

Riding the Waves of Policy?

The Case of Basic Skills in Adult and Community Learning in England

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**Submitted for special issue of JVET for ESRC
TLRP project: *The impact of policy on learning
and inclusion in the learning and skills sector.***

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on data from secondary sources and in-depth interviews to explore the question: What is the impact of policy on teaching, learning, assessment and inclusion in Adult and Community Learning (ACL) *Skills for Life (SfL)* provision? In particular, it focuses on the government's use of five policy steering mechanisms - funding, inspection, planning, targets and policy initiatives (in this case *SfL*). The design of the study¹ allows us to use evidence from four sets of interviews with teachers, learners and managers of ACL in eight sites of learning (four in London and four in the North East) over a period of twenty-six months of considerable policy turbulence. We argue first, that there is a symbiotic relationship between ACL and *SfL* provision and second, that while the combined effects of targets and funding have the most powerful effects on tutor and manager actions, inspection, planning and tutors' and managers' own professional values also have an important role in shaping the teaching of literacy and numeracy in ACL sites. We conclude by suggesting that professionals at the local level should be allowed to play a greater role in *SfL* policy-making to ensure effective policy and practice.

INTRODUCTION – WAVES OF POLICY

Adult and community education has a long and proud history in Britain with national government often playing only a minor role in its funding, promotion and organisation (Fieldhouse and Associates 1996). Compulsory schooling and higher education have traditionally taken the lion's share of policy attention and national education budgets in this country. From the 1970s, however, government took a greater interest in the education and training of adults, as the concept of lifelong learning filtered into international policy documents (Field 2000). In England, the incoming New Labour Government supported the case for lifelong learning through its publication of *The Learning Age* Green Paper in 1998 (DfEE 1998). Adult and community learning (ACL), which had been declining since 1992 as a result of its "non Schedule 2" funding status², now seemed to be considered important enough to be given a bigger slice of national education resources. The establishment of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in 2001, which took over responsibility for funding all types of post-16 provision outside higher education, not only brought ACL into the fold alongside further education and work-based learning, but also softened the division between Schedule 2 and non Schedule 2 funding arrangements.

A particular focus of the New Administration's approach to lifelong learning was the promotion of higher levels of adult basic skills, which were seen as important for both individual quality of life and international competitiveness (DfEE 1998). A high-profile working group under the chairmanship of Sir Claus Moser was commissioned to examine the issue and published *A Fresh Start* in 1999 (Moser 1999). The report claimed that seven million people³ in England had poor literacy and numeracy skills and called for urgent national action to tackle the issue. The Government's response was *Skills for Life: The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills* (DfEE 2001). This was not the first time that national government attention had been focused on this area. The 'Right to Read' movement, which emerged in the

1970s as a grassroots campaign, went on to receive national government funding and to spawn a national unit - the Adult Literacy Resource Agency (which was later to become the Basic Skills Agency) – to champion adult literacy provision (Hamilton 1996). The difference between the government response in the 1970s and in 2001 is one of scale and reach. The government financial support for *SfL* in its first year (£313m) was huge⁴ in comparison with the £1m allocated by the DES in 1974, even allowing for inflation, and its strategy is far more comprehensive and targeted in its objectives (Hamilton and Hillier 2006).

The *SfL* strategy includes a national promotional campaign; the setting of national standards for literacy, numeracy and ESOL; the development of core curricula, learning materials and national qualifications, based on the new standards; new qualifications for initial teacher training and professional development for teachers; challenging national targets (e.g. 1.5 million adults to achieve national certification in literacy and numeracy by 2007 and 2.25 million by 2010); ring-fenced funding for free literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision; screening, initial assessment, diagnostic assessment and Individual Learning Plans for all learners; an *Employers' Toolkit* to encourage employers to identify and support employees with basic skills needs; and the establishment of a National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) located in the Institute of Education, University of London. *SfL* also prioritises the needs of certain groups – unemployed people and benefit claimants, prisoners and those supervised in the community, public-sector, low-skilled, young employees and “*other groups at risk of exclusion, including speakers of other languages and those in disadvantaged communities*” (DfES 2003:7).

SfL thus represents a significant, long-term government commitment to improving adult basic skills, to social inclusion goals and to those who have either failed in or been failed by their schooling. For these reasons, we chose to include *SfL* provision

in ACL in our ESRC Teaching and Learning Programme Research Project, 'Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the Learning and Skills Sector'. One of the central questions in our research is how the government's use of five policy steering mechanisms - funding, targets, inspection, planning and initiatives - affects teaching, learning, assessment and inclusion (see Steer *et al.*, 2007 for a discussion of the role these policy levers play in current government policy in England).

