them to give their employees access to Essential Skills courses.** Working with employers, especially small and medium enterprises, has proved challenging for the Department. The message that a workforce with good Essential Skills has a direct and beneficial impact on efficiency and profitability is an important one for employers (paragraph 4.27).

#### On evaluating progress

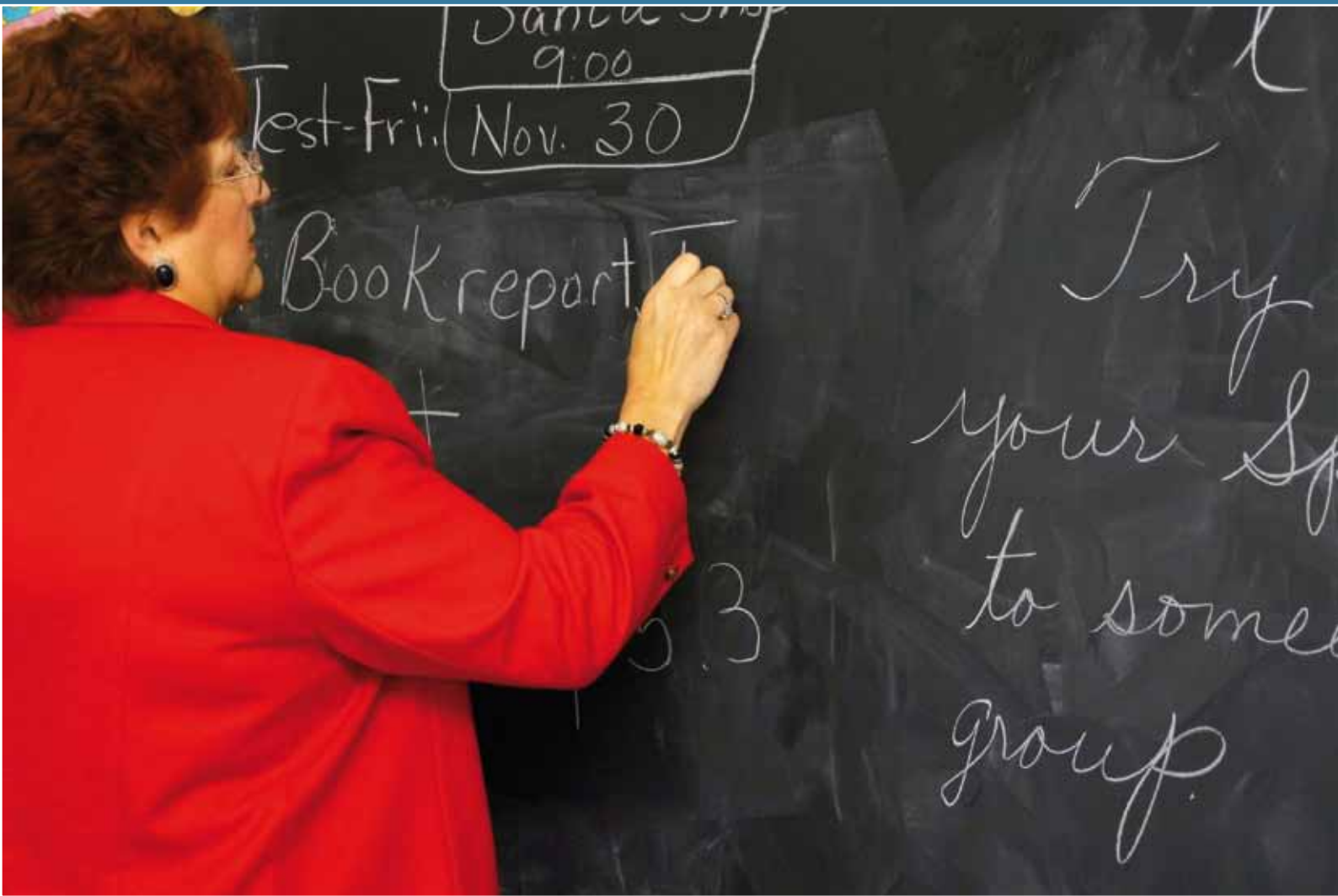
7. **The Department should continue its development of a comprehensive performance measurement and reporting system for Essential Skills**

**provision.** There is scope to enhance the existing systems and it will be important to ensure that each body involved in the programme maintains data on a consistent basis, so that progress and relative performance can be accurately assessed, on a timely basis. Data sets should include the extent to which people in disadvantaged areas are being brought into the programme (paragraphs 5.7 to 5.9).

8. **The Department should continue to liaise with the Education and Training Inspectorate to ensure that the new Essential Skills provision arrangements, introduced in September 2008, are reviewed in each of the FE colleges at an early juncture.** While inspections prior to March 2007 indicated that the quality of training provision was improving, they also highlighted a number of areas for improvement. An early review in each college would provide assurance to the Department that standards are continuing to improve under the new arrangements (paragraphs 5.28 and 5.29).
17. The Department has welcomed NIAO's recommendations which it sees as confirming the need for innovation and engagement with the diverse groups impacted by poor literacy and numeracy capabilities. It also said that it is fully committed to ensuring the continued application of resources to address numeracy, literacy and ICT as the three Essential Skills.



Part One:  
Introduction and background



## Part One: Introduction and background

### Better literacy and numeracy skills are associated with a higher probability of employment

- 1.1 In recent years, several studies have been undertaken which demonstrate that low standards of literacy and numeracy among the adult population can have serious social and economic implications for the people concerned. For an individual who struggles with the essential skills of reading, writing and maths, the impact can be profound, not only affecting them, but their family, the local community, society and the economy.
- 1.2 One piece of research<sup>2</sup>, carried out in 2006, showed that people with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy skills were:
- less likely to be in full-time work
  - less likely to be home owners
  - more likely to be experiencing economic disadvantage and to be in receipt of social security benefits<sup>3</sup>
  - more likely to suffer relatively poor physical health and mental wellbeing.
- 1.3 The report also suggested that the considerable disadvantages suffered by adults with the lowest skills were likely to be passed on to their children. However, there is also evidence that as people improve their skills, certain positive economic benefits accrue, including higher wages and improved chances of being in employment, as well as non-

economic benefits such as increased self-confidence and greater social involvement.

### Northern Ireland has relatively high numbers of adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy skills

- 1.4 An International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1996, showed that around 1 in 4 (or 250,000) people of the working age population of Northern Ireland could manage only Band 1 literacy and numeracy tasks on a five-band scale of difficulty. This means that they had difficulty with everyday tasks such as reading a newspaper or understanding signs and instructions, or checking whether they had received the correct change when shopping. The low skills were spread equally across all age groups in the working age population, with very little variation between men and women. The incidence of the problem in Northern Ireland was higher than in all but one of the other countries participating in the survey.

### The Department for Employment and Learning is charged with improving the essential skills of literacy and numeracy among the adult population

- 1.5 In Northern Ireland, providing individuals with the skills and qualifications required by employers is a key theme running through the Department for Employment

2 'New Light on Literacy and Numeracy', published by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, November 2006

3 The working age economic inactivity rate for NI, at 28.7%, is significantly higher than the UK average of 21.1% - Monthly Labour Market Report, DETI, November 2009

and Learning's work and is critical to the continued growth of the Northern Ireland economy. The Department works with other departments, agencies, colleges, charities, voluntary organisations and private sector companies to increase the number and quality of learning opportunities for people to improve their literacy and numeracy. Potential learners can access learning opportunities from accredited tutors across a range of locations, including Further Education colleges, private training providers and community organisations. All Essential Skills courses are free to the learner.

### The 'Essential Skills for Living' strategy aims to raise literacy and numeracy levels in Northern Ireland

1.6 In response to the IALS findings, the Department launched the "Essential Skills for Living" strategy in October 2002. This marked a radical new approach to literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland and began a long-term programme of improvement. The strategy planned for the introduction of a regional curriculum, accreditation for adult learners and improved tutor qualifications. It also set targets for building capacity and learner engagement; in particular, that the Department would support 14,500 learners by March 2004. In 2006, the newly-launched "Success Through Skills" strategy encompassed the Essential Skills programme as a component of a new strategy aimed at raising workforce skills generally. It included a Public Service Agreement target that by 2007,

18,500 people would have achieved a recognised Essential Skills qualification.

1.7 In the seven years to March 2009, nearly £40 million was spent on the Essential Skills programme. Despite substantial EU funding ceasing from June 2008, a significant increase in resources (totalling some £30 million) is planned for the following two years.

### Scope of NIAO review

#### We examined the effectiveness of action being taken to increase literacy and numeracy

1.8 This report examines the Department for Employment and Learning's strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy needs in Northern Ireland. Our work focused on how the Department has implemented the various strands of the strategy and the progress that has been made. In particular, our report looks at:

- the levels of adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland and why these had to be raised **(Part 2)**
- the development and implementation of the strategy for raising the levels of literacy and numeracy skills and how effective the Department has been in managing the programme **(Part 3)**
- what the Department is doing to widen participation, both directly and working with other organisations **(Part 4)**

## Part One: Introduction and background

- the progress made, since 2002, in increasing participation and achievement in adult literacy and numeracy and the costs involved **(Part 5)**.

1.9 Our examination included discussions with voluntary sector providers and interviews with adult learners. In this assignment, we were assisted by Mr Richard Buchanan, a former public sector official with substantial experience in the education sector.

### **Recent review by NAO of adult literacy and numeracy in England**

1.10 In June 2008, the National Audit Office reported<sup>4</sup> on progress in improving adult literacy and numeracy in England. The report was the subject of a Public Accounts Committee hearing at Westminster in June 2008 and their subsequent report was published in January 2009<sup>5</sup>.

1.11 The Committee noted that despite expenditure of some £5 billion, the evidence was that a large proportion of the adult population in England still could not read, write and count adequately. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills long-term aim, announced in 2007, is that, by 2020, 95 per cent of the population of working age will be at least functionally literate and numerate - the basic level of skills needed to get by in life. The Committee, however, noted that, even if that ambition is realised, England will be raised only to the current standards of the top 25 per cent of

OECD countries, who will probably have forged ahead by then.

1.12 The Committee also noted that more progress had been made in improving literacy than in improving numeracy. It recommended that new approaches to the recruitment of numeracy teachers must be adopted in England and that the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills must also do more to encourage public services to promote training opportunities among their clients.

4 Skills for Life: Progress in Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy, National Audit Office, HC 482, June 2008

5 Skills for Life: Progress in Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy, Public Accounts Committee, HC 154, January 2009

Part Two:  
Adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland:  
The scale and nature of the problem





## Part Two: Adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland: The scale and nature of the problem

### Key Audit Findings

- The 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey estimated that 24 per cent of adults in Northern Ireland had the most basic literacy skills. This compared with the UK as a whole at 22 per cent.
- The unemployed and the economically inactive represented the majority of those with the most basic skills.
- There has been no objective assessment of literacy and numeracy skills in Northern Ireland since the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey. In November 2008, the Department decided that it will participate in the next Survey in 2011, with results being available in 2013. An interim measure to assess the impact of the current strategy and inform policy direction is currently being researched.
- The Department of Education estimates that some 4,000 young people per year leave compulsory education without the appropriate basic literacy and numeracy skills.

2.1 It is important to note that low level essential skills do not imply illiteracy, but a level of literacy and numeracy skills that make certain tasks in everyday life and work difficult. These tasks would be considered routine by individuals with good basic skills.

2.2 In this part of our report we provide a summary of the research findings from the first adult literacy survey carried out in 1996 and examine the work that has been done since that time to gauge the level of literacy and numeracy skills in Northern Ireland.

### The first adult literacy survey in Northern Ireland was carried out in 1996 as part of the International Adult Literacy Survey

2.3 The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) began in 1994 as a seven country initiative with the aim of creating comparable literacy profiles across national, linguistic and cultural boundaries. The first results<sup>6</sup> demonstrated a strong link between literacy and a country's economic potential. Since then, a second (1996) and third (1998) round of surveys have been conducted in a further 16 countries, with Northern Ireland taking part in the 1996 Survey.

