

**0535**

## **Education for employment and life: CfBT international review programme: adult basic skills development**

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### **Background**

In 2009 a renewed emphasis was placed on improving the levels of basic skills amongst adults in the UK, with the re-launch of the UK government's seminal Skills for Life (SfL) strategy in March 2009, Skills for Life: Changing Lives.

Existing research indicates that the development of adults' basic skills can have an impact on employment status and living standards. For example, poor basic skills have been shown to be correlated with unemployment, low levels of participation in public activities, poor physical and mental health and family breakdown. Poorer outcomes for individuals have knock-on effects for the wider society and economy, and particularly serious implications in relation to crime, community cohesion, and global competitiveness. Therefore improvements in adults' basic skills are in the interests of the individual and the wider economy, locally and nationally.

In the light of this, the revised SfL strategy sets out three new and ambitious targets around stimulating the demand for learning, delivering responsive provision and increasing employability.

### **Research Questions**

CfBT has commissioned NFER to conduct a programme of six literature reviews focusing on adult basic skills, to identify and review best practice internationally with the aim of informing continuous improvements in the teaching and learning of adult basic skills.

The research covers provision for adult learners over the age of 16 and reviews the international evidence base for best practice in such provision. This research encompasses six literature reviews (referred to as key components of adult basic skills) covering six interrelated themes:

1. The development of basic skills through work based learning (including apprenticeships)
2. The impact of adult basic skills development on individuals and employers
3. The development of basic financial skills competency for adults
4. The development of employability skills for adults (including soft skills)
5. Adult basic skills development and family learning
6. Using flexible learning (including internet-based distance learning) as a medium to develop adult basic skills

Each review focuses on three key research questions:

#### **1. What policies exist to support the key component(s)?**

- a. Why have the policies been created, what do they aim to achieve?
- b. To what extent have the policies been successful?

## **2. What does recent descriptive and evaluative literature say about the key component(s)?**

- a. What research evidence is available related to the key component(s)?
- b. How effective are the approaches taken and what impact do they have?

## **3. What can be done to improve the teaching and learning of adult basic skills?**

- a. Given the findings of Q1 and Q2, which approaches could or should be replicated?

### **Methods**

A common methodological framework is used within each of the reviews.

**1. Conducting searches for evidence.** A document setting out the parameters of each review is the basis for the literature searches on a range of databases, and Internet searches on relevant subject gateways and websites. Search strategies are developed for all databases by using the controlled vocabulary pertinent to each database.

**2. Assessment of the relevance of identified literature.** Copies of the identified sources are scrutinised for inclusion or exclusion in the review of evidence based on an assessment of their relevance to the review.

**3. Summarising the key evidence.** Up to 25 sources are fully summarised for each review using an agreed template describing the evidence under headings such as the approach to adult basic skills teaching and learning, methodology and main findings including good practice, challenges for delivery, impacts and drivers of impacts.

**4. Production of themed reports.** These summarised sources form the basis of the reports for all six reviews. An extra report distilling the key messages from all six reviews will be produced once all are completed.

### **Frame**

A common analytical framework ensures that the relevance of the literature, identified by the searches, is assessed consistently and rigorously across all six reviews.

All sources are reviewed and assessed systematically to judge whether they are of low, medium or high relevance based on a consideration of the research methods used, the currency of the research, the number of research questions for which evidence is available and the extent to which the source answers these questions.

Those sources judged to be highly relevant are reviewed to identify the key 25 literature sources for summarising in detail. The final group of key sources is based on the inclusion of empirical research evidence (where available), relevant international evidence and the use of the most recent or comprehensive studies, in the event there is a series of, or multiple, reports on the same topic or programme.

### **Research findings**

The results of the first phase of the research will not be available until spring 2010 with the findings of the overall programme not available until August 2010. The BERA symposium will be the first opportunity, in a public arena, to share the combined results of the research. The results will focus on the three key research questions covering six interrelated themes of adult basic skills (see 'Research questions').

## **Impact and relevance to the learning and skills sector**

The shape of future adult basic skills learning and skills provision is currently an area of much focus in the UK. A number of recent developments in the learning and skills sector and external events have contributed to this increased focus with the most significant arguably being the re-launch of the Skills for Life strategy in 2009. The anniversary of the Moser report on adult literacy (published in 1999) and the recent economic recession in the UK are other key contributory factors.

All these developments in the sector mean that the findings of this research programme are likely to be of interest and relevance to a broad constituency including learning and skills professionals engaged in the design and delivery of basic skills provision, policy makers and educational researchers.