Department for Business Innovation & Skills

RESEARCH

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Contents

1. Introduction

SQW, in conjunction with the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC), GfK NOP and the National Foundation for Educational Research, was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to undertake an evaluation of adult basic skills provision.

The study included a quantitative survey, incorporating surveys of learners, and a qualitative assessment, involving in-depth research with learners on adult literacy and numeracy courses. This report (Part 2 of the study) covers the findings of the qualitative research. A separate report (Part 1) covers the findings from the quantitative assessment.

1.1. Objectives of the qualitative research

The primary objective of the qualitative research was to **provide a detailed understanding of how learners use and practise their literacy and numeracy skills outside the classroom**. In addition, the qualitative research was designed to:

- explore learners' experiences of their course

- see what links learners made between practise outside the classroom and course experiences.

1.2. Methodology

1.2.1. Stages of the approach

The stages of the approach to the qualitative research were as follows:

- **Recruitment of learners:** This was undertaken through colleges. We sought to identify and obtain the help of colleges from different locations across England. Seven colleges participated, one each from Yorkshire & Humber, the North West, the West Midlands, London and the South East, and two from the East Midlands. Colleges assisted by identifying and recruiting learners from different courses and levels of learning (i.e. Entry, Level 1 and Level 2). This helped to ensure a range of learner perspectives. Twenty-eight learners in total were recruited and interviewed.

- **Round 1 interviews with 28 learners:** Face-to-face interviews were undertaken using a 'narrative elicitation' technique, which is an unstructured learner-led approach to interviewing (described below). These were completed on college sites to ensure ease of contact by aligning with learners' provision or other college activities. Depending on the extent to which learners engaged in the interview process, these lasted between 30 minutes and one hour.

- **Video diaries:** Nine learners were identified during the first round interviews to take part in a subsequent video diary exercise. These were selected based on those who interviewers felt were likely to complete a diary study over the immediate

subsequent two-week period. Learners were provided with a mini video and were asked to record their experiences of practising their skills outside of the classroom.

- **Second round interviews:** We undertook follow-up visits with learners to complete second round interviews to discuss the experiences that they had recorded, how these had helped with their skills development and how they were related to their course. This deliberately followed a more structured approach to interviewing than the narrative elicitation technique used in round one. The second round interviews also enabled the interviewers to collect the video material. Five follow-up interviews were completed (four face-to-face and one by telephone). Course pressures resulted in a further second round interview being only a brief conversation, and an exchange of the video material. Due to family commitments, two interviews were not completed, though the video material was collected for one of these. The ninth learner was absent from their scheduled interview, and did not respond to any contacts; therefore we could not complete an interview nor collect the video material

It is important to note that the research covers a relatively small sample of adult basic skills learners (28 learners took part). Whilst we ensured that a range of learner perspectives were obtained, the findings cannot necessarily be generalised to the wider population of learners. In addition, given the nature of the narrative elicitation technique (see below), the analysis inevitably focuses to some extent on the information from those learners who were more forthcoming in the initial interviews. The study findings, nevertheless, provide an in-depth insight to the experiences and skills practice of learners.

1.2.2. Techniques used: narrative interviews

The methodology adopted for the work was quite innovative. The narrative elicitation technique is deliberately interviewee-led (rather than directive), and is designed to draw out learners' own stories without direct prompts or influence over their answers. The emphasis is on the interviewer listening, following-up on particular points in a non-directive manner. The technique deliberately avoids question words such as 'why' and 'how', which may imply a 'correct' answer. Instead, simple questions or prompts are given that focus on obtaining the learner's story, either through questions such as 'Can you tell me more about x?' or through the use of memory recall prompts over the relevant period of interest, for example asking what they did at the weekend/last week at work that may have involved reading and writing.

It is inevitable, however, that some interviews using the narrative elicitation technique may yield relatively little. As the approach places more emphasis on learners to lead the discussion, some shy or quiet learners may say relatively little in the interviews. For this reason we adopted strategies to promote conversation, including:

- visual tools to stimulate discussions asking learners, for example, to develop a lifeline reflecting their experiences of education

- a target sample size that was larger, at 30, than planned (20) as previous experience suggested that as many as one in three would provide limited data.

The format of the first round interviews covered the following areas:

- basic information on their courses, partly to obtain some key facts on learners' characteristics, and partly to help learners feel at ease in the interview

- how learners practised their skills in their daily life

- learners' education history, prompted by the use of visual charts

- learners' confidence in relation to literacy or numeracy, and how this had changed over time, again prompted by a visual tool

- an exploration of the people or organisations who were affected by learners' skills in literacy or numeracy.

We deliberately did not prompt for links between practise outside of the classroom and learners' courses, so that learners gave answers that reflected their experiences, and not those that may have been 'expected' because they were on a literacy or numeracy course. One of the aims was also to see if learners made links with their course in an unprompted way.

1.2.3. Techniques used: video diaries

The video diaries were also an innovative approach to capturing data on learner experiences of practising outside the classroom. These were intended to gain real-time evidence of how learners used and practiced their skills outside the classroom. Learners who were given the cameras were provided with verbal instructions on how to operate the camera and how to undertake the task. These instructions were deliberately non-prescriptive so that learners could find the best way for them individually to keep a video diary. Learners were provided with suggestions to:

- record themself or ask someone else to record whilst the learner explained what they were doing

- complete recordings at the end of a day, reflecting on tasks that they had done

- collect items that were relevant to the things that they had been doing, which could assist in the follow-up interviews.