2.4 The Northern Ireland Survey was carried out by the Central Survey Unit of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and was the first literacy survey to be carried out in Northern Ireland on a national sample of adults of working age.

6 "Literacy economy and society: results of the first International Adult Literacy Survey" (OECD), 1995



It set out to profile the literacy abilities of adults aged 16-65 using an internationally agreed measurement instrument and survey implementation protocols which covered, among other things, interviewer instructions and scoring procedures. The Survey defined literacy as:

*“Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”*

2.5 The survey measured three categories of literacy skill:

- **prose literacy** - the knowledge and skills required to understand and use information from texts such as passages of fiction and newspaper articles
- **document literacy** - the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats such as timetables, graphs, charts and forms
- **quantitative literacy** - the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, to numbers embedded in printed materials, such as calculating savings from a sale advertisement or working out the interest required to achieve a desired return on investment.

2.6 The Survey measured literacy skills by assessing the ability of people to successfully undertake tasks of varying

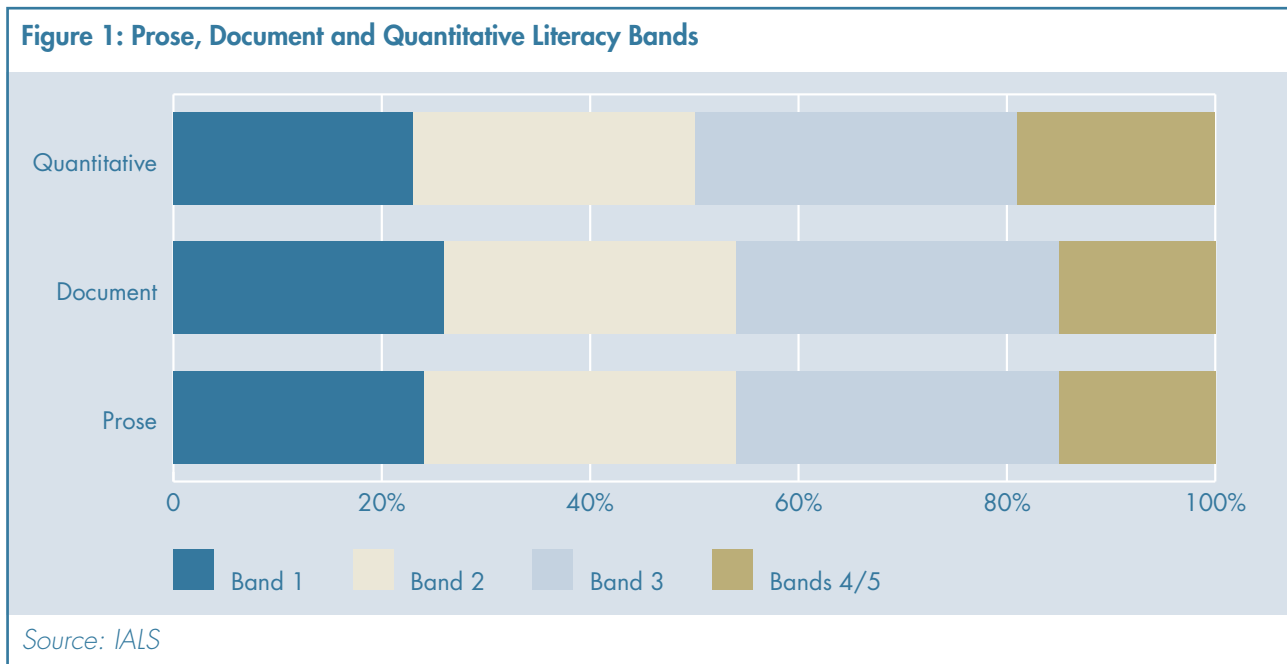
degrees of complexity which they encounter in everyday life. Performance was grouped into five bands with Band 1 representing the lowest ability range and Band 5 the highest. Because of the small percentage of people that fell into the highest category (Band 5), the data for Bands 4 and 5 were combined. The definitions for each of the bands were:

- **Band 1:** people with very poor literacy skills
- **Band 2:** people who can deal only with simple material
- **Band 3:** people with roughly the skill level required for successful secondary school completion and college entry
- **Bands 4/5:** people who demonstrate command of “higher order information processing skills”.

### Research has shown that 1 in 4 adults in Northern Ireland have difficulty with simple literacy and numeracy tasks

2.7 The Survey findings showed that the distribution of literacy skills among the working age population of Northern Ireland was broadly similar for each of the three categories, namely prose, document and quantitative. The research showed that almost 1 in 4 people (24 per cent) of working age had difficulty with simple literacy tasks, such as reading the

## Part Two: Adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland: The scale and nature of the problem



instructions on a medicine bottle - i.e. with Band 1 tasks on the scale of five bands. Around 30 per cent performed at Band 2 and a similar proportion at Band 3, with just 15 per cent at Bands 4/5 – see **Figure 1**.

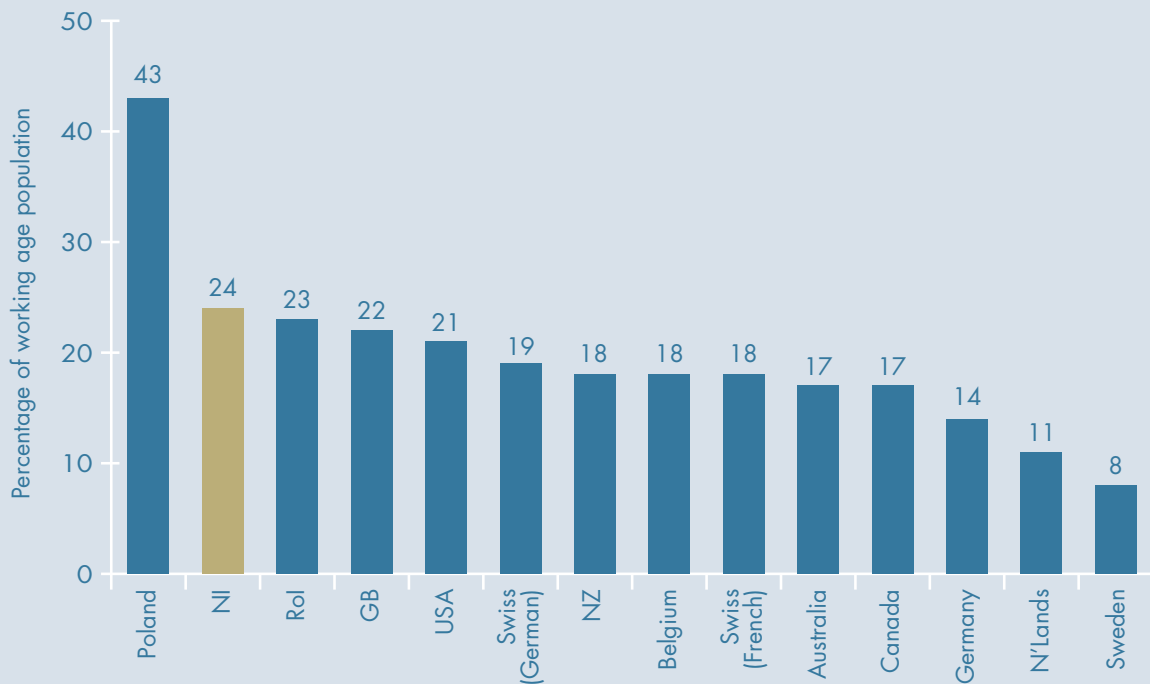
2.8 Some of the other main findings from the Survey were:

- men performed the poorest on the prose scale whereas women performed worse on the document scale
- the older age groups performed worse than the 16-25 year olds; 41 per cent of men and 37 per cent of women in Band 1 were in the 56-65 age group
- 36 per cent of the unemployed were in the Band 1 category

- 44 per cent of the economically inactive were in the Band 1 category
- 19 per cent of people in employment were in Band 1.

2.9

NIAO asked the Department what information the Survey had provided in relation to regional variations in literacy and numeracy skills. It told us that no figures were available. The Department went on to explain that it was required to remain within the requirements of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) protocols, particularly in respect of confidentiality. Most countries had modest sample sizes in the IALS and this was true of Northern Ireland as well. The overall sample size taken in Northern Ireland was 2,907 and this limited the extent to which sub-populations could be reported without breaching ONS protocols.

**Figure 2: Prose literacy level by country at Band 1**

Source: IALS

### International comparisons suggest that Northern Ireland's adult population performs relatively poorly on basic skills

2.10 The IALS also provided an international comparison of the prose literacy bands across the 14 participating countries. Of those, only Poland was shown to have a higher percentage of its working age population (43 per cent) performing at the lowest of the five bands of performance than Northern Ireland (24 per cent). However, the results for Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland were only marginally better at 22 per cent and 23 per cent respectively – see **Figure 2**. A full listing of the countries across each of

the five performance bands is attached at **Appendix 1**.

### Little research has been undertaken since 1996 to measure adult literacy and numeracy skills in Northern Ireland

2.11 Since the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey, the only means of gauging the continuing extent of the problem of low standards of literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland has been through the 'NI Omnibus Survey'. This is based on a random sample of 2,200 addresses across Northern Ireland. The Survey is designed to provide a snapshot

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of the lifestyle and views of the people here and is administered every quarter by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. On a bi-annual basis an Essential Skills component is included. The purpose of this is to provide a cost-effective method of monitoring individuals' perceptions of their literacy and numeracy abilities in everyday life. The following shows a sample of the questions relevant to Essential Skills:

**a) How comfortable are you reading information on your own?**

(For example, instructions on packaged goods or medicine bottles or information from a bank, employer, school, doctor, hospital, Government department or Agency)

**b) How comfortable are you filling out forms on your own?**

(For example, a driving licence or passport application form)

**c) How comfortable are you when you have to use maths for everyday calculations or sums?**

(For example, working out how much something will cost or what change you can expect to receive or how much of something you can afford)

2.12 The results in **Figure 3** show the percentage of respondents who reported that they were “*not very comfortable*” or “*not at all comfortable*”.

2.13 In considering the results in Figure 3, it is important to make the distinction between the IALS and the Omnibus Survey. Whereas the former used an **objective measurement** instrument to assess ability, the latter relies on individuals' **perceptions** of their ability. In the IALS it was identified that among those who performed in the lowest band, almost one in ten self-assessed their reading skills as excellent and almost a quarter said they

**Figure 3: NI Omnibus Survey results**

Question	Apr '05 %	Oct '05 %	Mar '06 %	Sep '06 %	Apr '07 %	Oct '07 %	Apr '08 %	Sep'08 %
How comfortable are you reading information on your own?	5	6	7	4	6	5	5	5
How comfortable are you filling out forms on your own?	13	12	14	12	15	11	13	13
How comfortable are you when you have to use basic maths?	6	7	9	6	8	7	7	9

Source: DEL

were good. In that context, according to DEL, the results in Figure 3 are likely to be at the lower bounds of need and, in population terms, would currently equate to over 100,000 people in Northern Ireland.

- 2.14 In April 2008, a Review of the Competitiveness of Northern Ireland, undertaken by Sir David Varney, pointed out that while the number of people who have only basic skills in Northern Ireland is on a par with the rest of the UK, the stock of working age adults who have no qualifications is the highest in the UK by some margin, at 24 per cent, with a large proportion of the inactive population having only poor basic skills. The Review goes on to describe functional numeracy and literacy as the “*building blocks of upskilling*” and states that the causes of the particularly high number of those of working age without basic skills are not fully understood. The Review stresses the need for the Northern Ireland Executive to tackle entrenched personal barriers to education, often among people who have been out of the labour market for many years.

**Until further research is undertaken, the impact of Government intervention on the Northern Ireland skills base will be difficult to determine**

- 2.15 In November 2008, during our review, DEL decided that it will participate in the next OECD survey, entitled Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), in order to obtain

a clearer picture of the current state of literacy and numeracy skills among the working age population in Northern Ireland. The Department told us that this will give certain results comparable to the IALS and will assess the level and distribution of adult skills, coherently and consistently across several countries. While the Department anticipates that the data collection method in the PIAAC will be similar to that of the IALS, its view is that the questions will probably be designed differently.