Much has been written on the *SfL* strategy and its impact on teachers, learners and adult basic skills provision, including research commissioned and undertaken by the NRDC (see www.nrdc.org.uk). This paper's modest contribution to a burgeoning body of literature in this area is to examine recent national policy on ACL and *SfL* over a period of two years (2004-2006) through the experiences of teachers, learners and managers in eight ACL learning sites in London and the North East. We argue that there is a symbiotic relationship between ACL and *SfL* developments, although government policy sees them as separate for the purposes of targets, funding and planning, and that it is necessary to look at how policy mechanisms combine in order to understand their effects on provision. Moreover, we suggest that for staff there are further professional drivers – meeting individual learners' needs, creating the environment for learning and developing professional practice in *SfL* - that arguably have at least as important an impact as the official policy levers on learning and inclusion in these ACL sites.

METHODOLOGY

The overall design of our 43 month project, described more fully elsewhere (Coffield *et al.*, 2005) combines interviews with policy makers and other stakeholders in the sector, analysis of policy and data collected from 24 'learning sites'. For this paper we draw primarily on four research visits made between summer 2004 and summer 2006 to each of eight ACL learning sites, four in the North East of England and four

in London. On each visit, we aimed to interview at least one basic skills tutor, one manager and six learners. Staff interviews were semi-structured, lasting on average 40 minutes, with assurances of confidentiality for individuals and their organisations and they have been analysed, site by site, to highlight the factors which interviewees believed had impacted on their practice. In all, 59 interviews were conducted with managers and tutors; and 92 shorter interviews were conducted with learners.

ADULT AND COMMUNITY LEARNING AND SKILLS FOR LIFE – A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

SfL provision is currently available in a wide variety of settings from the more formal, such as further education colleges and prisons, to the distinctly informal - a flat in a housing estate or a room in a bus garage. It is also increasingly embedded within vocational courses in colleges or 'leisure' classes such as floristry or carpentry, as well as being offered as traditional two-hour discrete literacy or numeracy classes in LEA adult education centres and community sites. What is common about *SfL* provision in all of these settings is that it is constrained or supported by the environment in which it is situated. The converse is also true – the learning site is determined by and partially or even wholly dependent on the learners (and therefore funding) that *SfL* provision brings with it. As one manager commented: *'I think there has been a realisation [that], in terms of bottom line, it is a big earner.'* (EM2/4).

For the ACL sites in our sample, there are a number of clear examples of this symbiotic relationship between the ACL setting and *SfL* provision. In Lawnview, for example, which is one of the sites of a large adult community college, the embedding of *SfL* provision within broader adult education courses, such as art and design, ICT or dressmaking, changed the content, delivery and assessment of that provision. While some tutors and managers valued this embedding approach to *SfL*, because it

provided a relevant context in which adults could develop their basic skills and also helped the organisation meet its targets, it was not always seen in such a positive light:

People with dyslexia go towards Art courses because a) they are good at it, b) they are comfortable with it and c) there is no written work to do with it, so they don't have to face that issue. So if you then impose a written or a basic skills component, you will put those people off the courses and the courses won't run, so then what will you have gained? You have set up an embedded basic skills course, but you have actually frightened away the people that you wanted. (LM1/1)

In Junior School Centre, the relationship between traditional ACL provision and discrete *SfL* provision was viewed as vital. One manager here believed that *SfL* learners benefited from being part of a thriving ACL centre where they were not ghettoised and could use broader adult education courses either in parallel with their discrete *SfL* provision, or as a subsequent progression route:

It is nice to work in an organisation where you've got a mixed curriculum and our students can go onto other classes and we can support other students that are having problems in their mainstream classes. (JM1/3)

One manager in Island Estate site pointed to a further benefit of embedding basic skills in ACL courses in floristry and massage, to attract some of the 'hard-to-reach' government priority groups in to *SfL* provision:

...we may attract the learners in on these embedded classes and then they have the courage to say that they have a literacy or numeracy need, and then

they would transfer onto the discrete literacy or numeracy classes. So it is a way of getting people through the door without actually admitting - which is sometimes hard for a lot of people – that they have a basic skills need”.

(IM1/1)

There is a downside to this symbiotic relationship. From 2001 to 2005, when *SfL* funding represented a real increase in the sums spent on adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, ACL sites benefited from higher learner numbers and the funding associated with *SfL*. However, government funding available for ACL was reduced for the academic year 2005/6⁵, as a result of changing government priorities (Smart 2005; McGivney 2005), and our sites reported that they were beginning to feel the effects of the broader ACL funding cuts.