Annex A to this report sets out the qualitative research tool in full, including the video diary instructions that were provided verbally to learners.

1.2.4. Techniques used: Financial Incentives

In order to encourage basic skills learners to take part in the study, about which they may have felt sensitive, each learner received a £20 high street shopping voucher for taking part in the first round interviews. In addition, those completing the video diaries and the second round interviews were given a second £20 high street shopping voucher.

1.2.4.1. Lessons from the approach

A number of lessons were noted from the approach taken to the research. In some cases, the narrative elicitation technique meant that we got more data on learners' backgrounds

and their personal experiences than we would have obtained in a more structured interview. This provided important evidence on the individual histories and stories of particular learners, with interviewees telling us, for example, why they had not done as well at school, and what other issues (e.g. depression, alcoholism) they were dealing with (or have dealt with in the past). The approach also meant that we were able to discuss learning successfully without being focussed on the course as their subject, and so we were able to see whether learners themselves drew links with the courses. One video-diarist, in their second round interview, expressed their surprise that they had not been asked about their course in the first interview, but no one expressed disquiet that the interviews were more wide-ranging.

As we suspected, a small number of the narrative elicitation interviews yielded relatively little data. The use of visual tools helped to an extent, but they were not effective for all learners. Some thought that the tools were a test, while others found one of the visuals too complicated.

The material provided by the video diaries was mixed. Some were very good sources of data, with learners having put quite a bit of time and thought into putting them together. These provided powerful material on how they had practised, but more particularly on how their course had affected their and their family's lives. Others provided straightforward video evidence of how learners practised their skills. As anticipated, we could not retrieve all of the video diary material, nor undertake all of the second round interviews; this was partly 'research fatigue' (with one learner ignoring researcher contact) and partly because of unexpected family circumstances of learners. This occurred despite using techniques to promote participation, including arranging second interviews at the time of the first, by taking contact details and by providing the mini video as part of the incentive. However, completion of five out of nine was lower what we had hoped for.

1.3. Structure of this report

The rest of this report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 sets out the backgrounds and characteristics of learners taking part in the qualitative research.

- Section 3 provides the evidence on the initial motivations of the learners. In addition, it sets out emerging evidence on changing motivations during the course.

- Section 4 focuses on the primary objective of the qualitative research, setting out how learners practised their skills outside the classroom, and barriers and enablers to this.

- Section 5 provides details on the course experience, and also the perceived effects of courses, in particular on confidence, skills and horizons.

- Section 6 provides some concluding observations on the qualitative research.

It should be noted that, in this report, all learners have been anonymised; we refer to individual learners using pseudonyms.

1. Learner backgrounds

This section looks at the characteristics of the interviewed learners and, specifically, their educational backgrounds. The important point to draw from this section is that the small sample interviewed comprises a variety of learners of different ages and with different experiences and backgrounds. The end of the section includes details of their entry points to courses.

1.1. Characteristics

The sample of interviewed learners was split approximately two-thirds female [18] and one-third male [10]. The learners were normally studying either literacy [13 learners] or numeracy [12 learners], though a small number were studying both [3 learners].

Three quarters of the sample [21 out of 28 learners] had left school more than ten years ago, four had left less than five years ago and three left school between five and ten years ago.

In our small sample, proportionately more females started a basic skills course within ten years of leaving school than males. Of the seven learners who left school less than ten years ago, six were female (making up one third of the female sample); all but one of the male sample had left school more than ten years ago.

Figure 1: Number of years since learner left school by gender of interviewee (percentages show of total female/male split)

Source: SQW Analysis

Just over one-third of learners [11 learners] were studying at Level 2 with a total of 10 learners studying at Entry Level (1, 2 or 3). Three learners were studying at Level 1.[1]

Figure 2: Number of learners by studying level
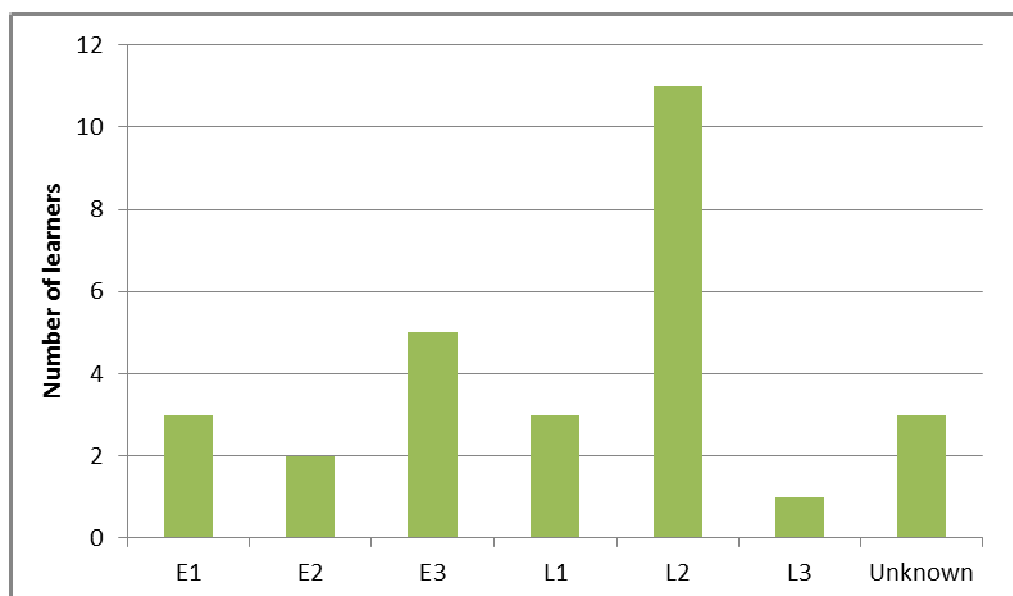
<div align="right">*Source: SQW Analysis*</div>

