Essential Skills for Living

Equipped for the Future: Building for Tomorrow

Strategy and Action Plan for Adult Literacy in Northern Ireland
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Foreword
By the Minister for Essential Skills for Living Strategy

On the 17 April 2002, as Minister for Employment and Learning, I launched the Essential Skills for Living – a Framework and Consultation Paper on Adult Literacy, for public consultation.

The Strategy sets out the new direction to be taken to improve levels of literacy and numeracy amongst the adult population in Northern Ireland.

Over the last few months my Department, along with the Education and Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA), engaged with a wide range of people who have an interest in Essential Skills. A series of open consultation seminars were held across Northern Ireland and 195 responses were received from a wide range of stakeholders.

I am very grateful to all those people who took time to attend the consultation seminars or to provide a response to the consultation document.

A considerable amount of work and effort went into handling the consultation and I would like to express my appreciation to EGSA, which managed the consultation process.

In this Essential Skills for Living Strategy and Action Plan, I now put forward the proposals to be implemented in this important area of work. They take into account the views expressed during the consultation to improve the levels of literacy and numeracy in the adult population in Northern Ireland.

In presenting this Strategy I am confident that, with continued partnerships, we can all make a better contribution to addressing this distinctive and important issue.

I assure you of my continued personal commitment, and that of my Department, in the important challenge that now lies ahead. With your support, however, we can assist adults to improve their Essential Skills and make a real difference to their lives.

Carmel Hanna, MLA
Minister for Employment and Learning
Introduction

Why Develop a Strategy?

The Northern Ireland Executive’s Programme for Government states in its vision and priorities for education and skills that the Executive will focus on:

• providing high quality education for all, with equal access for all;

• ensuring that all our young people have the skills and qualifications to gain employment in a modern economy;

• enabling people to update their knowledge, skills and qualifications; and

• assisting and supporting all those in the education system, including the socially excluded, to enable them to enter or return to the workforce, or to improve their quality of life.

In 1996, Northern Ireland participated in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The survey provided information about literacy levels in Northern Ireland and, at the same time, provided an international comparison against which Northern Ireland could be benchmarked. The results indicated that 24% of those aged between 16 and 65 in Northern Ireland (around a quarter of a million people) performed at the lowest level of literacy, level 1.

The IALS research, and research by the City University in 1998, shows that poor literacy and numeracy skills have serious consequences for the individual, the family, society and the economy.

• Individuals with poor literacy skills are most likely to end up in unskilled or semi-skilled work, twice as likely to have been made redundant or dismissed from their first job and four times more likely to experience long-term unemployment.

• It is very likely that parents with limited literacy and numeracy skills will be less able to give their children a good start or to help them if they have problems.

• Improved literacy and numeracy lead to benefits across society. The level of crime, social welfare requirements and poverty can be reduced, health improved and community participation increased.

• Poor levels of literacy carry economic costs as well as causing personal problems. People at work need good literacy and numeracy skills to be able to cope with the demands of the job, both safely and effectively. A knowledge-based economy, which embraces the opportunities of modern technology, must ensure
its workforce has the necessary competencies in literacy and numeracy and the culture to continue learning and raising its skills.

There have been many attempts to define literacy and numeracy. In developing this Strategy the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) uses a definition that encompasses the skills and abilities needed by all to ensure that they can participate in society and working life. It defines literacy and numeracy as Essential Skills, which require:

“the ability to communicate by talking and listening, reading and writing; to use numeracy; and the ability to handle information”.

Vision

The vision for the delivery of this Strategy is:

“to provide opportunities for adults to update their Essential Skills to assist them in improving their overall quality of life, their personal development and their employment opportunities and by so doing to promote greater economic development, social inclusion and cohesion”.

Principles

The principles which underpin this Strategy are:

- visible and committed leadership;
- a high quality and integrated provision delivered through partnerships;
- accessible and flexible provision which suits the needs of the learner; and
- provision which is supported by professional tutors within a professional framework.

Strands

The Strategy has five key strands which contain a number of actions detailing what the Department will do, and how it will be achieved. The key strands are:

- the need for strong leadership at all levels to deliver the Strategy;
• a structured and coherent framework which is based on common standards, a common curriculum and robust assessment and accreditation procedures;

• quality in all aspects of provision which is key to the success of the strategy and which in practice will be monitored and evaluated;

• a diverse range of provision which is key to building capacity and which must be flexible and creative to suit the needs of the learner; and

• a comprehensive promotional campaign which is essential to increasing awareness and driving up demand among adults for Essential Skills.