In Lawnview, for example, *SfL* class sizes were increased and, during the second term of 2005/6, because the college had run out of LSC funding, it was not able to enrol new students on to subsidised courses. This meant that potential new *SfL* learners were turned away and told to come back in September when places would be available again. In Junior School Centre individual tutorials with students had been discontinued in 2006 and class sizes were being more carefully scrutinised. In the North East, sites faced substantial budget cuts in 2006, even when they had over-achieved on their financial targets for 2005/6. In all sites, there was evidence of restructuring and reductions in staffing to cut costs and in two sites managers had been asked to take on additional responsibilities without increased remuneration.

At Island Estate the results of regional and local funding cuts were dramatic. The loss of embedded provision meant that this bustling centre, previously offering 32 different classes per week, was only able to offer seven classes in literacy, numeracy

and ESOL in 2006, was open four instead of five days per week and had computer facilities lying idle. As the manager at this centre commented:

We were part of a research project in embedded basic skills, we were a pilot project and it was wonderful and we had such good feedback and we were used as a beacon of good practice in embedding basic skills and now we have had notification from the LSC ... which said that they were no longer funding embedded basic skills. (IM1/2)

Evidence from our eight ACL sites suggests that there can be very positive spin-offs for *SfL* provision which is located alongside broader ACL provision, in terms of recruiting priority group learners, supporting those in ACL provision with basic skills needs and providing both horizontal and vertical progression routes for learners. It also appears, however, that *SfL* provision has suffered indirectly from the reduction in funding for ACL when it is co-located: class sizes and staff workloads have increased, resulting in less individual attention for learners, sometimes delays in enrolment and fewer opportunities for progression. Cutting funding for ACL provision has thus had a direct negative effect on *SfL* learners in our sites, even though literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision is a government priority.

SKILLS FOR LIFE, TARGETS AND FUNDING – A POWERFUL COCKTAIL

Since 2001, the *SfL* strategy has had a huge and unprecedented impact on literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision in all settings, including ACL, although less has been written about the latter (Barton *et al.* 2006). In the eight ACL sites we visited, *SfL* was overwhelmingly viewed as a positive development for three major reasons. Firstly, it has attracted substantial sums of money and relatively stable state funding into a traditionally under-funded area. In the words of one manager: *'This is the first*

time we have had substantial growth.' (GM1/2). Secondly, the strategy has raised the status of basic skills - *'It has put basic skills on the map, on the agenda.'* (JM1/1). Thirdly, the core curricula in literacy, numeracy and ESOL are seen as highly valuable, providing a way of changing and improving practice - *'we have such a lot more direction'* (HT3/3). Another tutor commented: *'It's useful to have a bible at your back.'* (JT1/1).

As Edward *et al.* (2007) discuss, however, both tutors and managers in our sites expressed concern about the pace of change associated with *SfL*:

I can see that if the pace of change carries on at the same level, I could see that the Skills for Life strategy, however good it's supposed to be, will be undermined. (KM3/3)

Many complained of its bureaucratic demands, with one tutor commenting:

I would rather spend more time on preparing for the class thoroughly, and less time on filling in pieces of paper. (HT1/1)

Bureaucracy was seen as eroding teaching and learning time, and encouraging staff turnover. Some of the 'paperwork' referred to by tutors and managers in our ACL sites emanated from the more formalised requirements of *SfL* for schemes of work, lesson plans, initial and diagnostic assessment of learner needs and individual learning plans, which could be seen to be of direct benefit to learners. However, some staff resented the fact that much of this paperwork, while ostensibly created for learners, was in fact often undertaken to satisfy external scrutiny requirements in a climate where professionals are not trusted. One manager expressed the frustrations of many:

As a tutor you've actually got no professional standing. I mean, if a doctor makes a diagnosis and he writes a prescription, he doesn't have to prove that you've got that particular thing. ... For instance, literacy is not 'embedded' unless we've got various referencing, various bits of documents and whatever. You have to x-ray learners' literacy and numeracy needs, whereas you don't have to into the same level on their vocational skills and ability.

(LM2/4)

Moreover, there was a whole swathe of bureaucracy resulting directly from the *SfL* funding methodology and associated targets:

It is quite dependent on the funding, you can't chance it, you can't fight it. We lose a few thousand [pounds], if we don't have whatever form, so you have to do it. We have to make sure that we have all the paperwork that people need.