1.1.1. School experiences

The learners all came from a variety of school experience backgrounds:

- Just over one-half of all learners [16] mentioned a negative school experience. Some commented on issues of exclusion, fear or dislike of examinations, episodes of bullying, apparently indifferent teachers and the use of learning styles that they could not relate to.   Jessica, for example, said that she did not get on well because school made her feel "like an idiot". Geraint and Alistair reported negative experiences, feeling felt that the necessary support was not there for them. These two learners also recognised that they themselves were partly to blame for not attending or not caring. .

Quotes 1 and 2

"There weren't much help at school to be honest. But I think it were my fault, half of us didn't want teaching in them days. They just sort of didn't bother. They just wanted them who did well… I'm not blaming teachers, it's obviously my fault as well for not wanting it." (Geraint)

"I didn't attend school as much as I should have done, and teachers at school then just saw I didn't care in a way, all those who couldn't read and spell properly they put in another class" (Alistair)

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[1] Note that we interviewed one learner who was studying at Level 3. Whilst strictly out of the scope for "basic skills", this learner had previously studied a basic level course.

- Just over one-fifth of the learners we spoke to felt that the school system at the time had not worked for them due to lack of appropriate support or disruptive classroom environments. Both Jessica and Nicola found their school experience had not worked for them as teachers were unable to give them the attention or explanation they needed. These two, however, along with a number of other learners, appreciated and described the benefits of basic skills courses with smaller classes where students all had the desire to learn and to get the most out of the courses.

Quotes 3 and 4
"When I was in school I didn't get to grips with things….you're in an environment where you're in a large classroom full of maybe thirty children and one teacher, and I just felt that the teachers weren't able to give me the time and attention that I needed." (Nicola)
"I had some nasty teachers, they didn't explain things to me properly." (Jessica)

- Four learners had been fairly successful in their educational career but had found literacy or numeracy particularly difficult. They now had a desire to get to grips with the subject or had reached a point in their career path where their lack of skills were providing an embarrassment at work, at home or in social situations.

Just under one-third [8] of learners' life paths had precluded their continuing education due to teenage pregnancy, emigration or home circumstances.

1.1.2. Education histories

Learners' views (summarised in visual learners' trajectories)[2] suggested that, across the sample, their experiences of overall education over their lifetime had generally improved. Each learner had their own education story to tell which had brought them to the course. Around one-half [14 learners] of the learners' experience of education had been a mixture of ups and downs and had not always been constant. Laura mentioned being bullied at school which was a low, but said that life had improved, and was on "an up" since being at college. Dani had experienced some ups and downs during her education experience: she also mentioned periods of stability, however, where her learning experience had been "okay". Just under half [12 learners] talked of education experiences that had involved some kind of on-going improvement over their life. Only two learners talked about their educational trajectory as a constant process, without any notable peaks or troughs over time.

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[2] See questions 7-9 in the research tool that is reproduced in Annex A.

> **Quote 5**
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> "*What you do is you learn and sometimes you're like, "I'm not quite sure," so you go down and then you try to pick yourself up again, you go up and then you have like this straight line and you're fine, you're fine, and you're like, "Oh my God I can't do it," you go down again and then you go up. So that's me, mine* [my pattern] *is like up, down and up and stable, it goes stable a little bit, and then I start shaking again and go down again. So that's how I learn.*" (Dani)

In relation to learning literacy or numeracy skills, specifically, the results were more varied. Although following different routes, 22 learners said they had experienced an improvement overall over their lives. Two learners said there had been neither improvement nor decline and only one learner said that there experience had been negative (the trajectories for three other learners were not captured).

Every learner who responded to a discussion about their education trajectory over the last six months [26 learners], however, commented on a positive, improving experience.

> **Quote 6**
>
> "*I have had my ups and downs, and now I seem to be going up…Because I feel that I've improved more at college than school.*" (Laura)

1.2. Entry points

As may be expected from a sample of learners from different backgrounds, learners' entry points to the college and course varied. Whilst personal motivation was the main entry point for nearly one-half of learners interviewed [13 learners], Figure 3 shows the variety of other primary learner entry points onto the basic skills course.