- 2.16 Given that the last comprehensive baseline study was carried out over 13 years ago, any new assessment, using the previous baseline, would have to take account of any growth in the numbers of adults without basic literacy and numeracy skills: i.e. the numbers of young people leaving compulsory education without having achieved the desired levels of literacy and numeracy. Information conveyed from the Department of Education to DEL showed that, in 2006-07, some 42 per cent of school leavers left without English and Maths graded at A\*-C.
- 2.17 The IALS showed that expected performance on the literacy scales was strongly associated with educational qualifications, with the percentage of people performing in the higher literacy bands increasing with higher qualifications and correspondingly those performing in the lowest bands likely to hold no qualifications. In spring 1996, some 31 per cent of the NI working age population had no qualifications but this percentage dropped to 26 per cent

## Part Two: Adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland: The scale and nature of the problem

by spring 2001 and to 22 per cent by spring 2006<sup>7</sup>. Using the IALS correlation between qualifications and literacy and numeracy skills, this would suggest that the numbers of young people leaving education without basic skills is declining year on year. However, in December 2007, in a statement to the Assembly<sup>8</sup> outlining her vision for the future of our education system, the Minister of Education stated:

*"I am the Minister of Education for all of our children. I cannot – and will not – ignore the fact that every single year there are 4,000 young people leaving school after 12 years of compulsory education who do not have the appropriate basic literacy and numeracy skills."*<sup>9</sup>

The Department also pointed out that the results are likely to be estimates based on a series of assumptions, and no in-depth assessments with individuals would be carried out.

- 2.18 Data collection for the PIAAC is not due to commence until 2010, with the main study being administered in 2011 and the reporting of results in 2013. As an interim measure, the Department said that it has commissioned research to model existing data from a range of sources to inform ongoing policy and assess the impact of the current strategy. The Department noted, however, that the results of this type of exercise would not be comparable to the IALS. If feasible, it said it may provide some indication in terms of the direction of change of the working age population in numeracy and literacy from 1996 to the current time. It will also help to assess whether Essential Skills provision is being directed at all target groups.

7 Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey: Historical Supplement, Spring 1984-Spring 2006 – DETI 18 July 2007

8 The Assembly – Official Report 04 December 2007

9 In March 2006, NIAO reported on the Department of Education's actions to improve literacy and numeracy standards in Northern Ireland schools, i.e. at primary and secondary level. This was the subject of a hearing at the Westminster Public Accounts Committee in November 2006. Recently, the Assembly's PAC has published an update on progress:

- Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools, NIAO, HC 953, March 2006
- Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools (Northern Ireland), House of Commons PAC, HC 108, November 2006
- Second Composite Report on Issues Dealt with by Correspondence, NI Assembly PAC, 23/08/09R, February 2009

Part Three:  
Strategies for raising adult literacy and numeracy skills



## Part Three: Strategies for raising adult literacy and numeracy skills

### Key Audit Findings

- The “*Essential Skills for Living*” strategy was introduced in October 2002 as a response to the IALS findings.
- The strategy addressed issues of capacity and quality as well as approaches to engagement.
- Early targets included one that, by March 2004, 14,500 Essential Skills learners would have been supported.
- The “*Success Through Skills*” strategy, launched in February 2006, encompassed the Essential Skills programme as a component of the new strategy.
- Later targets included one that, in the three year period ending in March 2007, 18,500 people would have achieved a recognised qualification in Essential Skills.

3.1 In this part of our report, we present an overview of the different Essential Skills strategies that have been introduced by the Department for Employment and Learning since 2002, which aim to raise the standards of literacy and numeracy among the adult population in Northern Ireland.

### Northern Ireland’s strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy needs was launched in October 2002

3.2 Following the publication of the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey in 1996, a Basic Skills Committee<sup>10</sup> was established by the Department as a representative body comprising a range of groups, supported by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) Basic Skills Unit (see paragraph 4.16).

The Committee charged the Unit with the responsibility for:

- promoting collaboration among providers and disseminating good practice
- providing financial support to community and voluntary groups for activities related to innovation in adult basic education
- providing the Department with advice on standards, curriculum, tests, qualifications and the qualifications for tutors.

3.3 The advice provided by the EGSA Basic Skills Unit played a key role in helping to inform and shape DEL’s ‘*Essential Skills for Living*’ strategy<sup>11</sup> - Northern Ireland’s strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy needs – which was launched in

10 The Basic Skills Committee includes representation from Government departments, business and industry, Further Education and the voluntary and community sectors.

11 *Essential Skills for Living – Equipped for the Future: Building for Tomorrow; a Strategy and Action Plan for Adult Literacy in Northern Ireland, October 2002*



October 2002 following the publication of a consultation document in April of that year. The consultation document<sup>12</sup> outlined the actions to be taken by DEL over the following ten years, set within the context of the 'Investing in Education and Skills' section of the Assembly's then Programme for Government.

- 3.4 The strategy defined literacy and numeracy as essential skills, which require:

*"the ability to communicate by talking and listening, reading and writing; to use numeracy; and the ability to handle information."*

Whilst acknowledging that the continuing development of literacy and numeracy skills was for everyone, regardless of their level of achievement, the strategy stated that particular priority should be given to those who had not yet reached Level 2 in the National Qualifications Framework. (Level 2 is set at achievement of four or more GCSEs at grades A, B or C).

- 3.5 At that time, there were two Essential Skills qualifications:

- **Communication Levels** 1 and 2
- **Application of Number** Levels 1 and 2.

An Essential Skills qualification at Level 1 is comparable in standard with GCSE English or Maths at grades D-G. An Essential Skills qualification at Level 2 is comparable in standard with GCSE at English or Maths at grades A-C – see **Figure 4**.

- 3.6 The vision for the delivery of the strategy was:

*"to provide opportunities for adults to update their Essential Skills to assist them in improving their overall quality of life, their personal development and their employment opportunities and by doing so to promote greater economic development, social inclusion and cohesion".*

**Figure 4: Essential Skills qualifications compared with GCSEs**

Essential Skills Standards	Equivalent Level in National Qualifications Framework
Entry Level Certificate in Essential Skills - Adult Literacy or Numeracy	Entry Level of the National Qualification Framework
Essential skills qualification in communication or application of number at Level 1	GCSE English or Maths at grades D, E, F or G
Essential skills qualification in communication or application of number at Level 2	GCSE English or Maths at grades A*, A, B or C

Source: DEL

12 Essential Skills for Living – Equipped for the Future: Building for Tomorrow; a Framework and Consultation Paper on Adult Literacy, April 2002

## Part Three: Strategies for raising adult literacy and numeracy skills

### The strategy addressed issues of capacity and quality as well as approaches to engagement

3.7 The strategy had five key strands which contained a number of actions detailing what the Department would do, and how this would be achieved:

- **leadership** – strong leadership was required at all levels for the strategy to be successful
- **building a structured framework** – the regime should be based on curriculum standards and rigorous assessment and accreditation procedures designed specifically to meet the needs and aspirations of the learners
- **building quality** – the providers of Essential Skills should work to a single set of quality assurance indicators and a framework of qualifications should be developed to improve the professionalism of tutors. New and effective quality assurance procedures should also be introduced for monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision
- **building capacity** – the traditional provision of adult education should be significantly expanded. Effective partnerships would be required across a wide range of providers and organisations to implement the strategy in a range of contexts and settings. In particular, Further Education colleges should work even more closely with

the voluntary and community sector, employers and training organisations

- **engaging learners** – a comprehensive promotional campaign should be developed and implemented to increase awareness and drive up demand among adults for Essential Skills.

3.8 The aim was to deliver the strategy in two broad phases:

**Phase 1** - covering the first year. This would be largely transitional and aimed at building the structured framework which would be in place by September 2003. The framework would include a set of standards, a curriculum, appropriate assessment and accreditation procedures and a more professionalised tutor framework base

**Phase 2** - this would aim to build capacity and engage learners. Capacity would be built across all providers of literacy and numeracy and new avenues, such as work-based and family learning, would be explored. A promotional campaign to engage learners would begin in January 2003 followed by a major drive to secure participation in June 2003.

### The strategy included an initial target that, by March 2004, 14,500 Essential Skills learners would have been supported

3.9 The consultation document had an overall aspirational target to reduce, by half, the number of adults with poor skills in

literacy and numeracy by 2012. As a first step, it proposed to set a target that, by 2005, the number of learners supported by Further Education (FE) colleges and the voluntary sector would be increased from 5,500 per annum to 25,000, representing 10 per cent of the overall target group (see paragraph 1.4) over the lifespan of the strategy. However, feedback from the consultation process expressed some concern that the targets for learners were inadequate and that the timing of the increase in tutor provision did not correspond with increased demand. It was suggested that more detailed and specific targets were required to include, for example, New Targeting Social Need, urban/rural split and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and learners with learning difficulties.

3.10 In response, DEL agreed to set the following revised targets:

- by September 2003, have in place Essential Skills qualifications which enables progression to Key Skills Level 2
- by March 2004, have established a target to measure the number of adults who had improved their Essential Skills qualifications against the new qualifications
- by March 2004, have supported 14,500 Essential Skills learners.

### The “*Success Through Skills*” strategy, launched in February 2006, encompassed the Essential Skills programme as a component of the strategy

3.11 In November 2004, the Department published a draft ‘*Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland*’ for consultation. This covered many aspects of the Department’s work, including Skills and Industry, Further Education, Higher Education and Preparation for Work. It focused on raising the skills of the current workforce, enhancing the quality of those entering the workforce and addressing the employability skills of those not in employment. In this context, three different types of skills were defined:

- **the essential skills** of literacy and numeracy and, increasingly, information and communications technology (ICT)
- **employability skills**, including the key skills of team working, problem solving and flexibility
- **work-based skills**, specific to a particular occupation or sector.

3.12 The draft strategy concluded that skill levels, generally, were too low and, if Northern Ireland was to compete successfully in the global economic arena, there had to be a concerted effort to drive up the level of skills on all fronts.

3.13 The draft strategy attracted over 100 detailed responses from a wide variety of individuals and organisations. The

## Part Three: Strategies for raising adult literacy and numeracy skills

consultation process endorsed the need for a strategic approach to skills and confirmed widespread and clear support for the suggested priorities and proposed action plan.

3.14 Having taken account of the responses to the draft strategy, the Department launched the *'Success Through Skills'*<sup>13</sup> strategy in February 2006 which set out how it planned to address current and future skills needs, in order to ensure that the economy remained globally competitive in 2015 and beyond. The vision included a reference that the workforce would increasingly be literate and numerate and have good ICT skills. Most significantly, the document set out how DEL would take the proposals forward in partnership with employers and their representative bodies; individuals and trade unions; training and education providers; the community and voluntary sectors; and other Government departments and agencies.

3.15 Although it espoused a vision of the Northern Ireland economy in 2015, and envisaged a ten-year timeframe for the full effects of the strategy to be realised, the initial focus for delivery was for a period of three years, after which time the implementation plan would require to be refreshed, programmes evaluated and progress assessed. Implementation of the strategy consisted of 16 programmes of action grouped into four broad themes:

- understanding the demand for skills
- improving the skills levels of the workforce

- improving the quality and relevance of education and training
- tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability.

A key target was also set out in respect of each programme of action.

### The *"Success Through Skills"* strategy includes Public Service Agreement targets for the achievement of recognised Essential Skills qualifications

3.16 In that context, the strategy stated that although a number of key targets were set out which related to outputs, the success of the Skills Strategy would be judged on a wide range of measures, some of which would be linked to the Department's Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets. Those that related specifically to Essential Skills were:

#### **PSA Essential Skills target included in the *"Success Through Skills"* strategy 2006**

- By 2007, 18,500 people will have achieved a recognised qualification in Essential Skills compared to 100 in March 2003.

#### **PSA Essential Skills target included in DEL's Corporate Plan 2008-2011**

- Over the three-year period ending in March 2011, 42,000 adult learners will have achieved a recognised qualification in Essential Skills.