Aims

The aim will be to deliver the Strategy in two broad phases, which to some degree, overlap in time.

Phase 1, which covers the first year of the Strategy, will be largely transitional and aimed at building the structured framework. The framework will be in place by September 2003 and will include a set of standards, a curriculum, appropriate assessment and accreditation procedures, and a more professionalised tutor framework base.

The aim of Phase 2 will be to build capacity and engage learners. Capacity will be built across all providers of literacy and numeracy and new avenues such as work-based and family learning will be explored. A promotional campaign to engage learners will begin in January 2003 followed by a major drive to secure participation in June 2003.

The measures proposed are designed to widen access, in particular to those in greatest need, to enable them to improve their skills. They will have a positive affect on all groups specified in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The measures will also advance the Executive's New Targeting Social Need (NTSN) policy and the work it is taking forward on the equality front, by providing the opportunity for socially disadvantaged people and groups to improve their qualifications and Essential Skills, and increase their employability.

The Strategy will be reviewed and modified to take account of research findings, evaluation outcomes and funding streams. The following chapters set out how the strategy is to be developed and implemented, the structures and training required to deliver it and how the strategy will be funded, monitored and evaluated.
Developing The Strategy

‘Essential Skills for Living’ A Framework and Consultation Paper setting out proposed actions for a Strategy to improve the Essential Skills of literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland was launched on 17 April 2002 and the consultation period ended on 21 June 2002.

The Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) managed the consultation process jointly with the Department and held a series of open consultation events across Northern Ireland to ensure all interested parties had the opportunity to contribute their views.

A total of 195 responses to the Strategy proposals was received from a wide range of stakeholders including individuals, community and voluntary groups, Further Education colleges, employers and their representative bodies, trade unions, Government Bodies, Committees and Departments and many others. A full list of respondents and their feedback is available from DEL on request.

Feedback from the public meetings, and the diverse range of responses have helped to shape this Strategy. It is the product of positive engagement with those who will be involved in its delivery and, in particular, learners who will receive training and support in updating their Essential Skills.

The key messages coming from the consultation exercise and findings from our research were that:

• the Strategy is widely welcomed;

• leadership is required at all levels;

• a flexible, creative, accessible curriculum and qualifications framework is required;

• improved professional development and support for tutors at all levels is essential;

• continuous robust research is required to inform the ongoing development and delivery of the Strategy;

• a diverse range of provision delivered through local, genuine and meaningful partnerships across a wide range of organisations is necessary;

• significant increased funding is key to building capacity across all sectors; and

• a comprehensive regional promotional campaign is vital to raise awareness and target a diverse range of learners.
Implementing The Strategy

The actions the Department will take to achieve the aims in the Strategy are detailed under the five key strands. Each of the strands sets out what will be done, and how it will be achieved.

Leadership

Respondents indicated that leadership is required at all levels for the Strategy to be successful. They welcomed the proposed Essential Skills Committee but advised that membership of the committee must include all sectors, learners and knowledgeable practitioners.

In response DEL will:

• by September 2002, establish an Essential Skills Committee chaired by the Minister for Employment and Learning with representatives of key stakeholders from government departments, business and industry, the further education sector and the voluntary and community sectors to drive the Strategy forward;

• each quarter, arrange a meeting of the Essential Skills Committee to monitor progress against the strands and to discuss and direct the future development of the Strategy; and

• invite key stakeholders to advise the Committee and to use their areas of expertise to inform the implementation of the Strategy.

Building a Structured Framework

In the Framework and Consultation Paper, the Department stated that the approach to Essential Skills provision in Northern Ireland must be structured and coherent and founded on a quality regime. The regime should be based on curriculum standards and rigorous assessment and accreditation procedures designed specifically to meet the needs and aspirations of the learners.
(a) Standards and Curriculum

Respondents told us there was a need for a flexible, creative curriculum and that the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curriculum used in England and Wales should be adopted in Northern Ireland. The particular needs of adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) and of learners whose first language is not English (ESOL) need to be taken into account through the curriculum framework. They also advised that the time-scale for the introduction of the curriculum was too tight.