(LM2/1)

This was particularly burdensome for small ACL sites, with neither the administrative support and management information systems of a college structure, nor, in some cases, the financial expertise to deal with highly complex and ever-changing funding regulations. Often, too, they were working to more than one layer of management or funding providers, each with its different bureaucratic rules and data-capture requirements. There is no doubt that a great deal of time and attention was being diverted from the core business of teaching, learning and assessment into chasing different funding streams and their related targets.

For this reason, we cannot easily separate the individual effects of the policy levers of funding, targets and policy initiatives (in this case *SfL*) in the ACL sites. Their combined effects need to be taken into consideration, as these two quotations from ACL *SfL* practitioners, one a manager and one a tutor, illustrate:

Targets are money to me. The money is with the targets. (GM1/1)

We are target-driven, there are no two ways about that. That is our funding, it is our jobs and the learners' centre, so we have to be mindful of that. If we've not got that, we've not got anything. (FT1/1)

Initially, *SfL* targets were focused more heavily on the enrolment and participation of priority groups of learners - objectives that both ACL and adult basic skills practitioners would recognise and support. ACL and adult basic skills practitioners have a long history of reaching out to non-traditional learners and keenly appreciate the importance of offering targeted and innovative provision to meet learner needs (Hannon *et al.* 2003; Bird and Akerman 2005; Macleod *et al.* 2005). However, the increasing policy emphasis on targets (and therefore funding) linked to national qualifications outcomes has received a more mixed reception and, our evidence suggests, has had some unintended outcomes for learners.

Targets and funding linked to accreditation

In the eight ACL learning sites in our study, there were ambivalent views about the role of the national qualifications in *SfL*. On the one hand, there was a recognition by some tutors and managers that gaining certification could be a real boost for learners:

Entry Level students have a tremendous sense of achievement in passing any kind of official test and they have a piece of paper saying they can do something so, in that way it does have value and it encourages them to carry on. (LT2/3)

This view was corroborated by learners as these three quotations from different sites illustrate:

I would love to do a national test if I am ready. It would give me confidence.

(GL8/3)

I like the idea of getting a certificate. (JL12/3)

I want to see how good I am! (KL6/2)

On the other hand, the national literacy and numeracy tests at Levels 1 and 2 were described as 'narrow', measuring only reading and, to a lesser extent, spelling, while ignoring writing, speaking and listening. The Entry Level qualifications, which involve portfolio building to demonstrate skills achieved over time and which do not require learners to take an examination, were seen to be more educationally sound than the test-based Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications.

More importantly, there was a real concern that accreditation linked to targets and funding had adversely affected both the organisation of provision and the nature of teaching and learning, making it harder to meet learners' individual needs. This recurring theme in our ACL learning sites is illustrated through the words of one *SfL* manager:

I feel that learners are now much more pressurised than they were, because of the funding. Many of our learners don't see getting a certificate as that

important. You know, if they can just read the electricity bill when it comes in, or write a note, that is what they come for. They want to be able to read a story to their child, you know. (HM2/2)

In the London sites, literacy and numeracy classes, which had traditionally been mixed ability, were increasingly being 'graded' – i.e. organised according to Core Curriculum Levels. Tutors and managers in these sites recognised that this innovation had made preparation and teaching easier because the spread of ability in each class was not so broad. However, this way of organising provision also reduced flexibility in timetabling. In Junior School, for example, evening sessions in literacy and numeracy had been reserved for higher-level work, effectively excluding learners at Entry Level. Some tutors suspected that the move to graded classes was not entirely educationally driven:

I think it's to do with the fact that management have got to jump through all sorts of hoops on their own because they have to fulfil the targets from so many different agencies and organisations. I presume that's why it [the change to graded classes] is happening and the end result - the people at the bottom are the students and they're the ones, a lot of them feel very upset about it. (KT3/3)

Managers themselves were often frank about the effects of financial targets linked to accreditation:

We expect to meet our financial targets, but obviously then, for the LSC, they are only counting people for the national tests who are successful in terms of accreditation, so obviously that driver has changed our curriculum offer. It is not always what the learners want necessarily: learners quite often want to

come and learn for the sake of learning and not because they want accreditation. (HM1/3)

There were equally strong feelings about the effects of accreditation on teaching and learning within the classroom. While the Core Curriculum stresses speaking, listening, reading and writing and the use of these skills in a wide range of contexts, because the tests only assess writing and spelling, these are the skills that tutors felt they had to focus on:

It is definitely a different type of teaching I am doing now. I am teaching towards getting them through those exams. (EM1/1)