Part Four:  
Reaching more learners and increasing participation



## Part Four: Reaching more learners and increasing participation

### Key Audit Findings

- Since April 2003, adult literacy and numeracy provision was promoted through the UK-wide "Gremlins" campaign but this has been replaced by a locally-orientated campaign from September 2008.
- The Workers Educational Association, the Educational Guidance Service for Adults and various community-based groups have all played roles in engaging with, and providing courses for, diverse groups of learners in community settings.
- From September 2008, Further Education colleges began piloting the new 'Learner Access and Engagement' policy. The new arrangements place Further Education colleges in the role of principal course providers with the voluntary and community sectors operating in a support and engagement role. The pilot extends to all Further Education colleges and will run for a three-year period, to 2011.

4.1 Raising participation of adults in learning that improves their literacy and numeracy skills is an important strand of the Department's strategy. This part of our report looks at what the Department has done to engage potential learners, both directly and through working with other organisations. In particular, it looks at:

- the success of the Department's promotional and advertising campaign
- engagement with the unemployed and economically inactive
- the work of the voluntary sector to target the hardest-to-reach groups
- liaison with the Department of Education to promote family literacy programmes

- the new arrangements that place Further Education colleges in the role of principal course providers
- encouraging employers to address the Essential Skills needs of their employees

### Advertising campaigns have raised awareness of opportunities and benefits

4.2 'Gremlins', which was part of a national advertising campaign to promote adult literacy and numeracy and raise levels of awareness, was launched by DEL in 2003. The adverts feature a range of situations where people's personal literacy and numeracy 'gremlins' make life difficult for them or prevent them from doing what they want. The decision to use this campaign was taken primarily on grounds of cost-effectiveness as the development

costs had already been met in full by the Department for Education and Skills in GB for the promotion of its 'Skills for Life' programme. The campaign included television, radio, cinema, outdoor and press advertising and a freephone helpline number to allow potential learners to speak to an advisor about enrolling on an Essential Skills course.

- 4.3 In September 2006, the helpline number was supplemented with a text messaging service. By the end of September 2008, over 3,800 calls and texts had been made to the helpline since the campaign began in 2003. **Figure 5** shows expenditure on the advertising component of the campaign.

**Figure 5: DEL Expenditure on the 'Gremlins' advertising campaign 2003–2008**

Year	Expenditure (£'000)
2003-04	481
2004-05	444
2005-06	454
2006-07	195
2007-08	150
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,724</b>

Source: DEL

- 4.4 An evaluation of the campaign was carried out in December 2005 by the Department's Analytical Services Branch (using information provided by the PR Company employed by the Department at the time); progress reports from DEL;

and a MORI survey which involved over 1,000 face-to-face interviews with a representative section of the NI population. The research showed that the campaign had achieved a high level of awareness, understanding, and positive approval and, in achieving its objectives, the campaign had provided value for money (the key points arising from the research are attached at **Appendix 2**). The 'Gremlins' campaign ended in January 2008 and was replaced by a new Northern Ireland-specific, promotional campaign from September 2008. This is targeting the hardest-to-reach groups and employers, and was introduced in time to coincide with new delivery arrangements that have been put in place (see paragraph 4.22) to help achieve the challenging targets that the Department has set itself for 2011.

- 4.5 In addition to the 'Gremlins' campaign, a number of specific groups with skills needs have also been targeted. These include some public sector manual employees, families with literacy and numeracy problems, low-skilled people in employment, unemployed people and prisoners. Initiatives include:

- working with the wider public sector, particularly the health and social care sector and local councils
- working with the Department of Education on piloting Essential Skills qualifications in schools
- initiating provision with the Ministry of Defence and in prisons



## Part Four: Reaching more learners and increasing participation

- working with the Department of Education to establish a pilot Family Literacy steering group, funding pilot projects and encouraging schools to develop family literacy programmes through Extended Schools initiatives
- developing a strategy for NI Civil Service staff which includes a pilot project for 100 support grade staff to enable them to apply for transfer to administrative posts within the Service
- integrating Essential Skills provision into DEL's programmes such as New Deal, Pathways, Steps and Training for Success.

4.6 The Department also uses a range of information sources to inform its approaches to engaging learners. These include information provided by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults about reasons for dropout or failure to follow-up courses and project evaluations which detail how clients were motivated to join.

### **The Department is seeking to engage more with the unemployed and economically inactive**

4.7 Further Education (FE) colleges are the main providers of Essential Skills courses. Since the start of the Essential Skills strategy in October 2002 until the end of July 2008, Further Education colleges contributed 60 per cent of enrolments, Training Organisations (including private and community and voluntary sector

organisations) 30 per cent and the remaining 10 per cent by a number of community providers under Peace II.

4.8 FE colleges work with other organisations, including the voluntary and community sectors, to engage those hardest-to-reach and economically inactive adults to participate in Essential Skills courses and achieve qualifications. The colleges operate through a network of outreach centres throughout Northern Ireland and aim to contextualise their provision to make it relevant to various target groups. In relation to the unemployed, much of the provision would focus on health, family and financial issues. From the information secured from the Department on community outreach learning facilities provided by colleges, there is inconsistency in the extent and nature of this type of provision between colleges with some areas (such as Armagh and Newry) better provided than others (such as Enniskillen). The Department told us that the colleges are working to address this issue and the introduction of the Learner Access and Engagement pilot – see paragraphs 4.22 to 4.26 - will provide a further means of addressing imbalances in provision.

4.9 The New Deal Programme<sup>14</sup> provides an opportunity for participants to enrol on an Essential Skills Training Option which lasts approximately 26 weeks, with classes delivered throughout Northern Ireland. Since 2002-03, around 1,100 participants have enrolled using this option, achieving some 340 qualifications. From 2004, as an incentive to get more customers to

14 A programme that gives people on social security benefits help and support to look for work, including training and preparing for work.



enrol using the option, the Department introduced a top-up incentive payment of £10 per week for those in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance. A further £100 bonus is paid for achievement of an Essential Skills qualification.

- 4.10 In September 2007, a pilot programme entitled 'Steps to Work' (S2W) began in four Jobs and Benefits Offices (JBOs). The Department has explained that the aim is to extend New Deal Provision to a wider target audience, including those in receipt of Income Support and Incapacity Benefit<sup>15</sup> as well as those who are not in receipt of any benefits. The purpose of the programme is to provide additional mentoring and support to help customers gain suitable employment and to date over 335 people have been screened for essential skills needs. S2W advisers are trained to encourage customers to access and complete their learning in a way that best suits them, whether as part of their new job or in their leisure time. At present, guidelines are being reviewed and booking essential skills screening will be incorporated as a mandatory condition for those without a Level 2 Essential Skills qualification. The S2W programme was rolled out across all JBOs and Jobcentres in September 2008 and will help those hardest-to-reach learners in gaining essential skills.

## The voluntary sector is being used more to engage the hardest-to-reach sector

### Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS)

- 4.11 In May 2007, DEL contracted with a number of community-based organisations in Londonderry, Strabane and Belfast, all areas with recognised high levels of unemployment, to deliver a new service known as LEMIS (Local Employment Intermediary Service). This programme aims to provide tailored assistance to help long-term unemployed and economically inactive and those who might not otherwise engage with the statutory sector to overcome their personal barriers to employment. There are currently over 1,200 people on the LEMIS caseload, with a significantly high proportion of those identified as having an Essential Skills need. The community-based providers encourage customers to participate in local Essential Skills courses.

### Workers' Educational Association (WEA)

- 4.12 DEL also entered into contracts with the Workers' Educational Association (and EGSA – see paragraph 4.16) to target the hardest-to-reach Essential Skills groups, largely seen as the long-term unemployed and the economically inactive. WEA is a not-for-profit organisation that provides adult education in community and workplace settings, including community halls, arts centres and training rooms. They have accounted for approximately six per cent of all Essential Skills

<sup>15</sup> Income Support and Incapacity Benefit was replaced by Employment and Support Allowance in October 2008.

## Part Four: Reaching more learners and increasing participation

enrolments. During 2007-08, WEA undertook to engage 450 learners with a target of 315 achievements. As the contract with WEA was output-related, payment was made on the actual number of learners who achieved a qualification.

- 4.13 A hallmark of WEA is that it offers learning facilities that are specifically adapted to meet the needs of its clients, whether they are communities, employers or individuals. As an example of this 'tailor-made' service, one of the WEA's clients is Parcelforce in Lisburn and Belfast, for whom classes are provided between 10.00pm and midnight to accommodate working patterns. WEA also takes both a proactive and reactive approach to making provision for adult learning. As an example of the former, information on proposed classes would be sent home with children from schools to stimulate interest in either individual or family learning opportunities.
- 4.14 In 2007-08, WEA engaged 615 Essential Skills learners and achieved 333 qualifications. In total, since the launch of the strategy in October 2002, WEA engaged approximately 2,000 learners with over 1,500 achievements. The contract with WEA expired on 31 August 2008.
- 4.15 We asked the Department if the new arrangements which were introduced from September 2008 (see paragraph 4.22), and place Further Education colleges in the role of principal providers of Essential Skills courses, will offer the same flexibility in tutoring services as

former providers such as the WEA. It told us that the guidance issued to colleges promoted flexibility in the delivery of course provision. In particular, it is expected that the provision for those in the "hard-to-reach" categories would, wherever possible, be offered locally, in community outreach settings and tailored to take account of local circumstances and individual needs.

### **Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA)**

- 4.16 The Educational Guidance Service for Adults is a voluntary organisation that provides information, advice and guidance on learning and work. It provides support for those most in need through one-to-one counselling and group awareness raising sessions. Since 2002, the Department has funded EGSA to engage with potential Essential Skills learners, either through:
- **supported referral** – where EGSA contacts the learning provider on behalf of the client and arranges for a tutor to contact the client to arrange a suitable class
  - **direct referral** – where EGSA provides the client with the relevant contact details if the client feels confident to make contact themselves.
- 4.17 EGSA carries out tracking on these learners at four and twelve week intervals to check if they have started a class, are still in provision or, if necessary, to provide further support and advice. The tracking allows

them to record the reasons for drop-out and non-uptake. In the three years to March 2008, it provided support to 1,300, 1,400 and 1,345 adults respectively, who were identified as having Essential Skills needs. The Department told us that EGSA is on track to support a further 1,400 adults in 2008-09.

- 4.18 We met with EGSA staff to discuss the obstacles that some learners faced in accessing suitable courses. They explained that these come in a variety of forms and provided the following examples by way of illustration.

### Case Study 1

Geraldine was contacted by EGSA in December 2007 and a supported referral was made to her local college for English and maths classes. A twelve week call was made to Geraldine in January 2008, but she had still not been contacted by the college. Another referral was made by EGSA, with a request to be informed of the outcome. The college returned an email on 25 January to say that they had spoken to Geraldine and had told her that there would be no classes until September 2008 as all the classes were full. The College undertook to let Geraldine know if there were any changes.

### Case Study 2

Joseph was referred to a provider in October 2007. A four week call was made to Joseph in December 2007 but there had been no contact from the provider. EGSA made a supported re-referral. Joseph was called again at 12 weeks and responded that he had been told that he

would have to wait until September 2008 as there were no classes available.

### Case Study 3

Iris enrolled in Essential Skills classes and while she attended classes her mother looked after her children. This arrangement subsequently ceased for personal reasons and Iris was forced to drop out of provision as there were no places left in the college's crèche. The college notified Iris some weeks later to advise that there were two available places in the crèche but it would cost her £18 per week for two children. Iris, as a single parent, could not afford this and alternatives were sought by EGSA. A community provider was found in her area with free crèche facilities.

### Case Study 4

Patricia is a learning advocate who has 6-8 people wanting to learn who live in an area where there were no providers offering Essential Skills classes. She contacted Learndirect who told her none were available and she then contacted EGSA. Providers have advised that a class cannot be started unless there are 10 or more clients. WEA have been contacted to see if they can make provision.