In response DEL will:

- by September 2002, adopt the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curriculum, used in England and Wales, and taking account of the lessons learned from the pilot projects established to test the Curriculum in different contexts, produce guidance on how best to use the Curriculum in Northern Ireland;

- by December 2002, have made available awareness training in the use of Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curriculum for all practising tutors;

- by January 2003, have instructed providers to introduce fully the new Core Curriculum to all adults enrolling in Essential Skills provision to allow tutors time to become familiar with the new materials;

- by March 2003, have made available awareness training in the Curricula for ESOL and LDD learners for relevant tutors; and

- by September 2003, have instructed providers to introduce fully the new Curricula to all ESOL and LDD adults enrolling in Essential Skills provision to allow appropriate support mechanisms to be in place and tutors time to become familiar with the new materials.

(b) Assessment and Accreditation

In relation to initial assessment, respondents to the consultation advised that a standardised, initial assessment tool is required to support tutors working within the structured framework. Essential Skills qualifications in Northern Ireland need to be transferable, accessible for people with disabilities and available for accreditation through a range of awarding bodies.

Small steps for accreditation are desirable as they promote effort in subsequent learning, and funding should not be solely linked to achievement. Clarification is also needed on the relationship and continuum between Essential Skills and Key Skills.
In response DEL will:

- by September 2002, produce interim funding and tracking arrangements to encourage recruitment and progression of learners;

- between September and December 2002, encourage providers to enter learners who are ready for accreditation at Entry Level for qualifications linked to the National Qualifications Framework prior to the introduction of the new Entry Level Essential Skills qualification in Northern Ireland in January 2003;

- between September 2002 and August 2003 ensure that learners who are ready for accreditation above Entry Level are entered for Essential Skills qualifications at Levels 1 and 2 linked to the National Qualifications Framework and encouraged to complete the full Key Skills qualifications;

- by December 2002, have obtained from the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) advice on the assessment of Essential Skills at Entry Level;

- from January to June 2003, involve Awarding Bodies in the initial phasing in of an assessment and accreditation regime for Essential Skills at Entry Level;

- by September 2003, put in place an assessment and accreditation scheme which will be available to all Awarding Bodies accredited to offer Essential Skills;

- by September 2003, liase with bodies in GB and Ireland to consider the development of an appropriate diagnostic assessment tool;

- by September 2003, have commenced the initial phase of implementation of a recording and tracking system linked to the new qualifications and assessment regime;

- by September 2003, have in place a funding mechanism which acts in support of the engagement and progression of learners towards achievement of the new qualifications; and

- by December 2003, produce advice on an assessment methodology for Levels 1 and 2 to provide a continuum with Key Skills and Entry Level Essential Skills.
Building Quality

In the Framework and Consultation Paper the Department proposed that providers of Essential Skills work to a single set of quality assurance indicators and that a framework of qualifications be developed to improve the professionalism of tutors. New and effective quality assurance procedures need to be introduced for monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision.

(a) Quality Assurance

With respect to quality assurance, respondents indicated that rigorous inspection is welcomed and was a positive step, which could result in improved quality of learning and teaching in Essential Skills and the opportunity to highlight good practice.

In response DEL will:

• by June 2003, in conjunction with ETI monitor the effectiveness of the implementation of the Strategy; and

• by September 2003, will have agreed with ETI a set of quality indicators against which all practice in Essential Skills will be monitored and evaluated.

(b) Tutor Training

Respondents indicated that the development of a more professional career structure for Essential Skills tutors is to be welcomed. In developing new qualifications, the two Universities need to follow the standards developed by the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) to ensure they are transferable within the United Kingdom. Funding should be made available for all tutor training and accessibility needs to be taken into consideration when arranging courses. Continued professional development is required for all levels of tutors and further research is needed to establish an updated tutor database.

Specific training is required to support tutors working with learners whose first language is not English and tutors working with adults to meet the needs of ESOL and LDD. Training should also be made available for key individuals who interface with potential adult learners in the community and for outreach workers to help them identify those adults who would benefit from Essential Skills training.