Figure 3: Primary learner entry points on to basic skills course
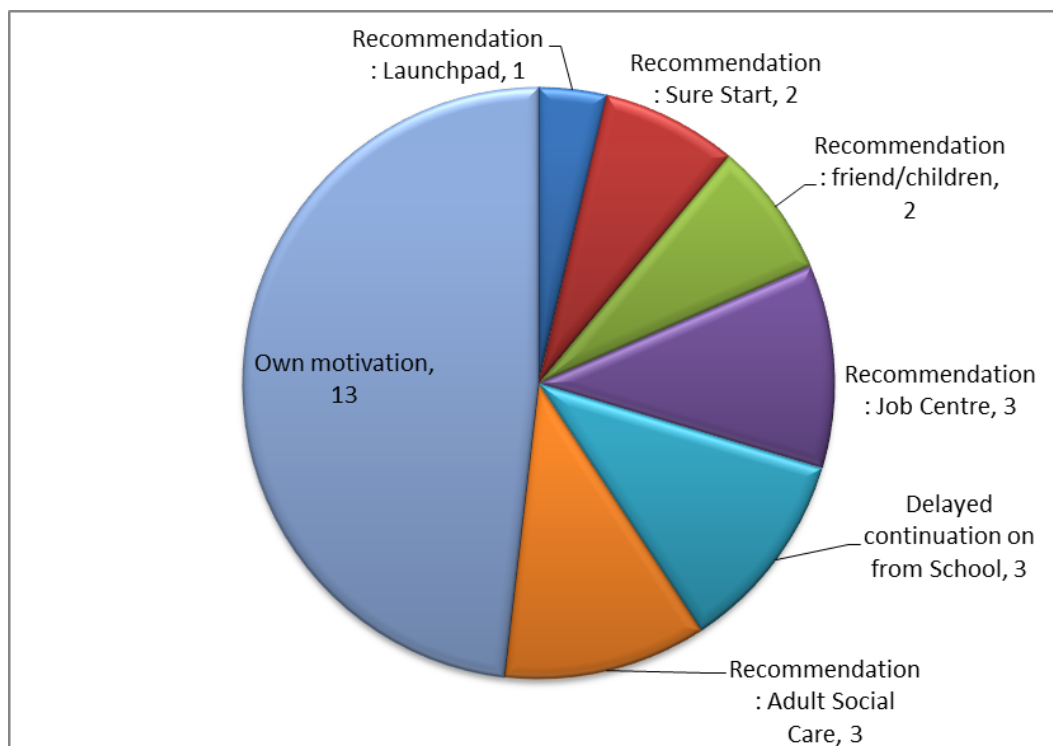
Source: SQW Analysis
Note: Launchpad is a course for single parents.

To summarise and aggregate the different referral points, learners who sought out the course on their own accounted for just under half [13] of the interviewees. Referrals to courses through other means such as recommendations from family and friends or other institutions such as a probation team or the Job Centre accounted for half of learners [14].

Quote 7

"I went to Jobcentre - they told us there, that you can- there's a course at college. And I didn't know…. there's a lot of people out there like me who didn't know that you could come to college. I didn't- I just thought there were like English classes and not- not learning." (Geraint)

Of particular interest are the numbers who were referred through Adult Social Care; these accounted for as many of the learners as more traditional routes through the Job Centre or a delayed progression from school.

1.3. Summary

This Section shows the variety of learner backgrounds within the sample for this qualitative research. Whilst just over one-half of learners mentioned a negative school experience, others were more favourable. Some noted that perhaps school did not provide the right environment for them to learner, and a small number of learners actually reported successful school careers. What was notably common across the learners interviewed was that, over their lifetimes, almost all learners characterised their education and training

experiences as having ups and downs. For most, the overall trajectory was one of improvement.

The referral routes onto the courses were broadly split in two, with just under one-half indicating that it was their "own motivation" that had led them to the course and the remainder receiving a recommendation. The sources of recommendations varied, including some that may have been less expected, such as adult social care services.

2. Motivation

This section discusses the motivations of learners focussing on why learners initially wanted to take part in their course. From the evidence, there are also some findings emerging about changing motivations, as learners take part in courses, and the course effects on their personal horizons. Given the particular scope of this qualitative study, we have not examined in detail changing motivations and horizons, though we identify some of the key messages.

2.1. Initial motivations

Initial motivations for enrolling onto their literacy or numeracy course varied between learners, who each had their own story to tell on what had led them to apply for the course. Figure 4 shows broadly the different categories of initial motivations learners gave for entering onto their course. The most common initial motivation, for just over two thirds of learners, had been job/career-related, that is, to acquire the skills or qualifications they needed to help them with the continuation of their current educational path or to apply for a new career.