*Case Studies provided by EGSA*

The Department informed us that EGSA has since commented, at a meeting in February 2009, that there had been a recent improvement in getting learners into classes at colleges; that retention rates have also been good; and colleges are being more responsive and flexible to delivery requirements. The Department

## Part Four: Reaching more learners and increasing participation

has also said that training organisations, including the further education sector, have traditionally delivered provision in a range of settings to facilitate the needs of learners and employers. The Department told us that it continues to encourage innovation in delivery to allow an enhanced uptake of the provision available.

### The Department is working closely with the Department of Education to promote a range of Family Literacy programmes

4.19 DEL is liaising with the Department of Education's Regional Training Unit about its Extended Schools Programme and has placed information on the latter's website highlighting best practice programmes and Further Education contacts for family learning provision. Through the Extended Schools programme, DEL encourages a number of activities:

- **promotional events** – to encourage parents to participate in school activities and their children's learning through developing their own learning, skills and qualifications
- **free, short, activity-based 'taster' courses** – to attract parents back into new learning opportunities and eventually progress to longer, traditional family learning and family literacy and numeracy courses which lead to qualifications
- **free family literacy and numeracy courses** – which focus on developing the literacy and numeracy skills

of parents within the context of relevant family learning issues such as parenting, children's health, play and children's behaviour. These courses are aimed at enabling adults to achieve nationally recognised qualifications.

4.20 The Department told us that other family learning projects have been funded by the EU Peace II funding package. For example, the Belfast Education and Library Board projects involved Family Support Officers who targeted parents and carers of children attending three local schools – Blythefield Primary, St Kevin's Primary and Glenwood Primary. The projects emphasised the benefits of parents and children learning together and provided adults with the opportunity to receive Essential Skills and ICT training. Other Belfast-based family learning projects included:

- working with young single parents with Essential Skills needs, using topics such as women's health, parenting skills and child development as a means of engaging them in learning
- improving parents' employability skills to enable them to move towards a learning environment at home and be better able to assist their children with homework.

The Department told us that it encourages providers to market family literacy with their local schools through leaflet drops and engaging parents in other school activities.

**There are a number of factors which have proved successful in attracting adults into the learning environment**

- 4.21 We asked the Department whether it had commissioned or conducted any surveys to ascertain from successful adult learners what they felt works best in terms of attracting adults into a learning environment, and what constituted the barriers to learning. It told us that case study material was obtained by consultants in 2006 during an evaluation of the strategy (see paragraph 5.10) on both current and past Essential Skills participants. This suggested that the 'Gremlins' campaign was a powerful motivator in encouraging people back into learning. Other factors included small class sizes, flexibility of provision, relaxed atmosphere, relevant materials, gaining a qualification, incorporation of ICT into the course and a supportive tutor. Barriers to learning were mostly practical, for example, not being able to get time off work to study, family commitments/ childcare, lack of public transport, and finding the college environment off-putting. Learners also reported embarrassment as a factor.

**From September 2008, new arrangements have placed Further Education colleges as the principal course providers and the voluntary and community sectors in an engagement and support role**

- 4.22 The Department has set challenging targets for Essential Skills for the period up to 2011. They are particularly

challenging when account is taken of the fact that the considerable resources which have hitherto been available under the EU Peace II package are no longer available as a means of supplementing DEL funded activity. The Department has chosen this juncture to make other adjustments to its current approach. The WEA contract, which was directly funded by DEL, ceased on 31 August 2008. This move represents a significant departure from previous arrangements, whereby providers such as WEA, and other groups funded by Peace II who previously provided tutoring services, will no longer be required to do so – that is now carried out principally by the FE colleges who supply the tutors and the materials. It is the view of DEL that non-statutory providers from the voluntary and community sectors and elsewhere are most adept at attracting, engaging with and supporting clients, while colleges can best provide the tuition to help adult learners acquire the necessary qualifications. The new arrangements, therefore, will seek to achieve close collaboration between the two parties.

- 4.23 This new approach, which extends beyond Essential Skills in targeting a range of 'hardest-to-reach' adults, takes the form of a three-year pilot programme for 'Learner Access and Engagement'. The programme will operate throughout Northern Ireland, with all six FE colleges participating. In terms of funding for the new arrangements, a total of £500,000 per annum will be available to support the programme in each college for the three years. Under the arrangements, FE colleges will award

## Part Four: Reaching more learners and increasing participation

learner support contracts on the basis of competitive tender. Organisations tendering to deliver this service will be asked to satisfy specific criteria around staff qualifications, competence and accountability. Importantly, all bidders will also be required to demonstrate a record of successful engagement at community level, including working with people who have literacy and numeracy skills needs.

- 4.24 The learner support service will be targeted at adults not in work who do not hold a qualification at Essential Skills Level 2 or above, who may have barriers to learning and who are not currently enrolled on an FE course. The support provided will include:
- signposting learners to employment related FE courses
  - pre-entry guidance, linked to planning and personal goals
  - advice on progression routes
  - on-course support and assistance to study
  - personal support and encouragement
  - guidance on external and FE support services
  - exit and progression guidance.
- 4.25 The programme is expected to deliver increased adult enrolments in employment-related FE provision and in Essential

Skills provision, as well as increased adult participation from those living in disadvantaged areas. Other likely benefits will include an increase in the number of adults achieving a recognised qualification and progressing to Level 2 provision and employment.

- 4.26 The Department told us that, as a pilot, the budget allocated to support the programme is limited in nature and, thus, not all learners who are eligible for this support may benefit at this time. In addition, each of the various organisations who are awarded contracts by the FE colleges under the new arrangements to provide learner support will have sufficient flexibility to test their own particular approaches to 'learner support' to deliver the programme's objectives. In NIAO's view, the implementation of the programme comes at a crucial time in the evolution of the Essential Skills strategy. To meet the challenging PSA target of 42,000 adult learners achieving a recognised qualification in Essential Skills over the three years to March 2011 will clearly require achievement at an unprecedented level in Northern Ireland. In that regard, the Department told us that the initial progress made by adult learners in the first year of the PSA target has exceeded its projections – see paragraph 5.5.

### The Department is engaging with more employers but more needs to be done to persuade them of the benefits of literacy and numeracy training for their staff

4.27 The Department has found working with employers challenging, particularly in terms of getting a positive response to the message that a workforce with good Essential Skills has a direct, beneficial impact on efficiency and profitability. Presentations, described by the Department as 'high level awareness-raising', have been delivered to a range of organisations:

- All Sector Skills Councils
- Health Boards
- Local Government Authorities
- Invest NI
- Institute of Directors
- NI Food and Drink Association
- Construction Employers' Federation.

4.28 The Department has also implemented a range of initiatives aimed at promoting the benefits of Essential Skills to employers:

- established an employer sub-group of the Essential Skills Committee to provide advice on specific ways to engage employers
- created a Workplace Innovation Fund to pilot new approaches to workplace learning

- funded advisers from 'Business in the Community' to broker Essential Skills provision directly with employers and providers (17 employers were engaged through the project)
- funded learning ambassadors in a number of local councils and public sector organisations
- funded a project with 'GoSkills' to engage learners and learning ambassadors in the taxi and private hire sector in Belfast and the North West
- held discussions with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Centre for Applied Learning (CAL) to develop an NICS-wide Essential Skills pilot CAL programme
- organised a seminar entitled 'Essential Skills – Leading the Way in the Public Sector' to promote the uptake of Essential Skills in Government departments, health trusts, district councils and Education and Library Boards
- held discussions with Sector Skills Councils to bring forward pilot projects to engage employers in Essential Skills through learning ambassador programmes
- produced promotional material for employers, including the issue of 10,000 leaflets to employers, including those in the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) sector, to

## Part Four: Reaching more learners and increasing participation

explain and promote the benefits of Essential Skills qualifications

- worked with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges to broker Essential Skills provision in the health sector
- worked collaboratively with Further Education colleges and Sector Skills Councils to develop tailored provision - for example, the Belfast Metropolitan College and Social Care project, to jointly deliver Essential Skills and NVQ qualifications
- included an employer strand in the Workers' Educational Association contract which resulted in the engagement of seven major employers, including FG Wilson and Translink
- focused PR activity, including case studies, to sell the benefits of Essential Skills to employers
- used the Union Learning Fund for Northern Ireland<sup>16</sup> to promote the uptake of Essential Skills in the workplace.

4.29 Given the high proportion of SMEs in Northern Ireland, we asked the Department what policies it had developed to specifically target the SME sector to improve participation in adult learning and encourage the release of workers for that purpose. It told us that engagement with the SME sector in Northern Ireland remains a challenge because of the extremely

small size of many businesses, which makes the release of staff for training very difficult. In 2007, attempts to raise awareness of Essential Skills by including promotional material in the Federation of Small Business' quarterly newsletter, which is circulated to around 6,000 local firms, elicited a poor response. Employers, including those in the SME sector, continue to be a key target group and opportunities to accommodate small numbers of learners within existing classes are being explored through work with the Sector Skills Councils and the Trade Unions. In addition, workers are encouraged by the Department's promotional campaign to enrol on a course in their own time.

4.30 The Department's analysis of enrolments shows that the number of part-time employees in provision is rising. It has suggested that this appears to indicate that the strategy is targeting those on the lowest rung of the employment ladder. It told us that, in 2003, only 12 per cent of enrolments were from people who were employed part-time, but by 2008 this had risen to almost 45 per cent. The Department considers this a welcome trend, as those part-time employees in Essential Skills provision tend to be low paid, poorly skilled and often women.

4.31 Case Study 5, provided by the Department, shows successful participation and progression in Essential Skills courses from someone already in the workplace. Case Study 6, also provided by the Department, gives an employer's perspective of the ICT element of the programme.

<sup>16</sup> The Union Learning Fund for Northern Ireland was established by DEL in 2002. It aims to promote activity by trade unions in support of the Government's objective of creating a learning society.



### Case Study 5

James has been studying Essential Skills for nearly 3 years. He is currently studying Level 2 numeracy, having previously completed Levels 1 and 2 Literacy and Level 1 Numeracy. James signed up for Essential Skills for various reasons, but primarily to get qualifications to improve his job prospects. He also wanted to prove to himself and others that he could do it. James had previously completed other courses, and decided to sign up after seeing an advertisement in the local newspaper. The venue at the college also suited him well.

James described the qualification as one of the most important aspects of attending the class and something that continued to keep him motivated. He believed it was very important in helping to improve his job prospects.

James currently works for an Education and Library Board, but his ambition is to go to college and become an engineer. He described Essential Skills as having helped him to a great extent. He has become more organised, more confident, and feels he is closer to his dream job. Achieving Levels 1 and 2 Literacy and Level 1 Numeracy has enabled him to understand more about the value of money and made reading a lot easier.

*Case Study supplied by DEL*

### Case Study 6: An employer's perspective

Business focuses on the bottom line. When we were seeking a competitive advantage we realised that our staff could give us that edge. A cross company process to develop the latent talent within our company required us to look at the skills gaps at every level. We recognised that many of our staff had allowed education to drift and skills to be forgotten. However, in this era of technology, the absence of a firm ICT knowledge would effectively be disabling the employee and the company.

The advent of ICT as a third Essential Skill was timely and has provided us with a recognisable qualification that fits business needs. The relationship between the Workplace Training Advisor who assisted us to access provision and funding, the college provider and our staff, is excellent. It proved to be the bedrock for success.

Engaging in the ICT Essential Skills programme has created an enthusiasm and commitment across all grades of staff. Morale, retention and recruitment have all improved while absenteeism has reduced. The atmosphere created by the tutor who delivers on-site is jovial, light-hearted yet focused. This is no formal classroom situation but the course is work-focused, work relevant and absolutely works. Importantly, both the employee and the company contribute time to make this programme work.

Beyond the success for the learners in the ICT class, our business can now report:

- an enhanced competitive edge wherein training is recognised as an important tool in sustaining our competitive advantage;

## Part Four: Reaching more learners and increasing participation

- a radically reduced skills gap;
- the work based delivery of ICT has reaped immediate productivity returns; and
- a shared responsibility between our staff as learners, management and providers to support this training programme.

We recognise our contribution in releasing staff from the workplace will and has produced significant benefits. Our investment is within the latent talent of our workforce. Simply put, all of our staff have greater employability skills now than they previously had. We are proud of their success and equally proud of what we can achieve together with focused training.