It was felt that volunteer tutors could play an important role and they should continue to have access to training, be involved in planning and be provided with appropriate support.
In response DEL will in conjunction with Queens University Belfast (QUB) and the University of Ulster (UU):

- by September 2002, ensure that Essential Skills are integrated into the Post-Graduate Certificate/Diploma in Further and Higher Education;

- by September 2002, have in place a new tutor training qualification at Level 4 to 5 which will be piloted by QUB and be available by September 2003 for teaching by other interested providers who meet the specification criteria set by QUB;

- by November 2002, have established a robust database of information on all tutors;

- by January 2003, have developed a qualifications framework for all levels of tutors ranging from a support role at level 2, equivalent to that previously offered to volunteers, to post graduate level;

- by January 2003, have in place a continuous professional development module for qualified tutors acting as mentors for those undertaking learner support qualifications at Levels 2 and 3;

- by September 2003, have developed the first of a series of teaching and/or continuing professional development modules that can be accredited towards an award for all tutors from Level 2 through to Level 5;

- by September 2003, have developed new literacy and numeracy pathways at degree and postgraduate level;

- by September 2003, ensure that all new tutor qualifications are mapped to FENTO standards, the National Qualifications Framework or the Higher Education Framework as appropriate; and

- over the next three years provide support for individual tutor development linked to available resources.

(c) Curriculum and Staff Support Structure

Respondents advised that the proposed Curriculum and Staff Support Structure should support and be accessible to all providers of Essential Skills, including prison and army education services and those working with ESOL and LDD learners. Concerns were expressed that the new structure would be aligned to the Further Education (FE) sector, which could alienate and disadvantage other Essential Skills providers. There was also concern about the lack of support for tutors and providers between the curriculum being introduced and the new structure being put in place.
In response DEL will:

- by September 2003, have in place a new Curriculum and Staff Support Structure to support all Essential Skills providers; and

- by December 2003, appoint Essential Skills specialists to work with ETI to monitor and support the new structured framework.

(d) Research

The responses to the consultation indicated strong support for the commissioning of local research to establish a robust baseline and to inform the continuing development and delivery of the Strategy. Research is needed in a wide range of areas such as, workplace and family learning. There is also a need for research to explore barriers to learning and how the most disadvantaged and excluded adults can be reached.

In response DEL will:

- by September 2002, establish a Research Steering Group to advise on the research which needs to be commissioned; and

- by December 2002, carry out an audit of available research and develop a programme of research to inform the implementation of the Strategy.

Building Capacity and Funding

In the Framework and Consultation Paper the Department proposed that engaging adult learners would require significant expansion of traditional provision such as that within the FE colleges and the voluntary and community sectors. It also proposed that learning should extend to the workplace and other non-traditional settings and the tutor base be increased.

Respondents advised that a diverse range of providers is the key to the success of the strategy. Effective partnerships are required across a wide range of providers and organisations to implement the Strategy in a range of contexts and settings. In particular, it was felt that the FE sector should work even more closely with the voluntary and community sector, employers and training organisations.

Relevant and customised programmes are needed within the workplace and Essential Skills training needs to be integrated into each organisation’s human resources strategy. Incentives are needed to attract potential learners to family
learning programmes and learning models are required to share and promote good practice in the workplace and family learning.

Many respondents felt that there should be more scope for innovation within the New Deal and Jobskills Programmes so as to integrate Essential Skills provision and to allow learners more time to progress. Learndirect programmes were believed to be an effective medium but more work is required to support and progress learners.

There was concern from all sectors about sufficiency of funding. Particular concern was also expressed about the Department’s FE funding formula and the dependence on short-term Peace II funding.

The Department recognises that funding is a key issue, which will impact directly on the implementation and delivery of this Strategy and, in particular, on achievement of the targets. Significant resources are already committed from a wide range of sources and the Department will ensure these resources are targeted effectively. The main sources of funding available currently to providers are the FE College funding mechanism (£1.9m per annum) and the EU Peace II funding (£9m) available until December 2004, although projects will have until December 2006 to complete the spending of funding. The Department will continue to bid for additional resources to build capacity.

In addition DEL will:

- by September 2003, have examined and made recommendations on a funding formula which encourages and supports learners whilst at the same time recognises progression of learners;

- by September 2003, have put in place arrangements for funding which will be open to providers who meet the criteria outlined below. The funding will exclude Peace II funding which will be managed by EGSA and the total amount will be dependent on availability of resources. Providers bidding for funding will be required to meet certain key criteria. In particular, they will be required to commit to:

  - using the Core Curricula for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, ESOL and LDD as appropriate;

  - entering adult learners on the new Essential Skills qualifications;

  - using tutors who have obtained qualifications at least at Level 3 or 4 in Essential Skills/Basic Skills;
Equipped for the Future:

- working within the assessment and accreditation procedures developed by CCEA;
- working within the Common Inspection Framework set of indicators for Essential Skills developed by ETI; and
- working in partnership across a range of providers.

