

Literacy, Language and Numeracy in the Construction Industry

Executive Summary December 2004

The Learning and Skills Council Black Country commissioned the Workplace Basic Skills Network, Lancaster University to conduct an action research project into literacy, language and numeracy support in construction. The aim of the project was to carry out action research that would lead to an improvement of literacy, language and numeracy learning within construction provision delivered by Black Country learning providers. It was intended that this project would contribute to the achievement of the Black Country's literacy, language and numeracy targets. The support of literacy, language and numeracy within vocational courses is also important for the national Skills for Life strategy and the national skills strategy. The scope of the project was to establish a benchmark of current best practice in embedded delivery.

Methodology

The initial research consisted of consultation with appropriate regional, national and international agencies to establish existence of existing resources. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with providers and employers outside the region to obtain further examples of best practice. An additional survey about embedding literacy, language and numeracy in construction courses was developed and circulated to the membership of the Workplace Literacy, language and numeracy Network. A steering group was established to provide guidance and direction. A working group of local providers was formed from December 2003 to December 2004. The working group decided the terms of reference and priority actions for the coming months. Meetings were held on a regular basis to progress activities. The research methodology and analysis has been predominantly qualitative rather than quantitative. This was an informed decision to ensure that the maximum opportunities of identifying best practice and benchmarking could be obtained.

Findings

Provider Perspective

- *Literacy, language and numeracy needs*

Providers estimated that between 20%-90% of construction learners (i.e. those on foundation and intermediate construction courses) had literacy, language and numeracy needs. The extent varied across providers and the highest level of need occurred amongst providers that attracted learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The majority of learners undertaking training on construction programmes were under 25 and automatically accessed initial assessment. A range of commercial (e.g. Basic Skills Agency Initial Assessment) and in-house

assessment materials were used. It was identified most local providers were not assessing learners over 19 on part-time courses for literacy, language and numeracy development needs. One of the providers provided support during the evening theory sessions. At the time of research no provider was delivering literacy, language or numeracy to local construction employers. The project had intended to research a variety of delivery models within construction companies but this was not possible.

- Literacy, language and numeracy delivery

Many of the vocational representatives interviewed did not perceive a difference between literacy, language and numeracy and Key Skills. This indicated a need for awareness raising to ensure that the relationship between the two is understood. This is particularly relevant in the light of the planned convergence and the move towards embedding delivery of literacy, language and numeracy within the main curriculum. At the time of the initial research it was found that many providers were in the process of evaluating the most appropriate delivery methods for their learners.

- Key Skills

The initial research found that some providers were working towards the allocation of Key Skills tutors and sometimes Basic Skills Tutors within curriculum areas to develop contextualised learning. Six out of the seven providers had developed contextualised Key Skills assignments and customised worksheets. All providers and learners preferred this approach. However, there was one disadvantage expressed: students found it difficult to sit an end test that did not have any vocational relevance. This is an issue that is also relevant for embedding literacy, language and numeracy provision as the same Key Skills test is taken.

- *Literacy, language and numeracy support*

Literacy, language and numeracy support in the theory sessions usually took the form of discreet support to the whole group so that individual learners were not singled out for attention. This was seen to correspond to the nature and culture of the student groups. However, such a delivery method does not guarantee that individual needs are being met or that progress in literacy, language and numeracy is being recorded. Co-tutoring i.e. where the vocational tutor and the literacy, language and numeracy tutor deliver the sessions as a team was being developed at one of the colleges but it had not been implemented long-enough to evaluate its effectiveness. All of the providers gave portfolio support and this was viewed as essential for the completion of the Key Skills portfolio. Discrete support was also offered by some providers and was found to be effective.

- Literacy, language and numeracy support staff

Some providers felt that the support tutor needed to be a literacy, language and numeracy specialist but vocationally aware whilst others advocated that the support tutor needed to be or have been a vocational tutor but trained in literacy, language and numeracy support. There are practical and management implications for each of these approaches and further continuing professional development training would be needed to ensure that tutors have appropriate vocational and subject specialist knowledge. Although providers evidenced awareness of literacy, language and numeracy issues it was reported that in practice some vocational tutors had difficulties accepting the need for literacy, language and numeracy support on construction courses.