Figure 4: Learners motivations for entering onto the course
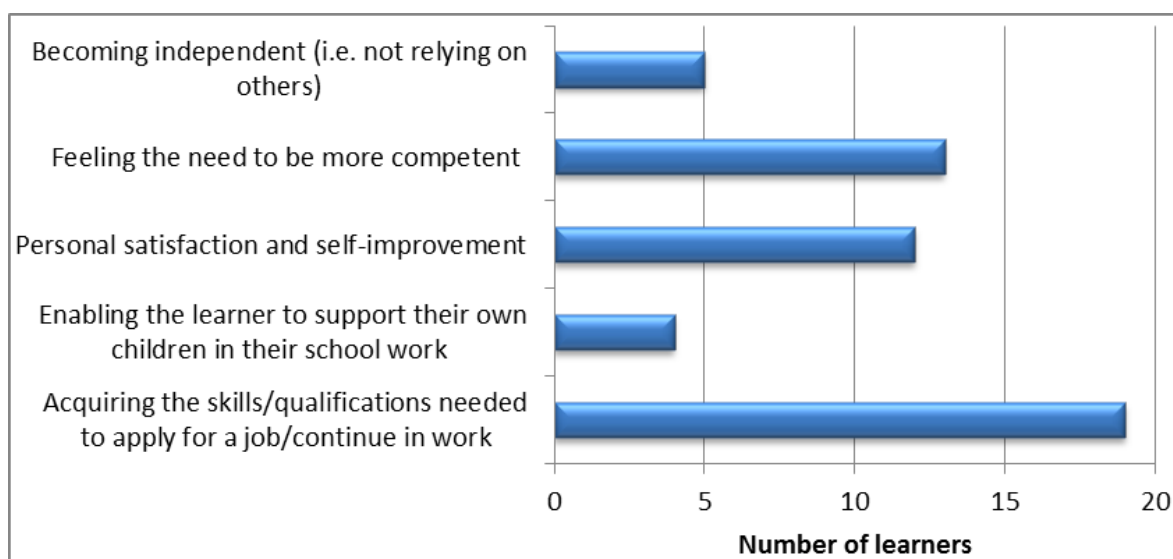
Source: SQW analysis

In addition, just under one-half of learners stated their motivation was self-improvement and to feel more competent with words or numbers [13 learners]. For at least one learner (Chris), the motivation was linked to the possibility of going on to higher education. For others there was a more direct career link, whether for the future (Nicola), or to enable progression in their current career (being allowed to use the till, or working more closely with customers).

Quotes 8 and 9

"The main reason I took the course is to enter to the higher education. That was my main reason. Self-improvement is like about twenty per cent of my- you know, encourage me to do it. But the rest of it, the rest eighty per cent is my- to go for higher education." (Chris)

"I decided that I want to go into being a teaching assistant and being a teaching assistant would mean that I would have to use maths." (Nicola)

For many of the learners, motivation was a combination of competency and career progression. Bradley, in contrast, simply stated that he wanted to improve himself in order to have a higher standard of living.

Quote 10

"I want to have a good job, I want to have a good house, good money, and I know that I've got it in me to do it." (Bradley)

As shown in Figure 4, there were also primarily social or personal motivations for taking part in courses. Five of the learners were motivated by gaining personal independence. Four of the learners, like Geraint, identified their children as motivation to improving their literacy or numeracy skills, because the course would improve their ability to help children with school work.

Quote 11

"I feel it's a father's duty to help their children. I've helped them but when it comes to written, either me wife's done it or computers… they've come out really well as children, I'm glad. I didn't want 'em to be like me... My wife's done paperwork for 'em if they needed it." (Geraint)

2.1.1. People affected by their skills

Family, friends and work colleagues or customers were listed by learners as important in underpinning their motivation for taking part in the courses. Related to this, we asked leaners to identify which people in their lives were most affected by their skills in either literacy or numeracy (see questions 17-19 in the research tool, which is reproduced in Annex A).

While five leaners identified themselves as most affected, the majority of leaners [18] put family members as those most affected by their skills, including Saskia who said her son was the most affected: *"my son…I can be able to help him in homework".* Less central, but also important to many learners were friends, classmates, tutors, and work or interests. For example, Saskia mentioned her friend who had been positively affected by her own improving skills, because her friend had encouraged her to get involved in the first place. This had resulted in Saskia encouraging her to try and improve her skills: *"My friends- I'm*

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telling them- one of them was telling me she's doing fashion and I told her why not come back and learn literacy and numeracy."

Though some identified friends and classmates as most affected (i.e. in the central circle), there were a couple of exceptions who identified personal interests (one indicated "poetry" and one indicated "church group") or work (one citing "benefit office staff") as being the activities or people most affected by their skills.

2.2. A process of changing motivation and expanding horizons

Some of the interviewed learners had experienced a process of changing motivation through the course. For some learners, pride in their achievements to date appeared to motivate them towards further courses or had contributed to increasing their ambition. Jessica mentioned her own self-doubt before passing the exams, which had led to self-recognition of her achievement.

Quote 12
"I've actually passed the exams, which I didn't think I would, but I did. And a pat on the back for myself for that. I'm working my way up, I have done well" (Jessica)

For others it had prompted them to take stock of both their social life and their work life, seeing that they could do more on both fronts. Some learners had realised that their initial motivating idea might still be a little further into the future, with Chris recognising that a degree was going to need a lot more work to reach than he had originally anticipated. Positively, and rather than prompting drop-out, this realisation had spurred him (and others) to continue their course – and indeed do more, which contrasts with many of their earlier school experiences.

One quarter of the learners (7 learners) had joined the course to improve their reading, writing or numbers skills and had then developed the motivation to continue with additional courses. Bradley, for example indicated that he now wanted to go on to university and further his education. For learners with this type of ambition, this was not just because of the potential economic benefits relating to career or job prospects, but also because they had found that they enjoyed the learning environment and could see the personal benefits it was bringing them (such as the social aspects of being on the course).