Perhaps more disturbingly, the central role played by the inter-relationship of targets, funding and accreditation of SfL qualifications meant that learners capable of gaining accreditation were perceived as more viable than others, and were in fact more 'valuable' in terms of money attracted, even though tutors and managers wanted to meet all learner needs. One frustrated manager spoke for many when she stated:

I do know that the targets we were set were very, very high, and we are constantly, constantly pushing or encouraging our learners to do the Level 1, those who are capable, to do the Level 1 tests. ... I think the frustrating thing is that a lot of our learners are not even nearly at Level 1, and so therefore in the eyes of these targets that we have been set, they do not count. We could be working with them for years before they actually reach Level 1 and that is a frustration because they are the people who obviously really need help. (IM1/1)

Concern was expressed in several sites about the future of provision for those with learning difficulties, who can be shown to have achieved very important outcomes from learning in terms of life skills, confidence and socialisation, but who are not able to obtain the accreditation that is required to draw down funding. In terms of the impact of policy on inclusion, learners of this type were clearly seen to be losing out directly from the powerful cocktail of funding, targets and the accreditation requirement of *SfL* policy. One manager stated forcefully:

I think nationally we have a real issue regarding learners with learning difficulties: it is a crisis on a national scale. (GM1/4)

Managers and tutors in our research sites were using all kinds of strategies to ensure that Entry and Pre-Entry Level learners, who have constituted and will continue to constitute a large proportion of *SfL* learners in ACL sites, would still be able to access provision even though they were not contributing to the targets. A ploy in most sites was to target some 'quick fix' learners who would be able to pass the Level 2 tests immediately or with minimal tuition, thus releasing funding which could then be used to support learners on lower level programmes who might take longer to take the test. Clearly this was an ethically driven action to protect vulnerable learners, but in some cases, where 'targeting the low-hanging fruit' involved paying people up to £100 to take a test, questions might be raised about whether this was the best use of scarce public funding. As one manager pointed out, unintended outcomes of this sort were very likely, given the government's over reliance on the twin policy levers of targets and funding linked to a centrally driven strategy such as *SfL*:

The LSC says that 20% in this area have a basic skills need, and we are just scratching the surface, and I think the real issue is funding and the

government's obsession with targets, which I think sometimes are targeting the wrong people. (EM2/3)

Most managers were also aware of wider criticisms being made of the strategy. Bathmaker's (2005) analysis of the statistics of qualifications achievement in *SfL* showed that 54 per cent of achievement was by 16-19 year olds and that 43 per cent by over 19 year olds was in ESOL, as opposed to literacy or numeracy. Questions were also raised by the Committee of Public Accounts about 'mission drift' in relation to *SfL* (House of Commons, 2006).

INSPECTION – A WEAKER BUT MORE BENIGN POLICY LEVER

While funding and targets appear to be the policy mechanisms with the most potential to affect basic skills provision, inspection, we would argue, is both a weaker and a more benign policy lever. Several of our ACL sites were inspected during the period of our research and, for the most part, tutors and managers saw it as a positive experience. One manager commented, for example:

I found it very useful, because I think it was a great unifying factor for the department, I think we were all in there battling together. And I think it is actually quite hard to get part-time tutors to bat with you, but we were all on the same side. (JM1/1)

A good inspection report left managers and tutors with a sense of achievement and legitimation, and some felt that the pre-inspection preparation helped to "tighten things up" and the post-inspection action plan provided a useful direction forward. However, this feel-good factor came at a bureaucratic price for some practitioners:

It was actually the first time that we had ever been inspected ... I mean, we must have felled a forest which all the stuff that we did, just in order to comply with the new inspection framework – everything being on such a much more formal basis, put it that way. (HM2/2)

Another manager suggested that quality enhancement would be better served by more regular inspections, by peers:

If, for instance, they developed these network groups, and we inspected each other's provision, so there is more consensus about what is good practice and we are spreading good practice across the borough, where we can also spread resources and expertise, so different people inspect different things, you know. (LM2/1)

Given the Government's move towards a greater focus on self assessment and continuous quality improvement, with a decreased role for inspection in those providers that have received good inspection reports (DfES 2006, QIA 2007), support for this type of peer activity may well be one way forward.

PLANNING – INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT BUT UNDER-DEVELOPED

The LSC, unlike its predecessor organisations, the FEFC and the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), was given a planning as well as a funding role in relation to post-16 education and training. To facilitate its planning role, it was structured with a central office in Coventry and 47 local arms (see Hodgson *et al.*, 2005 and Coffield *et al.*, 2005 for a detailed discussion of the role and structure of the LSC). Part of the function of the new unified organisation was to review, co-ordinate and rationalise provision at a local level in order better to meet the needs of learners and employers.

