

*Freedom to Learn:
Basic skills for learners
with learning difficulties
and/or disabilities*

Executive Summary

May 2000

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The report of the working group looking into the basic skills needs of adults with learning difficulties and disabilities

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Introduction

This report sets out ways in which access to good basic skills teaching and learning could be improved for adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In the foreword to *A Fresh Start*, the report of the committee led by Sir Claus Moser on improving the literacy and numeracy of adults, Sir Claus acknowledged the need for further work on the needs of learners with special learning needs. *“We have not been able to consider the special needs of adults with learning disabilities who wish or need to improve their basic skills. We are conscious of the important concerns at issue. In particular, there is the need to ensure that sufferers from dyslexia are helped with targeted basic skills programmes, where needed. This calls for a special study, following this report, to assess where its recommendations are appropriate and where they should be supplemented.”*

In September 1999 the DfEE established a working group to look into the basic skills needs of adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities comprising representatives of a wide cross-section of experienced professionals. The working group sent out a national call for evidence and used their own national and regional networks to canvas the views of individuals with learning difficulties and disabilities. The conclusions and recommendations that follow reflect this consultation and take into account the Government’s agenda on social inclusion and partnership.

The content of the report is as follows:

Introduction – Scope, methodology, conclusions and recommendations

Section One – People with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and the acquisition of basic skills

- The learners
- The barriers
- Priorities for improvement
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Section Two – The specific disability issues which affect the access to basic skills for some learners

- People who are deaf or hard of hearing
- People who are blind or visually impaired
- People who have mental health difficulties

- People with dyslexia
- People with physical disabilities
- People with learning difficulties.

Main Findings

The Learners

- 1** The Government White Paper *Learning to Succeed*, 1999 shows that people with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be unqualified or unemployed as their peers.
- 2** Many adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities told us that the result of underachievement or the need to re-learn was low self-esteem and self-confidence. These are major barriers to learning.
- 3** Such learners have literacy or numeracy needs at all levels. They range from people who need to acquire the basic skills to enable them to lead more independent lives to those who face specific barriers which currently prevent them from acquiring the basic skills needed for employment or further education.

Barriers to Learning

- 4** The barriers to learning identified in *A Fresh Start* also affect adults with learning difficulties. However, because their learning needs are often more complex the impact of these may be greater. The needs of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities must be taken into consideration when each aspect of the national strategy is implemented.
- 5** The evidence shows that there are widely disparate learning opportunities for adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Variation in the range and quality of provision means that many disabled adults are still not given the chance they need to learn basic skills. The current range of opportunities for learning appears to depend mainly on the initiative and commitment of individuals. This is not satisfactory.
- 6** Learning difficulties such as those caused by poor short-term memory, poor sequencing skills or language dysfunction require specialist high-quality teaching. Currently, this is not available to many learners because of a shortage of skilled and qualified teachers.
- 7** If they are to participate in classes, many disabled learners require specialist or individual support. This is frequently unavailable. Some learners require specialist equipment, such as tape recorders, touch screens, brailers, voice synthesisers, without which they cannot learn at the appropriate level. Most would benefit from access to information technology and appropriate software. Though many teachers are unfamiliar with the range of software available. Others learners require transport to the class, more accessible accommodation, timetabling which avoids fatigue or a personal assistant. The requirement will be individual to the learner and unless it is met, it will be difficult if not impossible for the learner to engage in appropriate forms of learning.
- 8** We want to be sure that the proposals put forward in *A Fresh Start* to increase opportunity and achievement do not inadvertently put up barriers to this group of learners. We

support a common framework for basic skills but we think that the proposed standards are not sufficiently accessible, and the curriculum not sufficiently flexible, to enable all learners to build skills in literacy and numeracy. Learners may include, for example, people who communicate in media other than written text, such as Braille or symbols, and people who communicate through British Sign Language or through communication technology. For many of these learners, alternative ways to access the basic skills framework, and alternative means of demonstrating achievement, are required.

9 The major barrier identified for many learners including those with severe learning difficulties is that their performance is well below the entry level for the standards. Their learning difficulties may be complex and the acquisition of basic skills very difficult for them. Some do not speak or recognise written text and may communicate better through symbol or signing. Many teachers have made it clear to us that they are unsure of the detailed steps needed to enable these learners to progress towards entry level in a structured way and the work of the FEFC Inspectorate and the Tomlinson Committee confirms this. Improved guidance on the appropriate curriculum pathways for these learners would improve teaching and lead to higher levels of achievement.

10 Many learners are not in formal education. They are taught basic skills in community environments. The contribution of workers from other sectors such as the social services or the voluntary organisations is frequently not recognised. Basic skills is often a component of the work that they are doing with their clients whilst teaching independent travel or cookery, for example. *A Fresh Start* has highlighted the need for more practical approaches to learning in the community both to build transferable skills and to make learning more relevant and attractive. The contribution that others within the community can make to learning basic skills should be recognised. They should be included in the initiative to improve basic skills.

11 We are very concerned at the lack of expertise nationally in teaching basic skills to adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. There has been little research or practical help to identify effective strategies for teaching and learning. There are too few opportunities for improving practice through good quality training. This should be addressed as a priority.

Improving provision

12 The challenge for the twenty-first century is to ensure that all learners with learning difficulties and disabilities can gain access to appropriate opportunities to learn basic skills. There will be an entitlement to lifelong learning, which will enable learners to acquire new skills and to maintain those already learned. Providers of basic skills education will be responsible for ensuring that those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive comparable opportunities to other learners.

13 To achieve this, we recommend:

- i) the basic skills strategy includes all learners
- ii) alternative ways of enabling learners to demonstrate achievement be developed

- iii) a flexible and coherent curriculum at pre-entry level be developed to enable learners at this level to progress towards the entry-level curriculum and increase flexibility at all levels
- iv) guidance and models of good practice in key aspects of teaching, assessment and learning are developed and disseminated
- v) investment is made in general awareness and specialist training for teachers, support workers and others, in teaching skills to learners with disabilities and learning difficulties
- vi) funding is made available to improve materials and equipment for teaching and learning, [including information and learning technology](#)
- vii) funding methodologies are devised to support life-long learning and the maintenance of basic skills in ways which promote equality of opportunity
- viii) all relevant promotional materials clearly identify the learning opportunities available to those with disabilities or learning difficulties
- ix) support is provided to increase opportunities within the community through statutory, voluntary and private sector organisations and partnerships. Different agencies should work together so that learning is better co-ordinated.
- x) quality assurance arrangements should take these recommendations into account.

14 The report contains additional recommendations which are specific to the following groups of learners:

- people who are deaf or hard of hearing
- people who are blind or visually impaired
- people with mental health difficulties
- people with dyslexia
- people with physical disabilities
- people with learning difficulties.

[We recognise that some learners have dual or multiple disabilities.](#)