- work with EGSA on an ongoing basis to ensure Peace II funds are effectively targeted and a significant percentage is allocated to workplace and family learning; and
- submit bids for funding in annual budget rounds so as to sustain/expand capacity.

In addition DEL will:

- by September 2002, integrate Essential Skills provision into all its training programmes;
- by January 2003, have reviewed the Jobskills arrangements to take account of the feedback received from the consultation;
- by March 2003, evaluate the outcomes of the pilot projects in the workplace funded by the Innovation Fund and produce best practice case studies;
- by March 2003, explore with employers and trade unions ways of encouraging employees to upgrade their Essential Skills;
- by September 2003, identify and support champions for Essential Skills among employers and trade unions;
- by September 2003, have carried out research into best practice initiatives and programmes in promoting family learning and disseminated best practice;
- by September 2003, have encouraged the wider public sector to maximise opportunities to build Essential Skills within their provision; and
- by September 2003, train DEL staff who interface with the public in the early identification of learners with weaknesses in literacy and numeracy.
Engaging Learners

In the Framework and Consultation Paper the Department proposed that the success of the Strategy will depend on the development and implementation of a comprehensive promotional campaign, to increase awareness and drive up demand among adults for Essential Skills. It recommended that EGSA would provide advice on the wider aspects of promotion. This should include advice on who should handle the initial contact and support for learners arising from the promotional activity and what scope there would be to involve, sensitively, in promotional activity, those individuals who come into regular contact with the general public.

Responses to the consultation indicated strong support for a regional promotional campaign to raise overall awareness of the need for Essential Skills and to take account of the varying needs, priorities and ambitions of learners. These should include lifestyle factors, flexibility in provision, diverse learning opportunities, and guidance and counselling for learners in a range of settings. Robust research is needed to develop a targeted and effective promotional campaign, which engages a wide range of learners in different contexts and locations. Many suggestions were received on how to promote learning and there was overall support that local personalities and the support of local and regional media should be enlisted.

In response DEL will:

• by September 2002, agree a compact with EGSA to act as the main advocacy and promotional body for Essential Skills;

• by January 2003, have worked with EGSA on developing a comprehensive promotional campaign strategy aimed at raising awareness of Essential Skills and targeted at the needs of learners from a wide range of contexts;

• by March 2003, have worked with EGSA on developing a strategy, based on informed research, to engage a wide range of learners through its network of regional offices; and

• by June 2003, have launched a major promotional drive aimed at increasing awareness and encouraging learners to update their skills.
Targets

In the Framework and Consultation Paper, the Department detailed the overall targets for engaging learners to improve their Essential Skills. The total number of learners supported currently by colleges and the voluntary sector approximate to 5,500 per annum. The Department proposed by 2005 to increase this number to 25,000 representing 10% of the overall target group during the life span of this Strategy.

Respondents expressed some concern that the targets for learners were inadequate and that the timing of the increase in tutor provision did not correspond with increased demand. It was suggested that more detailed and specific targets were required to include, for example, NTSN, urban/rural split, and ESOL and LDD learners.

In response DEL will:

• by September 2003, have in place Essential Skills qualifications which enables progression to Key Skills Level 2;

• by March 2004, have established a target to measure the number of adults who have improved their Essential Skills qualifications against the new qualifications; and

• by March 2004, have supported 14,500 Essential Skills learners.

DEL would be keen to increase the percentage learner targets further if additional resources become available.
## Glossary of Terms

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCEA</td>
<td>Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment</td>
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<td>DEL</td>
<td>Department for Employment and Learning</td>
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<td>EGSA</td>
<td>Educational Guidance Service for Adults</td>
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<td>ETI</td>
<td>Education and Training Inspectorate</td>
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<td>FE</td>
<td>Further Education</td>
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<td>IALS</td>
<td>International Adult Literacy Survey</td>
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<td>NVQ</td>
<td>National Vocational Qualification</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTSN</td>
<td>New Targeting Social Need</td>
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<tr>
<td>LDD</td>
<td>Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>English Speakers of Other Languages</td>
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<tr>
<td>FENTO</td>
<td>Further Education National Training Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>QUB</td>
<td>Queens University Belfast</td>
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<tr>
<td>UU</td>
<td>University of Ulster</td>
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<td>EU</td>
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Equipped for the Future:

Notes