*Case Study supplied by DEL*

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## Part Five: Achievements and costs



## Part Five: Achievements and costs

### Key Audit Findings

- The target for the three year period ending in March 2007, that 18,500 people would have achieved a recognised Essential Skills qualification, was 86% achieved.
- Between October 2002 and July 2009, just over 54,000 people enrolled in Essential Skills courses and, of these, over 34,000 people achieved one or more Essential Skills qualifications. Overall, there were some 97,000 course enrolments (people can enrol in more than one class), resulting in almost 57,000 recognised qualifications
- An evaluation of the “*Essential Skills for Living*” strategy, published in 2006, was largely positive but pointed to the need to make greater impact with employers and the hardest-to-reach groups.
- A total of £40 million was spent on the Essential Skills programme over the seven years to March 2009 and a further £30 million is budgeted over the following two years.
- Substantial EU funding, totalling £7.6 million, made available through the Peace II programmes, ended in June 2008.

5.1 This part of our report reviews the progress made since 2002 in increasing participation and achievements in literacy and numeracy learning for adults, and sets out the expenditure on the Essential Skills programme.

which it claimed exceeded the then PSA target, which was:

*“By 2007, 18,500 people will have achieved a recognised qualification in Essential Skills compared to 100 in March 2003.”*

### The Department has made good progress towards meeting its targets for Essential Skills

5.2 In May 2007, the Department published a progress report on the ‘*Success Through Skills*’ programme. This stated that there had been over 55,000 enrolments on Essential Skills courses since the launch of ‘*Essential Skills for Living*’ strategy in October 2002. It reported that, by February 2007, over 21,000 Essential Skills qualifications had been achieved,

5.3 However, there is a significant distinction between the 18,500 **people** referred to in the target, and the over 21,000 **qualifications** attained by learners reported as the achievement. The explanation of that distinction provided by DEL is:

*“An individual may obtain a literacy and numeracy qualification within the programme. If this occurs, this individual is counted twice within the total number of learners. However, individuals who obtain*

*multiple literacy qualifications (more than one level), or multiple numeracy qualifications, are counted only once. As at 31 March 2007, there were 22,162 learners who had achieved an Essential Skills qualification. This equates to 15,929 individuals [people] and 25,489 qualifications”*

Set against its PSA target that 18,500 people would achieve a recognised Essential Skills qualification by 31 March 2007, the outturn figure (15,929) represents a 14 per cent shortfall.

- 5.4 The Department’s progress report stated that the Essential Skills strategy had been performing well and noted that a challenging PSA target had been set for the 2007-08 financial year, i.e. by 31 March 2008, DEL would provide support for the achievement of 10,500 Essential Skills qualifications. This represented a 10 per cent increase over the previous year’s achievements. The Department told us that the number of achievements at that date was 12,470 Literacy and Numeracy and 204 ICT qualifications, which surpassed the target.

- 5.5 The PSA target in DEL’s current Corporate Plan 2008-2011 in relation to Essential Skills is that in the three-year period ending in March 2011, 42,000 adult learners will have achieved a recognised qualification. The Department told us that the initial progress made in the first year of the PSA target has exceeded its projections (12,852 adult learners with a qualification against a target of 11,950).

- 5.6 The Varney Review of the Competitiveness of Northern Ireland (see paragraph 2.14) recommended that in its forthcoming review of ‘Success Through Skills’, DEL might wish to examine, in particular, the effectiveness of its policies to tackle the lack of basic skills and the balance of resources assigned to deal with them; the aim being to ensure that the delivery of basic skills is prioritised.

### **Worthwhile literacy gains have been made by adults attending Essential Skills courses**

- 5.7 The figures provided by DEL in relation to Essential Skills enrolments and qualifications, since the Programme began in October 2002, are outlined in **Figure 6:**

## Part Five: Achievements and costs

**Figure 6: Enrolments and achievements by academic year**

Academic Year	People No.	Enrolments No.	People No.	Qualifications No.	%
October 2002 - 31 July 2003	2,562	4,018	195	316	8%
1 August 2003 - 31 July 2004	5,203	9,172	1,908	3,445	38%
1 August 2004 - 31 July 2005	6,924	12,210	3,010	5,463	45%
1 August 2005 - 31 July 2006	8,796	15,621	5,404	9,697	62%
1 August 2006 – 31 July 2007	8,453	16,561	6,953	12,428	75%
1 August 2007 – 31 July 2008	10,418	19,678	9,165	15,013	76%
1 August 2008 – 31 July 2009	11,896	19,848	7,397	10,628	54%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>54,252</b>	<b>97,108</b>	<b>34,032</b>	<b>56,990</b>	<b>59%</b>

Source: DEL and the Awarding Bodies

Note: The last column shows the qualifications achieved, each year, as a percentage of enrolments in that year. However, it should be noted that some qualifications may, in fact, relate to enrolments in the previous academic year, but these cannot easily be identified.

5.8 The split across the two main religious denominations shows that a higher percentage of those enrolled in an Essential Skills course were Roman Catholics (48 per cent) than Protestants (41 per cent), where community background was known. Thirty one per cent of learners were unemployed, of whom almost half fell within the 16-19 age band (see **Figure 7**). Some 36 per cent of enrolments were registered as being in part-time employment, where employment status was known<sup>17</sup>.

5.9 An analysis correlating the 'Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure' against the ward area in which the participant lives, based on postcodes, shows that 31 per cent (where the

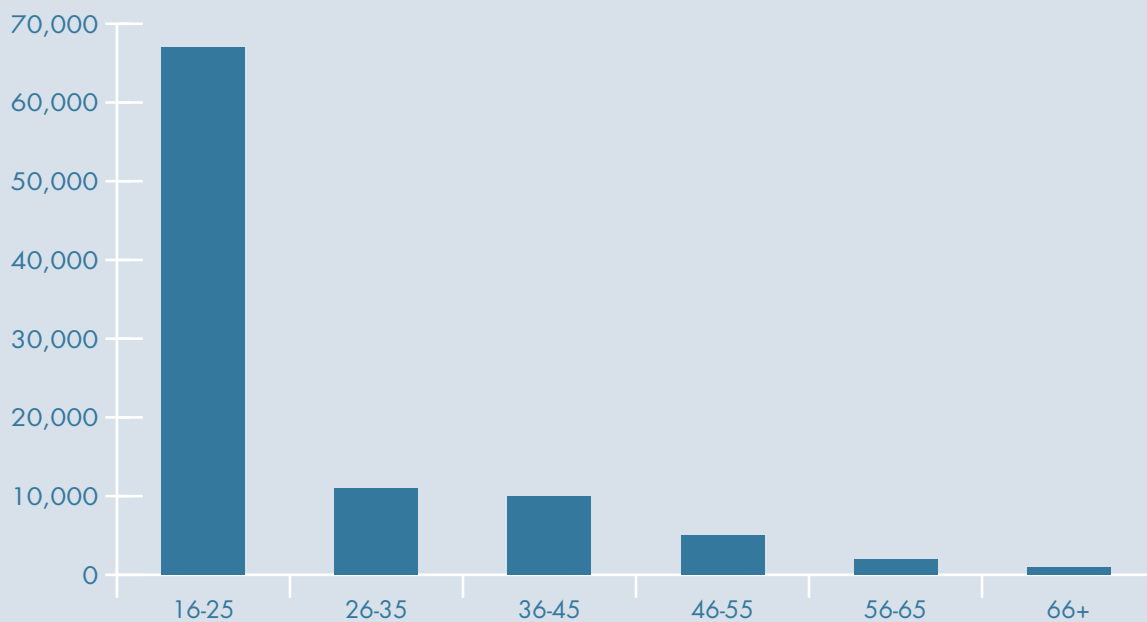
postcode is known) of all Essential Skills enrolments were from the most deprived areas.

### An evaluation of the Essential Skills strategy, published in 2006, was generally positive

5.10 An evaluation<sup>18</sup> of the Essential Skills strategy was published in October 2006. This assessed the progress made and considered the most effective strategy for the future. Overall, the evaluation was generally positive, concluding that Essential Skills had got off to a very strong start and was on track to achieve or exceed its targets. The research which underpinned the appraisal also demonstrated that participants

<sup>17</sup> In 26 per cent of enrolments, the employment status was unknown.

<sup>18</sup> 'Appraisal of Essential Skills for Living' – A Report prepared for DEL by Consultants, October 2006

**Figure 7: Enrolments by age band (2003–2008)**

Source: DEL

had benefited considerably from the learning experience and that the impacts achieved addressed the priorities of a number of Government departments. The consultants' report highlighted the need for DEL to engage more employers in the Essential Skills agenda and pointed out that while performance in the first three years had been impressive, there were still an estimated 150,000 people in the population with Essential Skills needs (not including those who had emerged from school education with Essential Skills deficiencies during the period). The research suggested that the hardest-to-reach groups, such as unemployed males and the most socially excluded groups in society, were being engaged by Essential

Skills. However, the report pointed out that over time, as the overall target population decreased, it was likely that the remaining target population would become harder to reach. This suggested that the emphasis of provision would need to shift more towards community and outreach provision, using innovative approaches to engage the most disengaged client groups.

5.11 The evaluation report included a number of recommendations:

- **employer engagement** - further work would be necessary to identify the barriers to employers signing up and supporting employees, to

## Part Five: Achievements and costs

identify good practice elsewhere and to identify the key selling messages that would encourage employers to engage.

- **promotional campaign** - DEL should work with the Department for Education and Skills and partners across the UK to ensure that 'Gremlins' would be continued in the medium term. This should be supplemented by a Northern Ireland promotional campaign, to:
  - incorporate the key selling messages about self-improvement, family and social confidence;
  - target adult female family members as key influencers;
  - target businesses and people in employment to encourage workplace engagement;
  - enrol champions and 'graduates' to promote Essential Skills; and
  - use real life experiences (e.g. case studies) to connect with the target groups.
- **tutor development and support** – this should be a priority, to ensure that capacity and capability continues to meet demand and need. The programmes of tutor development and support should include:
  - tutor network, to supplement the Learning and Skills Development Agency portal and provide opportunities for knowledge sharing and dissemination of good practice;
  - a shadowing and placement programme for newly qualified tutors, to enable them to learn from more experienced tutors and accelerate the rate at which they achieve full confidence and flexibility;
  - a coordinated Continuous Professional Development programme that offers all tutors the opportunity to learn new and relevant skills and to experience new approaches to Essential Skills delivery; and
  - ring-fence the administration funding provided to colleges to ensure it is spent on providing dedicated administrative support.
- **increase community and outreach provision** - to maximise penetration into the hardest-to-reach groups, new and innovative approaches would be required to engage people in their communities.
- **linked programmes** - DEL should consider further exploration of:
  - tripartite awards – literacy, numeracy and ICT;
  - increased use of ICT to encourage participation;
  - combination of Essential Skills with other key subjects; and



- family learning projects – especially focused on fathers as a means of reaching the unemployed male target group.