However, during its first five years, the major planning focus for the LSC has been on further education, 14-19 provision and work-based learning. While LSC funding has had a significant impact on *SfL* provision in ACL sites, there is less evidence from our eight ACL sites that the LSC has made a difference to the planning of ACL provision in their local area. Managers in our sites reported that national planning and funding decisions emanating from either the DfES Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit or the LSC National Office had more direct impact on their practice than decisions taken at the local LSC level. In fact, some managers bemoaned the absence of local planning. Turbulence in the structures and staffing of local LSCs proved confusing to some managers who had built up good working relationships with staff in those offices. In two of the London sites, the local Learning Partnership, rather than the LSC, was seen as a useful co-ordinating organisation. And in both the North East and London sites there seemed little room for the type of forward planning that the establishment of the LSC promised: targets and funding streams were constantly changing, making annual planning difficult and three-year planning a desired, but seemingly impossible, aspiration. As one exasperated manager put it:

I don't know what the budget is, I don't know what is happening. I haven't a clue. And the LSC and the others are going to say, 'Where is your three-year plan?' And I will say: 'You're joking – how can I plan for three years hence if you don't know what is happening in the next 18 months?' (FM3/4)

Moreover, planning was described as something that is done to you rather than a consultative and forward-focused supportive process:

Planning should be a two-way thing as well and we are not consulted, we are not asked our opinion. (GT1/4)

In this short-term, often uncoordinated and unstable planning climate, resources can be wasted, experience, energy and expertise underutilised and vital capacity building opportunities lost. If planning is to become a more useful policy lever, our data suggest that it needs to be more long-term, more locally co-ordinated, and more collaboratively devised with a focus on sustainability and capacity building for the future.

PROFESSIONAL VALUES – THE ULTIMATE DRIVER OF PRACTICE AND POLICY?

Meeting the needs of all learners

In previous sections we have considered how policy levers impact upon teaching, learning, assessment and inclusion in our ACL sites, but managers and tutors in these sites identified other highly important influences on their practice. Most staff who acknowledged the need to maximise funding and meet their targets nevertheless identified their professional commitment to meeting the needs of all learners as having more impact than anything else on their managerial and educational decisions and practice. One senior tutor with over 30 years' experience of working with adult basic skills learners still saw this as the heart of her role:

It is a lot of responsibility. It is people's second chance ... a really big step. They've had a really, really negative self image for a long, long time ... and you have got to get it right, because if you get it wrong, they are not going to try again.' (GT1/3)

We met a wide range of learners, including some already on university courses, some almost ready to take a national test at level 2 when they arrived at the centre

and others with severe health, learning and social needs who required both teaching and confidence-building if they were to make progress. Comments from learners confirmed that those complex needs were being met:

“It’s a mixture of learning and socialising. When I was going through therapy for depression I never really socialised, so that’s helped me a lot – probably more so than anything, it’s the socialising that’s helped me a lot more”. (IL1/3)

Some staff noted a tension between the needs of traditional basic skills learners and others who merely wanted a qualification quickly, such as teaching assistants, for whom the national tests were a stepping-stone to the Higher Level Teaching Assistant qualification. Most, however, were committed to meeting the needs of both groups. In the North East, for example, we found sites participating simultaneously in two very different outreach projects: one to attract ‘quick fix’ learners who wanted to take a national test after minimal preparation and another to contact very hard-to-reach learners through working with the voluntary sector.

Since the funding methodology for *SfL* rewards the achievement of learners at Levels 1 and 2, concerns were expressed in all learning sites about the future of provision for learners working at Entry and Pre-Entry Levels. Many tutors saw their work at lower levels as more demanding, more rewarding and more important because it could make a real difference to learners’ lives: we saw, for example, how such provision had helped one individual gain the confidence and the skill to handle money and to go out to do her own shopping for the first time. The ‘unique learner’ rule, which rewards providers more highly for the first national test achieved by a learner than for any subsequent progression, also caused exasperation amongst staff who wanted to see learners progress from Level 1 to Level 2, or to add a literacy qualification to their numeracy award. We found evidence of tenacious commitment

to professional values, which prioritised the needs of learners over financial prudence:

If people who have done numeracy say now they want to do literacy, we will just do it. I mean, until I am told [by the Local Authority] that I can't do it. It is like the Entry Level students: ... until I am told they can't come any more, then I will continue to provide that service for them. (EM1/3)

