

programmes to follow shortly

Basic skills is the educational buzz-phrase of the moment. This area of adult learning includes language, literacy, numeracy and IT, and is a major area of public concern.

Reflecting that concern, education secretary Charles Clarke has pledged £1.6bn to plug the huge gap in mature learning over the next three years.

Recent research suggests that the skills level of Britain's workforce is the worst in Europe, apart from Albania. An estimated seven million adults lack the reading and maths skills we expect of schoolchildren. Half of them are in jobs and, as Confederation of British Industry director-general Digby Jones pointed out: 'Every day we pay three million people to go to work in Britain who can't read like an 11-year-old. What does that do to our productivity? Getting our people to read, write and count is enormously important to British business.'

It was the Moser report in 1999 that first laid bare the dire state of literacy and numeracy in the UK. It bemoaned the fact that, if given the alphabetical index to the Yellow Pages, seven million people in the UK could not locate the page reference for plumbers. Nor could one in three adults calculate the floor area of a room, 21ft x 14ft.

'This is a shocking situation and a sad reflection on past decades of schooling,' the report said. 'It is one of the reasons for relatively low productivity in our economy, and it cramps the lives of millions.'

Referring to the teaching of basic skills as 'the Cinderella service', it advocated halving the levels of functional illiteracy and innumeracy within ten years and 'making major progress by 2005'.

In isolated pockets progress is being made. Disparate organisations such as the Learning and Skills Council, the Basic Skills Agency, the regional development agencies, University for Industry, learndirect, Fento (Further Education National Training Organisation) and Lancaster University's workplace basic skills network are doing imaginative work in the field.

And individuals are clearly benefiting. Samatar Dallal, for example, in his job as housing officer with Hounslow Council, can now confidently write and send letters to clients after a 12-week course in business communication arranged by his employer.

'My English was quite good before,' he says, 'but now I understand the different styles used in formal writing. Before, I always got a colleague to check one of my letters before sending it off. Now I don't have to ask them.'

The need for literacy and numeracy to be relevant to the modern workplace has never been

The money is on the table and there's no shortage of commitment... but something is missing. **Robert Nurden** explains why the government strategy on basic skills doesn't add up

stronger. In recent years there have been huge changes in health and safety requirements, the euro, the introduction of new technology, revised international standards and working practices, new quality demands, and flatter management structures.

All this impinges not only on the workforce but on management too. Indeed, many older managers find they know far less about electronic communication than their staff. Being literate and numerate now means more than writing good English and adding up accurately; it also means being conversant with an often baffling range of technical equipment. The need to upgrade basic skills is sweeping through the workplace, from boardroom to broom cupboard. And the idea that literacy is just a bolt-on aspect of adult learning is clearly outdated.

Fiona Frank, former executive director of the workplace basic skills network, explains: 'To be really effective, we must get away from "the deficit model" or "remedial action" associated with literacy. We see it as important to stop the stigmatisation and separation of language, literacy and numeracy provision from other workplace training and development.'

Focusing on workers' shortcomings, Ms Frank believes, reinforces a culture of individual blame and responsibility when in reality it is a matter of shared responsibility. 'Avoiding the use of deficit

statistics about individuals enables the provider and the employer to focus on a more holistic approach to training and development,' she says.

This is where union representatives have a vital role to play. Their negotiators and lifelong learning advisers – workers who have enhanced their career prospects as a result of receiving basic skills teaching – can often broker agreements with employers to release staff for free training during company time.

The government has also clocked the fact that basic skills instruction is more effective in the workplace itself. Among the current venues are prisons, hospitals, local councils, bus and railway stations. Training takes place in the fisheries industry, among street cleaners, hostels for the homeless, and ceramics and ice-cream factories.

All of which is fine. But can the government really expect that by 2007, some 1.5 million adults will have improved their basic skills?

It will only work, say experts, with the necessary resources to build professional capacity: in other words having enough teachers. They have no argument with the amount of money on offer. This time it is enough. For them the problem comes with the shortage of teachers, and with pay.

At present there is a massive shortfall of staff. Research by the Association of Colleges (AoC) reveals that in 113 colleges there are currently 594 vacancies for basic skills teachers. Greater London, the north west and the south east are the worst affected. The study also showed that in further education colleges generally, almost half the staff are prepared to leave for better pay in schools and industry.

In the ranks of rarely spotted educational species, basic skills instructors join teachers of engineering, science, construction, visual arts, ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) and learning difficulties.

Until recently, there was no need for basic skills teachers to possess any particular qualifications. This is not surprising when you consider the range of people who fall into this category: mentors from private companies working within schools to help with children's reading, union-based lifelong learning instructors, and voluntary literacy teachers introducing asylum-seekers to the rudiments of English in draughty church halls. If they did have any qualifications, what they had probably went by the arcane name of either a City & Guilds 9281, 7707 or 9285.

Now, from the start of this year, to accompany its drive to improve the educational level of the British workforce, the government has decreed that



basic skills teachers should possess a professional qualification. There are also plans to introduce a basic skills specialism at teacher training colleges.

Yet only a handful of educational establishments are geared up for the new regime. On the face of it, this looks like yet another example of 'initiative overload' to add to the other gripes already suffered by the teaching profession.

Judith Norrington, curriculum director at the AoC, says: 'The field is just starting to drag itself away from being just a gap in the timetable towards that of having a professional status. But it is early days. We are lagging behind and there are still massive shortages of basic skills teachers.' The extra training demands might well reduce numbers even more, she says.

In addition to teacher shortages there is the issue of pay. Industrial action by college lecturers over pay threatened for 30 January was called off, but earnings for further education staff, many of whom are basic skills teachers, have fallen well below those of schoolteachers. The starting salary in further education is £14,581, while in school it is £17,595. The highest FE salary is £26,423, but in schools it can rise as high as £32,217.

Lynn Ferguson, workplace basic skills co-ordinator for Unison's Open College, says: 'Even though I welcome the extra government money, I

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am worried that the required number of basic skills teachers will not materialise. Nor is it just a question of numbers; it is about ensuring quality too. It will certainly take a while.'

She believes the new measures should be focused on the workplace itself, not on the adult classroom. 'One of the main disincentives for grown-ups to improve their skills is their anxiety about being shown up.'

'School for many of these people was not a pleasant experience and to replicate that atmosphere in adulthood is counter-productive. The last thing they want to do is walk through the doors of another educational institution. One of the main barriers, alongside not having enough teachers, is people's internal, psychological barrier.'

'To make these initiatives work, Unison wants to see an expansion of workplace-based training. Here the experience is less intimidating, the structures are less hierarchical, and instruction is relevant to working practices.'

She says the involvement of union representatives, in association with the Workers' Educational Association, is a vital component of setting up successful basic skills training in the workplace. Before provision starts, such links can establish awareness sessions that can create the right context for the language and literacy elements to prosper.