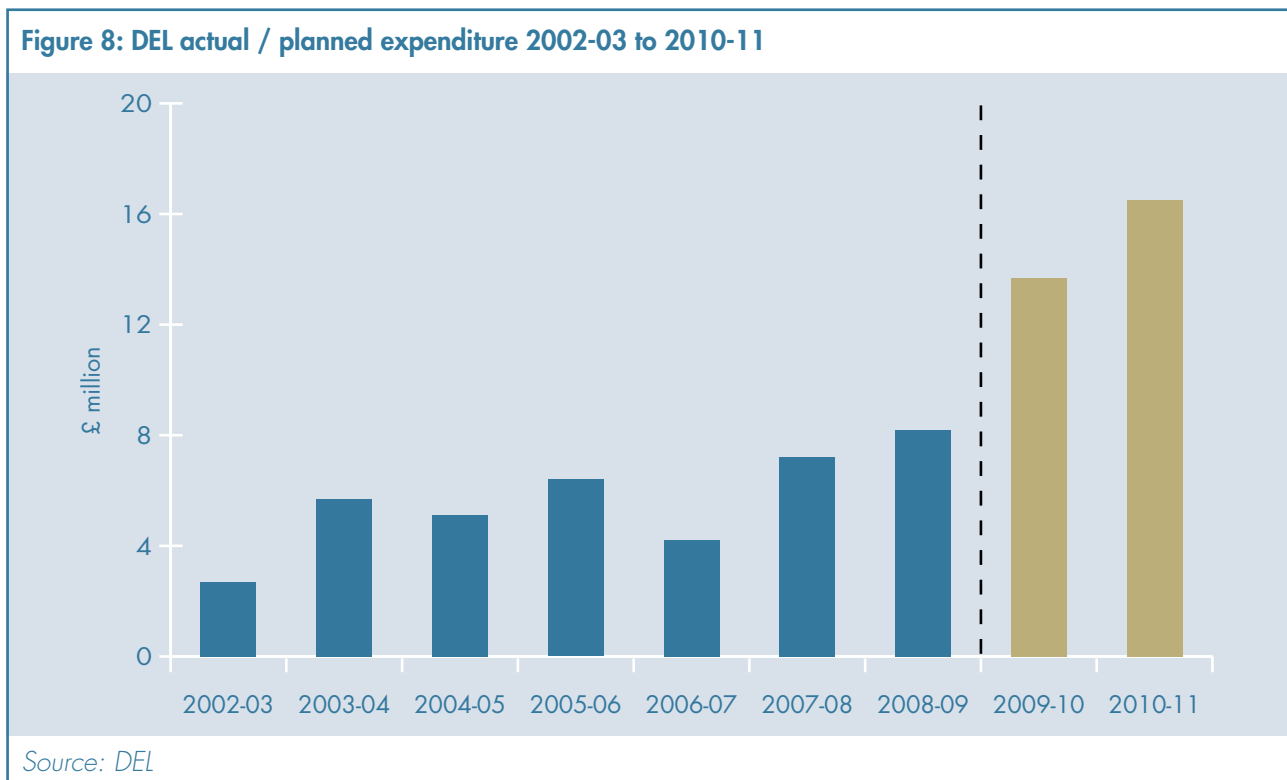
- **Jobs and Benefits Office development** - the Essential Skills team in DEL should work with colleagues in the Employment Service to develop and implement a programme of training for JBO advisers. This should be supplemented by the provision of an easy to use database which details all the different Essential Skills learning opportunities and locations available.

The progress made in implementing these recommendations is set out at **Appendix 3**.

- 5.12 The Department told us that “the positive start identified by the consultants has been built upon and their recommendations used as the base for a diverse range of engagement at all levels to promote engagement with Essential Skills in the workplace and community.”

### There has been a large increase in resources devoted to literacy and numeracy services in Northern Ireland

- 5.13 Between 2002-03 and 2008-09, expenditure by DEL on Essential Skills totalled nearly £40 million. A significant increase in resources is planned up to 2010-2011, as outlined in **Figure 8**:



## Part Five: Achievements and costs

5.14 The Department told us that the additional allocation in 2008-09 represents increased funding in excess of £1.5 million to the Further Education colleges to address increased Essential Skills provision. The colleges' budgets for Essential Skills are scheduled to increase further in both 2009-10 and 2010-11. In addition, the planned expenditure on Essential Skills within the Learner Access and Engagement pilot programme (see paragraph 4.22) for those years is approximately £1 million per annum.

5.15 In addition to expenditure by DEL, EGSA and Proteus (see paragraph 5.16) have been allocated resources from the EU Peace II and Peace II extension programmes. In the period up to October 2006, EGSA disbursed funding of some £5.9 million from a total budget of £9 million, securing 7,235 enrolments and 5,576 qualifications. We noted, however, that DEL's Essential Skills database shows 6,044 enrolments and 3,536 achievements. The Department has suggested that the difference is likely to be attributable to the fact that a number of the projects funded by EGSA were not delivering Essential Skills but other courses such as ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and courses for people with learning difficulties. The Department has also pointed out that EGSA achievements are likely to cover learners who have achieved multiple levels of qualifications in literacy and numeracy. The Awarding Bodies cannot break down data to show achievements against individual EGSA-funded projects (there were approximately 108 projects) making

it difficult to establish a precise picture of their contribution against the PSA target.

5.16 Proteus provides support and assistance in an extensive range of European programmes and is an Intermediary Funding Body for the Peace II programme. Since assuming responsibility for the Essential Skills element of the Peace II extension in 2006, Proteus has been allocated £1.7 million funding from which there have been 612 enrolments and 163 achievements. Again, there might be multiple levels of qualifications given that the same issues with the awarding bodies apply to Proteus. These achievement figures have been provided to the Department by the Awarding Bodies and are regarded by it as robust.

5.17 Case studies 7 and 8 below are examples of learners who have successfully participated in Essential Skills courses funded by Proteus.

### Case Study 7

Craig described himself as a "star pupil" when he moved from Paisley, near Glasgow, to Belfast at the age of 13. In Belfast, however, he noticed a big difference in the regime in his new secondary school. In his previous school, he had nine periods each day and, on average, an hour and a half homework per evening, compared with six periods and two hours homework per week. As a child, Craig initially revelled in the new, comparatively relaxed atmosphere. Having already suffered the mental health consequences of having witnessed a traumatic incident, the effects of this, combined with his boredom in class, led to him being regarded as a disruptive

pupil. Significantly, Craig was excluded from the English class.

He left school with GCSEs in Science, Maths and French and went on to study Art and Design, where he achieved an intermediate GNVQ. He embarked on an advanced course but did not feel motivated to continue because at that stage he did not regard a career in art as potentially lucrative. He left to pursue a career as a chef, gaining another NVQ and subsequently working in a number of Belfast restaurants.

Personal issues led to Craig leaving catering and after a short spell of working for a Belfast company, first on general mail duties and then in computer design, he suffered a protracted period of sickness. Craig also found himself as the carer of his two children.

Craig's mother works with the Mothers and Toddlers Group at her local community centre where she heard of an Essential Skills course in English that was struggling to attract pupils. She encouraged Craig to enrol and he immediately felt comfortable in the informal atmosphere of the learning environment and its flexibility in adapting to different places of learning – *"The teacher's style makes us feel she is more part of our small group than a teacher. I have got so much out of it – it represents a whole new approach to learning."*

Craig will have achieved his Level 2 Essential Skills qualification before the course finishes at the end of June. From here, he intends to pursue an Open University 'Openings' course in psychology before embarking on his ambition of becoming an academic in Irish Renaissance Studies.

### Case Study 8

Fiona left school with GCSEs in English and Business Studies. Her favourite subject was Art and she was regarded as excellent at drawing. She was, however, deterred from pursuing the subject when she only achieved an 'E' because she had not completed all the coursework. Fiona never liked Maths and in primary school was never taught her 'times tables'.

On leaving school, Fiona went to Birmingham where she worked in a bar before having her first child at the age of 19. After returning to Belfast, she had a number of jobs, first in printing and then, in pursuit of her ambition to work with children, she gained a qualification through the Northern Ireland Pre-school Playgroup Association and worked in a crèche.

As a consequence of personal circumstances, Fiona was encouraged by her mother to attend a 'Mind and Me' course at her local community centre, which addressed mental health issues. While there she met Vanessa who was preparing to run an Essential Skills course in English. In spite of having gained a 'B' in English at GCSE, Fiona was attracted to the course because she felt she did not have the basic skills to write letters and to know how to punctuate sentences and form paragraphs. She also wanted to be in a position to help her son with his homework and to encourage him in his learning.

Fiona had previously been motivated to enrol in a psychology course but after travelling into the City centre had decided against it. The main attraction of the Essential Skills course was its proximity to her home and the size of the class (6), and also Vanessa's style of teaching – *"She treats us as adults and doesn't make us feel stupid if we ask a question."*

## Part Five: Achievements and costs

Fiona wants to be a psychologist and the Essential Skills course has given her the confidence to prepare to enrol in an Open University course on the subject. She would be prepared to pursue a maths class, but only if it was essential to the achievement of her psychologist ambitions. The Essential Skills course will finish at the end of June when Peace 2 funding ceases, but by then Fiona will have achieved her Level 2 qualification.

*(Contacts for Case Studies provided by Proteus)*

5.18 A significant feature of the Essential Skills projects funded through the EU Peace programmes is that they must, in addition to including provision for addressing Essential Skills, satisfy other requirements, such as building positive relationships between communities in order to promote peace and reconciliation. As a result, courses are provided with a very diverse range of themes in a broad spectrum of locations, as illustrated in **Figure 9**.

**Figure 9: Examples of community and voluntary groups who have provided Essential Skills courses**

Organisation	Description	Qualifications Target	Address
Families Acting for Innocent Victims (FAIR)	Plans to target victims affected by the conflict living in the South Armagh area. Will enhance employability of victims and equip the users to recognise and take advantage of the opportunities in the changing labour market.	20 Essential Skills qualifications in Numeracy and Literacy, at various levels and tailored for each trainee	Markethill, Co Armagh
Greenway Women's Group	To provide a dedicated 'learner focused' Adult Essential Skills programme for local women providing holistic Essential Skills and ICT training in an informal, flexible learning environment with on-site crèche provision.	24 Essential Skills qualifications at various levels in Numeracy, Literacy and ICT.	Cregagh Road, Belfast
Londonderry Chamber of Commerce	To engage with employees with low levels of qualifications in the retail and hospitality sectors. It will engage with employees from both sides of the community and will aim to increase competency levels and promote an ethos of mutual understanding and lifelong learning in the workplace.	36 Essential Skills and ICT qualifications as well as OCR qualifications in cultural diversity	Bishop Street, Londonderry
Upper Andersonstown Community Group	To deliver an Essential Skills programme to 40 local people per year over two years. The project will target those in need, including ex-prisoners, victims, able and disabled people, the settled and travelling communities in the Andersonstown/ Glen Road areas.	60 Numeracy, Literacy and ICT at various levels	Andersonstown, Belfast
Positive Steps Community Centre/ Cookstown & District Women's Group	To provide Essential Skills training in a neutral, friendly environment to promote self worth, self being and self confidence.	72 Essential Skills and other qualifications	Park Avenue, Cookstown.

*Source: Proteus*

5.19 Funding through the EU Peace II programme ceased with effect from June 2008. At present, the Department is exploring the potential afforded by some 55 European Structural Fund projects which could go some way toward bridging the resource gap left following the end of the Peace II extension package.

### Inspections, carried out up to March 2007, indicated that the quality of training provision was improving

5.20 Essential Skills qualifications have been developed by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. They have been accepted by the other regulatory bodies in the UK and are included in the National Qualifications Framework. Essential Skills qualifications can be read across to different frameworks within the UK and the Republic of Ireland (see paragraph 3.5).

5.21 Training providers are required to ensure that tutors meet the standards set by the Department. This includes a requirement that all new tutors need to have both a teaching qualification and subject specific qualification in English or Maths at the appropriate level.

5.22 The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has worked closely with the Department throughout the evolution of the Essential Skills strategy. 'Improving Quality and Raising Standards' is the linchpin of the ETI's approach to inspection of

Essential Skills in further education which focuses on three key elements:

- (1) standards and outcomes
- (2) quality of teaching, training and learning
- (3) leadership and management.

5.23 For example, within 'Standards and Outcomes', an inspection will address:

- **responses of learners** – how successful are the learners in working independently to improve and extend their own learning?
- **standards achieved** – what is the standard of the learners' work in relation to their ability?
- **progression** – how far does the progress of the learners build on their prior achievement and match their potential?
- **retention rates and results** – what success has there been over time in achieving a high level of retention and good standards in external accreditation?

5.24 The inspection approach places a great deal of importance on the need for, and quality of, individual assessments for each learner. These would typically embrace areas of individual weaknesses, experience at school and take account of interests and hobbies.