Employer perspective

All employers interviewed had experience of staff with literacy, language and numeracy development needs. Each employer was aware of individual cases but the size of the need within each organisation had not been quantified. None of the employers believed that this was an issue that employers were responsible for addressing. A small sample of telephone interviews revealed a reluctance to discuss the issue, which through discussion with experts in the field, was seen as reflective of the attitude within the sector. This highlighted the need to develop literacy, language and numeracy awareness amongst local construction companies.

Learner perspective

Three out of twenty learners interviewed found that literacy, language and numeracy support had been beneficial. All learners were happy with the quality of the support that they received although some wouldn't have completed their Key Skills portfolio by choice. There were no indications that a particular mode of delivery was more effective than another. A learner tracking survey was conducted a year after the initial interviews. Two learners participated in a telephone interview and one learner returned a written questionnaire. The results of the learner tracking suggested that the perception of the benefits of literacy, language and numeracy change over time.

Resources

At the time of the initial research (January 2003) there were few resources to support literacy, language and numeracy within construction courses. A limited amount of industry based resources were available but these tended to be written for Key Skills support rather than for literacy, language and numeracy. Since the survey the Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy Strategy Unit, DfES have published embedded resources for Trowel Trades (August 2004) and more are planned.

Action Research Working Group

An action research working group of literacy, language and numeracy representatives was formed to participate in a range of research activities to explore the most effective ways of supporting learners with Skills for Life needs within the construction programme area. The group identified its terms of reference and two meetings per term were agreed. Priority activities were identified as the development of a construction screening tool for learners over 24, the development of materials and approaches to prepare construction learners for the level 2 national test and the contextualisation of course materials. During the life of the working group a draft screening assessment tool was developed but there were difficulties in implementing all of the aims of the working group because of pressures that various member organisations were experiencing.

Conclusion and recommendations

- Only one provider assessed learners over 19 who were attending evening provision. It is recommended that initial assessment for all part-time evening class learners be introduced, to ensure that an appropriate learning programme is planned.
- A range of embedded literacy, language and numeracy models was identified during the research. It is recommended that providers implement good practice identified in the publication of the NRDC embedded literacy, language and numeracy research project when it is published.
- Many providers have moved towards full-time Key Skills staff attached to the vocational area and one provider is recruiting a full-time literacy, language and numeracy support tutor for construction. It is recommended that the capacity for literacy, language and numeracy support continue to be strengthened.
- Almost all providers offered some form of literacy, language and numeracy support in the theory sessions but only one provider offered support in practical sessions. It is recommended that providers consider the benefits literacy, language and numeracy support in practical sessions of construction programmes.
- Similarly, only one provider offered literacy, language and numeracy support to part-time evening learners. It is recommended that the need for literacy, language and numeracy support be considered for part time evening learners in accordance with initial assessment results and the learners' individual learning plans.
- There is a need to develop and build capacity of literacy, language and numeracy staff who can teach in a vocational context and are able to develop effective contextualised provision. It is recommended that CPD training activities are developed to build capacity and to strengthen embedded delivery.
- It was generally believed that vocational tutors would benefit from continuing professional development in literacy, language and numeracy awareness and training in working as a team with literacy, language and numeracy staff. It is recommended that vocational tutors receive Skills for Life awareness training as part of the Skills for Life Quality Initiative strategic whole organisational approach. It is also recommended that joint team building/embedded delivery training be developed for vocational tutors and literacy, language and numeracy practitioners.
- Literacy, language and numeracy skills were not seen as a dominating issue with the employers interviewed. Some employers were reluctant to discuss or admit that poor literacy, language and numeracy skills existed amongst the workforce. It is recommended that a series of employer awareness raising activities be developed to promote understanding of the issues.
- The action research Working Group model was effective in enabling local colleges to share good practice and to consider common approaches. However, a difficulty encountered during the life of the project was securing the time to develop the screening tool.