Quote 13
"I think I'd be a force to reckon with if I went to university and got a good education. So that's what I'm planning to do, and I've got the drive." (Bradley)

Being on the course appeared to have sharpened or broadened most learners' foci and horizons. Many initial motivations were enhanced, whereby the new skills were linked to higher level jobs or promotions, not just getting by in work. Section 5 of this report looks at

the evidence on the effects of courses on learners' horizons. Before that, however, we look at the opportunities learners had to practice their skills.

2.3. Summary

As we found with learner backgrounds, this Section has shown that there was variety in the initial motivations of learners. The most common were associated with career-related goals, improving one's own competences or a combination of the two. However, there were a number of learners for whom the initial motivation was personal or social, including developing self-reliance and independence, or being able to provide more support and help to the family.

The research found that there was some evidence to suggests a process of changing motivations as a result of the course. For example, pride in what had been achieved already was prompting greater ambition, and in some cases had resulted in enrolment in further courses. In addition, the course was resulting in learners taking stock of both their work and their personal lives, and highlighting to them that they could do more on both fronts. Section 5 takes this further by looking at the evidence on the effects on learner horizons.

3. Opportunities to practise

3.1. Opportunities to practise: settings and contexts

This section assesses the evidence on the opportunities to practise. In their interviews, respondents spoke of practising their literacy and numeracy skills in a range of settings. Chief among these were home and work. At home, for example, learners spoke of reading bills, reading and writing letters and emails, and helping children with their homework. At work, they reported filling in paperwork, working the till, and helping customers with calculations. Depending on the type of job the learner had, work could either provide opportunities to practice literacy or numeracy, or be a barrier. Social life also provided an important context for literacy and numeracy practices, and learners spoke of getting extra opportunities to practise at (or because of) college, for example, by helping others with their coursework or by completing homework.

Within these varied settings, learners reported a broad range of activities.   Reflecting on their improved skills and confidence, learners spoke of a range of different types of practises, both old and new. These practices fell into the following categories:

- Completely new activities

- New practices within old activities

- Old activities done with more skills and confidence.

We have used these three categories to structure this section, and within each draw out the different settings or contexts (i.e. home, work, daily/social life). These demonstrate how the course has enabled learners to develop new skills, and improve existing skills, with subsequent effects on their home lives, social lives and with respect to work. We also explore the evidence on enablers and barriers to practising, and examine the extent to which learners made links between how they practised and their courses.

3.2. Completely new practices

Some literacy learners reported reading as a completely new practice. For example, Alistair said that prior to her course, she never picked up a book to read, as she struggled too much. Since beginning her course, she now did some reading for pleasure. Writing was also cited as a completely new practice. Laura said that, throughout her adult life, she had wanted to send postcards to family members when she was on holiday. However, she lacked the skills and confidence to write these postcards, so never did. Now that she was taking a literacy course, she said, she sent postcards any time she went away, even if just for a weekend. Because of her course, she had achieved a long-standing goal.

Several numeracy learners said that they now routinely did maths, whereas they used to avoid anything to do with figures. For example, Saskia said that, prior to her numeracy course, she lacked the confidence and competence to help her teenage son with his maths homework; therefore, she left this task to her husband. Since beginning her course,

however, she had fallen in love with maths, and now was ready and able to help her son. More able, she noted with some delight, than her husband. Several of Saskia's video diary clips focused on her son's maths homework, with her helping him work through a range of problems.

Because she was studying numeracy while her son was still relatively young, Saskia was avoiding the fate of another numeracy learner, Charlotte. Despite being educated to A-level standard, Charlotte said she had always been very poor with numbers. This meant that, when raising her three children, she had felt unable to help them with their maths homework, which was something her husband had to do. Other learners spoke of their pleasure in now being able to read and calculate their household bills themselves, rather than leaving this task for their partner.

Learners also reported engaging in new "real-life" activities that made a real difference in their families' lives. For example, Sophie was now able to help family members with benefit claims. Another learner, Heather, had a disabled son. Heather devoted considerable and time and energy writing formal letters to various council departments advocating on his behalf. As she put it, *"my son has become my homework"*. For both of these women, literacy courses had provided not just better skills, but an expanded capacity to participate in civic and political life. Without the improved confidence and competence gained through their courses, neither learner would have been as capable of addressing imperatives in their lives and the lives of their families.

Learners also spoke of engaging in new social activities. For example, Jessica said that, before her course, she never joined in when friends were doing quizzes or certain games.

Quote 14
"I could never join in. I could never spell anything, so used to feel all left out."
But now, she said*, "I join in because I can actually spell some of the words. I'm not brilliant, but I'm getting better."* (Jessica)

3.3. New practices within old activities

While some learners reported engaging in completely new activities, a greater number said they were engaging in new literacy and numeracy practices within old activities. That is, they were doing the things they had always done, but, because of the course, they were no longer avoiding the literacy or numeracy elements of these activities. For some learners, these new practices within old activities took place inside the home. For example, Greg and Charlotte both said that when making recipes, they were now capable of converting between metric and imperial units, whereas previously they had been unable to use metric measures accurately.