## Part Five: Achievements and costs

- 5.25 A typical Further Education college inspection includes an Essential Skills element and Inspectors consider the timetable in order to observe classes provided by the college in a range of settings, including workplace; in the community; in local schools; and in the college itself. There are currently three Inspectors who specialise in Essential Skills and in the period September 2003 to March 2006, Essential Skills provision in 12 out of the then 17 colleges was inspected. There were no inspections of Further Education colleges in the 2007-08 academic year, in order to allow the new amalgamated college arrangements to settle (the 17 colleges were merged into six new bodies).
- 5.26 The Department told us, however, that the delivery of Essential Skills continued to be inspected by ETI in other sectoral inspections, for example, Training for Success, ApprenticeshipsNI, and Jobskills. More recently, the Department commissioned ETI to undertake an evaluation of priority skills areas within the FE sector. This was being undertaken between January and June 2009. An assessment of Essential Skills provision comprises an integral component of the assessment.
- 5.27 In the course of the early inspections of Essential Skills provision, the Inspectorate identified a number of aspects which required considerable improvement. As a consequence, Inspectors worked closely with the Learning and Skills Development Agency to help colleges improve standards and ensure that improvements were made through a series of monitoring visits.
- 5.28 We reviewed the inspection reports of 12 (pre-merger) colleges over the period September 2003 to March 2006 and found a number of recurring issues that required improvement:
- the need for better strategic management and leadership
  - questions about quality of, or variability in, teaching
  - poor retention/success rates
  - inadequate monitoring, review and evaluation arrangements.
- 5.29 However, follow-up inspection reports, completed between November 2004 and March 2007, revealed a substantial improvement in most of these areas, with only two colleges still requiring improvement in relation to teaching issues, and one requiring improvement in relation to retention/success rates. A later emphasis on monitoring and evaluation showed that there was a need for improvement in this area in seven of the (pre-merger) colleges (i.e. four of those originally identified as deficient and three others).
- 5.30 In respect of one college, a 2004 inspection report noted:
- “The quality of the essential skills provision in the Institute has a few strengths which can be built upon; there are significant*
-

*shortcomings in most of the important areas, but particularly in the management and leadership and in the quality of teaching and learning. Urgent and radical action is required if the Institute is to meet as fully as possible the needs of the existing adult learners and to respond effectively and efficiently to the needs in the local area”.*

- 5.31 By contrast, the conclusion in the final follow-up inspection in November 2006 noted:

*“The monitoring inspection visits confirm that the Institute has made very good progress in addressing the key issues for improvement identified in the original inspection report and the provision now demonstrates major strengths. The Inspectorate is confident that the actions implemented will result in sustained improvements in the quality of their provision. No further monitoring visits are required.”*

While this was an extreme case in terms of the depth of criticism initially levelled at the college, it serves to demonstrate the value of the inspection process as a means of driving improvement in this area of provision.

- 5.32 A number of reports highlight the hard work of the colleges’ Essential Skills coordinators in developing and maintaining effective links with external organisations including community organisations, employers and local primary schools and note the beneficial

impact this has had on increasing the number of adult enrolments.

- 5.33 We asked the Department whether, given the changes that have occurred in the delivery of Essential Skills since 2002 and the re-organisation of the colleges themselves, it had considered commissioning a thematic inspection review of this area of provision. It said that, while it had not requested a thematic review, it had commissioned inspections on a range of issues directly related to Essential Skills in FE colleges which are currently being progressed by the Inspectorate. It also said that the Inspectorate has examined and reported upon Essential Skills delivery (see paragraph 5.26) within the sectoral and priority skills reports that it has undertaken.





# Appendices

## Appendix 1: IALS International Comparisons (1996) (Paragraph 2.10)

### Prose Literacy Bands

	Band 1 (%)	Band 2 (%)	Band 3 (%)	Bands 4/5 (%)
Poland	43	35	20	3
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>15</b>
Republic of Ireland	23	30	34	14
Great Britain	22	30	31	17
United States	21	26	32	21
Switzerland (German)	19	36	36	9
New Zealand	18	27	35	19
Belgium (Flanders)	18	28	39	14
Switzerland (French)	18	34	39	10
Australia	17	27	37	19
Canada	17	26	35	23
Germany	14	34	38	13
Netherlands	11	30	44	15
Sweden	8	20	40	32

### Key to skill bands

- Band 1: people with very poor literacy skills;
- Band 2: people who can deal only with simple material;
- Band 3: people with roughly the skill level required for successful secondary school completion and college entry; and
- Bands 4/5: people who demonstrate command of "higher order information processing skills".
-

## Appendix 2: Evaluation of Gremlins campaign (Paragraph 4.4)

This appendix summarises an evaluation of the Gremlins campaign which was completed by the Department's 'Analytical Services Branch' in December 2005. The evaluation was based on information provided by the PR Company employed by the Department at that time; progress reports from DEL; and a MORI survey which involved over 1,000 face-to-face interviews

### **Raise overall awareness of the need for Essential Skills**

- Findings from post campaign research indicates a high level of awareness, understanding and positive approval e.g. total awareness – 75%
- Awareness levels highest among the 15-24 and 25-34 age categories – 94%
- 70% of the public rated the campaign as extremely effective
- 57% of respondents had heard of the term 'Essential Skills'
- Key messages have been effectively communicated through the Gremlin brand
- Positive attitude to Gremlins and current ads – virtually all groups felt they were effective

### **Ensure learners identify they have an Essential Skills need and admit it to themselves**

- Advertisements have proved extremely popular
- Post-Helpline research indicates that callers have expressed empathy with both the content scenarios played out in adverts – 99% of callers could relate to the gremlins ads
- 70% of respondents, who were aware of the advertising campaign, found the campaign effective in highlighting learning issues to learners

### **Reassure learners they are able to improve their Essential Skills and enable them to take action and be clear about how this can improve their lives**

- Post-Helpline research illustrates that the campaign is clearly effective at prompting those who called the helpline into action
- The advertising campaign has adopted a direct response strategy to allow potential learners to call the helpline or access information from the website

## Appendix 2: Evaluation of Gremlins campaign (Paragraph 4.4)

- PR activity has highlighted the benefit of taking action through case studies and testimonials
- The objective was embraced with the 'Learning Works' logo
- The advertising campaign has emphasised to the learner the importance of Essential Skills in everyday activities such as DIY, home finance, helping children and sales shopping
- Omnibus research suggested that learners found the learning environment more conducive than school
- All learners were satisfied with the course tutors and found they were key to the learning experience

### **Value for Money – Achievement of objectives and targets**

- From the information provided above, it is clear that all project objectives have been sufficiently addressed and, from the perspective of achievement of objectives, the project is providing VFM
  - The Department has met its interim target of supporting 25,000 adults improve their Essential Skills by March 2005
-

## Appendix 3: Evaluation of Essential Skills strategy (October 2006) – progress made in implementing recommendations (Paragraph 5.11)

This appendix is based on details provided by the Department for Employment and Learning on the progress made in implementing recommendations from a consultants' report, published in October 2006, which evaluated the Essential Skills strategy

<b>Consultants' recommendations</b>	<b>Departmental comments at February 2009</b>
<p><b>Employer Engagement</b> Further work would be necessary to identify the barriers to employers signing up and supporting employees, to identify good practice elsewhere and to identify the key selling messages that would encourage employers to engage.</p>	<p>The Department, through a series of pilots with the Union Learning Fund and Alliance of Sector Skills Councils<sup>19</sup>, has sought to address these issues and is actively engaged in promoting Essential Skills with both parties.</p>
<p><b>Promotional Campaign</b> DEL should work with DFES and partners across the UK to ensure that 'Gremlins' would be continued in the medium term. This should be supplemented by a Northern Ireland promotional campaign, to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• incorporate the key selling messages about self-improvement, family and social confidence;</li> <li>• target adult female family members as key influencers;</li> <li>• target businesses and people in employment to encourage workplace engagement;</li> <li>• enrol champions and 'graduates' to promote Essential Skills; and</li> <li>• use real life experiences (e.g. case studies) to connect with the target groups.</li> </ul>	<p>The 'Gremlins Campaign' was maintained to January 2008. From September 2008, a bespoke NI campaign was successfully introduced which allows targeted promotional activity across a range of delivery channels.</p> <p>Incorporated within the new 'know-how' campaign.</p> <p>Incorporated within ongoing promotional activities.</p> <p>Incorporated within ongoing promotional activities.</p> <p>Incorporated within Union Learning and Sector Skills Council activity and support.</p> <p>Incorporated within ongoing promotional activities.</p>

<sup>19</sup> Sector Skills Councils play a crucial role in the implementation of "Success Through Skills". The Councils ensure the views of employers in their sector are centre stage by providing high quality labour market intelligence to underpin recommendations to Northern Ireland Government on changes to skills policy and qualifications reform.

## Appendix 3: Evaluation of Essential Skills strategy (October 2006) – progress made in implementing recommendations (Paragraph 5.11)

Consultants' recommendations	Departmental comments at February 2009
<p><b>Tutor Development and Support</b></p> <p>Tutor development should be a priority, to ensure that capacity and capability continues to meet demand and need. The programmes of tutor development and support should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tutor network, to supplement the Learning and Skills Development Agency<sup>20</sup> (LSDA) portal and provide opportunities for knowledge sharing and dissemination of good practice;</li> <li>• a shadowing and placement programme for newly qualified tutors, to enable them to learn from more experienced tutors and accelerate the rate at which they achieve full confidence and flexibility;</li> <li>• a coordinated Continuous Professional Development programme that offers all tutors the opportunity to learn new and relevant skills and to experience new approaches to Essential Skills delivery; and</li> <li>• ring-fence the administration funding provided to colleges to ensure it is spent on providing dedicated administrative support.</li> </ul>	<p>In place through the Learning and Skills Development Agency co-ordinator meetings which provide an effective mechanism for identifying issues, sharing good practice and organisational development.</p> <p>Addressed through Level 4 tutor education providers who have developed opportunities for student tutors to gain experience / understanding of teaching and learning across a wide range of contexts.</p> <p>Through the LSDA, a programme of professional support has been designed for existing and new Essential Skills tutors to enhance their skills in teaching and assessing literacy and numeracy and, more recently, ICT, to the post-16 sector.</p> <p>Superseded by the incorporation of Essential Skills funding within the further education funding methodology.</p>
<p><b>Increase Community and Outreach Provision</b></p> <p>To maximise penetration into the hardest-to-reach groups, new and innovative approaches would be required to engage people in their communities.</p>	<p>Incorporated within the 'Learner Access and Engagement' pilot.</p>

20 The Learning and Skills Development Agency is part of the Learning and Skills Network which is an independent not-for-profit organisation committed to making a difference to learning and skills. It aims to do this by delivering quality improvement and staff development programmes that support specific government initiatives. This is achieved through research, development, staff training and consultancy and by supplying services directly to any organisation with an interest in high quality education and training.

Consultants' recommendations	Departmental comments at February 2009
<p><b>Linked Programmes</b></p> <p>DEL should consider further exploration of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tripartite awards – literacy, numeracy and ICT;</li> <li>• increased use of ICT to encourage participation;</li> <li>• combination of Essential Skills with other key subjects; and</li> <li>• family learning projects – especially focused on fathers as a means of reaching the unemployed male target group.</li> </ul>	<p>The introduction of ICT as a third Essential Skill requires all participants to have achieved Entry Level 3 numeracy and literacy to ensure the learner can achieve the optimum learning experience. The ICT pilot has resulted in over 1,100 learners enrolled on the pilot at February 2009.</p> <p>The contextualisation of learning materials allows Essential Skills to be incorporated into a range of other vocational areas.</p> <p>This is addressed through co-operation with the Department of Education and the Education and Library Boards through their Extended Schools project Management Board. The Department is also represented on DENI's Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce. A forum to promote Essential Skills through family learning has also been set up.</p>
<p><b>Jobs and Benefits Office Development</b></p> <p>The Essential Skills team in DEL should work with colleagues in the Employment Service to develop and implement a programme of training for JBO advisers. This should be supplemented by the provision of an easy to use database which details all the different Essential Skills learning opportunities and locations available.</p>	<p>A major programme of activity to engage with the JBOs is planned for delivery from April 2009. This will ensure a consistent and coherent access to, and promotion of, Essential Skills to all DEL JBO staff and their clients. This will be supplemented with a one stop contact which is under development.</p>

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