Creating the right learning environment for the community

Another issue closely related to meeting learners' needs is the provision of an appropriate learning environment for the community that each centre serves. The most vibrant sites we visited had a strong understanding of their clientele and responded flexibly to the needs of the different types of learners in their community. In an area of high unemployment, for example, Forest Community Centre supplemented its *SfL* work for the local authority with a separate local LSC contract with targets for helping job-seekers back to work and reacted to the news of yet another factory closure by sending out leaflets to staff likely to lose their posts. With a creche at its heart, a friendly and welcoming staff, including some drawn from the local community or with experience of being learners there themselves, and a range of both formal classes and drop-in provision, this centre appeared to be achieving success in the two policy areas valued by the Government: social inclusion and employability. Comments from learners at the Centre confirmed their appreciation:

'You feel it's going to be intimidating, but everyone is so friendly: the atmosphere's great.' (FL6/1)

This Centre's excellent: the facilities, the friendliness, the help and support are the main things.' (FL1/1)

Yet staff remained mindful of the fragility of funding and the need to hit their formal targets. A manager characterised their approach as *'get the targets out of the way and then we get on with what we are really about'* (FM3/3). In other centres, too, such as Island Estate, as described above, we found staff struggling to maintain their professional vision of the best, most welcoming and accessible learning environment for their disadvantaged and very isolated community, although in that instance they were eventually defeated by the loss of regional funding and the LSC's refusal to fund embedded provision.

Developing professional practice

Professional development is a complex issue. On the one hand, it can be used as a policy lever, as, for example, in the requirement that Sfl tutors acquire the new Level 4 qualifications in literacy and numeracy teaching. On the other, for established professionals, it is a very personal matter. Externally imposed programmes of professional development may also disrupt the ongoing local plans for staff development in teams.

The staff in our ACL learning sites, while welcoming many aspects of *Sfl*, were not always positive about the need to gain a Level 4 qualification, and even less enthusiastic about the need to acquire an FE teaching certificate. For those who had worked in the area for a long time – and many managers and tutors in our sites fall into this category - the requirement to take an additional qualification late in their career, when they had other relevant qualifications and years of experience, appeared somewhat insulting. A further problem for those in the London sites was

that provision for Level 4 qualifications simply did not exist in many areas when *SfL* was first introduced, although this situation later improved. Some tutors and managers opted to wait for opportunities to gain accreditation for prior learning and certification and then to take top-up modules - a route which they felt was more appropriate for their situation. The proposals in the recent FE White Paper (DfES 2006) appear to encourage the establishment of such routes to qualification, which will undoubtedly be welcomed by those in our sites.

Some saw benefits in the new Level 4 qualifications, as an acknowledgement of the skills required, but they also expressed regret about the loss of the volunteer route for entry to the profession:

...because in basic skills teaching aptitude and empathy are almost as important as the skill level, and you can train someone in all sorts of skills, but they still may not make it as a basic skills teacher; and having people as volunteers who we then encouraged to get a generic teaching certificate gave us the ability to get to know them, to know how they were with the learners, what their potential was and we absolutely don't have that at all now. (HM2/2)

To experienced staff, who had taken pride in developing their professional practice for years, the 'professionalisation' agenda was seen as quite offensive on a personal level, and proved disruptive to established provision. On some local authority sites where quality improvement and continuing professional development for tutors had been part of their practice for years, managers were finding it increasingly difficult to find time to schedule their own staff development programmes. Tutors' energies were going into acquiring the Level 4 qualifications, and managers and experienced tutors were heavily involved in mentoring those taking these awards as well as supporting newly qualified, but inexperienced, tutors recruited to cope with the

expansion in learner numbers. But despite this turbulence, we found tutors pursuing their own development needs, including a recently qualified tutor who had been disappointed by the perfunctory treatment of dyslexia in her university Level 4 Literacy course, but was now taking opportunities to develop her expertise, both by attending a specialist course elsewhere and by working alongside an experienced expert in her workplace. Developing a strong professional service requires committed staff, but in both London and the North East difficulties in recruiting and retaining good staff were reported. Moreover, with current funding constraints in ACL provision, it is likely to become increasingly difficult to attract high-quality graduates because, as several of the managers in our sites pointed out, pay and conditions of service in ACL are poor in comparison with those in other sectors of education. We heard of candidates being lured to college employment by 'golden hellos' that ACL services could not offer. The manager of a large local authority service argued for better career structures for professional staff, similar to those offered in schools:

I think the whole Skills for Life agenda has been dedicated to driving up quality, and ... having had knowledge of some of the other providers, particular training agents, I think there was a need to drive up the quality there, because there was a great inconsistency. But I think what needs to go with it is a career development kind of structure for people who are in this. (GM1/2)

Others argued that their professional commitment should earn them a 'voice', that they should be consulted by policy-makers, either directly or through the establishment of an appropriate professional body, about any further changes to *SfL* or funding arrangements. One of their problems was the need to pass messages 'up the line' through various layers of bureaucracy: the distance between the staff working with basic skills learners and the officials taking decisions in offices in

London or Coventry appeared immense and growing. This echoes comments by Mary Hamilton and Yvonne Hillier:

It has been difficult for ALLN practitioners to consolidate their professional expertise and policy involvement. A lack of formal representative networks and associations and (until recently) training has meant that practitioners have only been able to make token contributions to new developments. (Hamilton and Hillier 2006:158).