3.3.1. Social activities and daily tasks outside the home

Learners reported positive changes to their day-to-day social activities. Almost all numeracy learners emphasised the significant ways in which their course had made shopping easier and more empowering. For example, Saskia and Charlotte said that shopping was a better, more economical experience now that they were able to add up the cost of their shopping in their head while filling up their basket. By reducing or removing guesswork, their new numeracy skills gave them a sense of control they had previously lacked, and saved potential embarrassment at the till. Sophie demonstrated this technique on a number of occasions in her video diary, estimating her grocery bill and also discounts when clothes shopping. Improved literacy also had an impact on the day-to-day shopping experience. As Laura observed happily, "I can read things on the shopping list" now.

Some respondents said that they were now able to calculate the bill when at a restaurant with friends or colleagues. For example, Jessica said that she had always left this task to others before taking part in her course, but now her friends insisted she do it, because she had become so good at it. They also insisted that she check their maths when they added something up, because her skills had become better. This was a source of great pride for her, and a real-world indicator of her progress.

Quote 15
"I can actually do it .... It feels great. And I get a hug from one of my friends because she is proud." (Jessica)

Other people spoke of being able to read signs better. One learner (Jason), a keen fisherman, said that he had never been able to read the signs at fishing sites, but now could work out what they said. This learner, whose literacy had been very low, also said that he was now able to read shop signs, rather than working out what the shop sold just by looking through the window.

3.3.2. At work

Some learners reported engaging in entirely new practices at work because of their improved skills. These workers no longer have to hide from particular tasks. For example, Geraint said that he was now filling in basic workplace forms, for example with regard to customer complaints. Before his course, he had memorised the key information, and brought the forms home for his wife to complete. Christine said that she used to ask colleagues to help her perform calculations for customers, but could now do this on her own.

3.3.3. A virtuous circle of practice and proficiency

Because these learners had developed better skills, they found more opportunities to practise. These were new opportunities in other contexts or during "old" activities – for example, adding up the bill and a restaurant, instead of leaving that for others. Such activities may be part of a virtuous circle, with improved skills increasing practice, and increased practice improving skills.

These new (or more exactly, expanded) opportunities to practice were not just a result of improved skills. Respondents noted that their improved confidence, whether subject-specific or in general, gave them the strength to try new things in old places, without being overwhelmed by fear of embarrassment or failure. This was particularly pertinent for Jessica, whose case study story is provided in the Box below.

Case study 1: Jessica

As a child, Jessica had struggled in school. Four decades later, she still had strong memories of being told by teachers that she was incapable of learning.

Because of her poor skills and limited self-confidence, Jessica had always avoided opportunities to practice literacy and numeracy. As she saw it, these were not opportunities to improve her skills, they were guarantees of the same feelings of embarrassment and failure she had suffered as a schoolgirl.

Since beginning her adult literacy and numeracy course, Jessica's skills and confidence had grown. She was now willing and able to engage in literacy and numeracy practices in social situations – for example, adding up the restaurant bill when eating out with friends. The more she threw herself into these social literacy and numeracy practices, the easier they became and the more her confidence grew. This encouraged her to work even harder in class: a virtuous cycle. Jessica was also encouraged by an odd coincidence: the school that she had attended four decades earlier had been converted into an adult education centre – the very same one she attends today. A site of embarrassment and failure had become one of success and growth.

3.4.   Old practices done with more skills and confidence

Learners discussed a range of activities they had been doing for a long time, but which they had struggled at because of poor literacy or numeracy. Because of their literacy and/or numeracy courses, these learners said they were now able to perform these activities with greater skill, confidence and satisfaction.

3.4.1. In the home

3.4.1.1. Reading with children and helping them with their homework

Chief among these activities was helping children with homework. Parents spoke at length and with pride of being able to help their children with their, reading, writing and maths.

Parents of younger children said that reading to their children was one of the most essential and rewarding activities they engaged in, and pointed to this as a prime motivation for improving their skills. These parents, many of whom were poorly educated themselves, emphasised that it was vitally important to them to be able to read to their children, both as a way of helping the children avoid literacy difficulties and because they saw this as a necessary activity for anyone wanted to be a good parent. Research evidence confirms these beliefs, showing that such family literacy practices are key to

reducing the intergenerational transmission of poor literacy and other disadvantages, and also play an important role in parent-child bonding[3].

One such parent was Jade, who said that she now read with her children every night – something she had previously done only on occasion (see quote below). Jade's video diary included numerous clips of her reading storybooks with her primary school age sound, and picture books with her toddler.

Quote 16
"Instead of making [my son] read a book [by himself], I read it too. And then we read the same book and I read a page and he reads a page." (Jade)

Other learners spoke of helping their children with their maths homework, and no longer struggling to understand the problems.

3.4.1.2. Reading to oneself

Several learners said that they had always read magazines, newspapers or even books, but not nearly as well as they wanted to. Now that they had taken a literacy course, they said, they read more and better, and got more out of it. For example, Geraint said that before his course he had never read anything but football scores – now, he was reading *Harry Potter*. Another learner, Heather, said that she used to read a bit, but only short, simple books. Now she liked to challenge herself by reading longer and more complex works.