If staff were obliged to take additional qualifications in order to be deemed professional, they also wanted to be listened to and respected as professionals; they wanted their commitment to the learners and their local knowledge of their communities to be valued and actively used for decision-making; they wanted recognition that Level 4 is only a basic entry qualification and that further professional development should be funded; and they wanted to move closer to parity with college and school teachers in their working conditions and career development opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS: STILL RIDING THE WAVES?

The image in our title fits our data in two distinct ways. Firstly, visiting our sites in the early years of the *SfL* strategy, we found many professionals adept at 'riding the waves' of policy change, adjusting to nationally prescribed changes to targets, curriculum, qualifications, inspection procedures, paperwork and above all, funding. Tutors were busily acquiring new qualifications, adjusting their pedagogy and using new materials to prepare learners for the recently introduced national tests; managers were seeking out different ways of maximising funding, to ensure that

learners who could not take national tests would still be able to receive support in literacy and numeracy. Most expressed a desire to slow the pace of change in order to consolidate their practice and to focus more consistently upon the needs of their learners, rather than on their LSC or local authority funding targets.

Secondly, towards the end of the period of our fieldwork visits, we gained the sad impression that the tide might be turning and that ACL may not be able to ride this latest wave. Over a thirty-month period, we saw expansion of provision and anxieties about finding sufficient staff give way to reduced provision and concern about losing staff, as funding cuts began to bite. Managers who, 12 months previously, had been enthusiastically planning the growth of their service were, on our final visit in 2006, anticipating cuts, lamenting the impact of the 'unique learner rule' and plans to fund fewer courses, and raising questions, like the Public Accounts Committee (House of Commons, 2006), about whether enough of the funding for *SfL* was really reaching the adult basic skills learners for whom it was intended. As ACL funding cuts began to impact on basic skills services, fears emerged that the largest wave of *SfL* funding might already have passed, and some of the most enthusiastic tutors were facing cuts in the hours they worked. Even more importantly, some learners who had begun to address their basic skills problems would find that services were no longer available to meet their needs.

The two strongest messages for policy from our learning sites are about the need for financial and policy stability, both in basic skills provision and in the wider context of ACL, to enable teams to continue their work; and about the distance between professionals and those who construct policies in this area. The policy levers have undoubtedly had great impact, but not always in the way that policymakers may have anticipated. We share the view of practitioners and managers, who have years of experience of working with adults with basic skills needs and of 'riding the waves of

policy' in ACL, that there is much to be gained by increased dialogue between those who make policy and those whose practice it affects. This suggests the need for a stronger role for the practitioners and officials at local level in planning provision and capacity building for the future in order to harness valuable local knowledge and to meet the needs of diverse local communities. ACL and basic skills practitioners have much to offer to policymakers – not least in providing feedback on how all the various policy levers and drivers actually impact on the lives, life chances and everyday experiences of their learners.

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² The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act made a distinction between ‘Schedule 2 provision’, which led to nationally recognised qualifications or vocational outcomes, would be funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and would be delivered primarily in further education colleges, and ‘non Schedule 2 provision’, which consisted of non-accredited and ‘non-vocational’ provision that would be funded and primarily delivered by local education authorities and voluntary and community organisations.

³ This figure is disputed both by those who question the basis of measurement in the International Adult Literacy Survey (e.g. Hamilton and Barton 1999) and, more recently, by the *Skills for Life* needs survey of 2002-03 which produced a lower estimate, of 5.8 million people below Level 1 (Williams 2003).

⁴ The scale of spending on adult basic skills is unprecedented - £3.7b by 2006 and a projected further £2bn by 2010.

⁵ It is very difficult to pin down precise funding for ACL because adult and community learning is packaged up within ‘Other Programmes’ in the recent LSC Progress Report (LSC 2006). However, what this report does indicate is a considerable reduction in ACL learners in 2004/5 (from 993,500 in 2003/4 to 915,000 in 2004/5).