3.4.1.3. Bills and budgets

In contrast to learners who had always avoided bills and were now able to understand them, some said that they had always dealt with their own bills and budgets, but had struggled because of poor numeracy skills. For example, Nicola used her video diary to demonstrate new, impressive skills at using spreadsheets for monthly budgeting.

Quote 17
"This is the spreadsheet that I have now made since completing my course. So I am now able to put the amount of the bills in here and here. And then put one wage and the other wage. Put total housekeeping, total outgoings for each of us. And work out in an easier way how to split the money and pay the bills equally and fairly every month." (Nicola)

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[3] Carpentieri, J., Fairfax-Cholmeley, K., Litster, J., Vorhaus, J. (2011) *Family literacy in Europe: using parental support initiatives to enhance early literacy development*. London: NRDC, Institute of Education.

3.4.1.4. DIY

A number of learners reported that DIY was easier now that their numeracy skills were better. These learners reported doing DIY with greater confidence and accuracy. As one noted, he used to do DIY, but was never able to measure out space or calculate quantity requirements for paint with any sort of accuracy. Another said that he had previously avoided DIY tasks that called for any type of numeric estimation, but no longer shied away from these calculations.

3.4.1.5. Social activities and daily tasks outside the home

Reading is not just a private activity. Group-based reading takes place in a number of contexts, including churches and music groups. Samantha said that for her, one of the key contexts for reading was her church. Since beginning her course, she said she was more confident and capable in church group reading sessions. This had won her compliments from her church group and improved her self-confidence and self-esteem.

3.4.1.6. Writing

Some learners observed that the writing practices that were a normal part of their social lives, such as emails and texts, were now done with great skill and more confidence. Samantha, for example, said that she and friends liked to use the local library's computers together, and that she and they both had noticed that her writing was improving.

3.4.2. At work

Several learners spoke of performing occupational tasks with greater efficiency and effectiveness since beginning their literacy and/or numeracy course. For example, Victoria said that she was now more confident when filling in paperwork at her job. Nicola said that, prior to her course, she had always had to "muddle through" any workplace-based calculations. Now, she had more confidence in her number skills, and was less dependent on calculators, computers and colleagues. Peter, who worked as a youth football coach, said he was more confident and capable when writing up training plans for his team. As indicated by Bradley's case study story below, he has become more proficient in everyday tasks at work, such as writing emails, and this is now translating into a new-found confidence that he can forge a successful career for himself.

Case study 2: Bradley

Bradley had been severely bullied at school and, as a consequence, had regularly played truant. Despite being a highly intelligent young man, he had left school barely able to read and write. After years of struggling to find reliable employment, he had found a good entry-level job working in the media sector. Knowing that he would be unable to do this job well if he did not improve his English and maths skills, Bradley signed up for a literacy and numeracy course.

Bradley made rapid progress, moving quickly from Entry 3 to Level 2. Because of his improved literacy and numeracy skills, he was able – and eager – to take on new challenges at work. Instead of avoiding emails, he was able to craft highly literate responses to clients' queries. Because he no longer felt that he was hiding a secret, he became more confident and outgoing at the office – and more convinced that he was capable of forging a good career. Bradley now saw his entry-level job not as the best he was capable of, but as a stepping stone to better things, including a university degree and a career as a successful entrepreneur.

Improved skills and confidence also enabled learners to contribute to their communities through volunteer work. Charlotte said that she had initially signed up for her numeracy course because her maths skills were too poor for her to work the till at the charity shop she volunteered at. After completing two numeracy courses, she now found that other charity shop colleagues were asking her to check their maths on the till. Other learners spoke of using their improved literacy and numeracy skills in volunteer roles. Heather helped out at an autism charity, for example, and Sophie was a volunteer benefits advisor and both were making use of their new-found skills.

3.5. Homework as practice

Several learners emphasised the importance of homework in providing opportunities to practice. For learners, homework was seen as a valuable aid to in-class activities. Homework seemed to be particularly valued by learners who did not feel that they had enough opportunities for real-life practice to develop their new skills. It was also valued as a way to practise skills before applying them in the real world. For example, one numeracy learner, Saskia, said that she did as much homework as possible, even getting extra assignments from her teacher, because she genuinely enjoyed the applied practice and knew it would help her in the "real world". Another learner said that he gave himself imaginary home work in order to have more opportunities to develop his skills; this learner, Ed, invented homework questions for himself based on the newspaper articles he read.

Learners who struggled with the pace of learning in their classes said that homework helped them practice at their own pace, and gave them a sense of control of their process of learning. Other learners observed that doing homework helped them to self-assess their learning progress. For example, Ed said he knew he was getting better at writing because his wife no longer needed to spend a long time checking his essays.

Homework was not always done alone. Charlotte said that she often met up with two women from her class, so they could do their homework together. For Charlotte, this added an important and rewarding social dimension to learning.

3.6. Enablers and obstacles to literacy and numeracy practice

3.6.1. Enablers of learning

The most commonly cited enabler was support from family and friends, with learners speaking extensively of the importance of their encouragement. For example, Jessica spoke of the support of one of her friends (see below), and other learners told similar tales of proud and encouraging family members and friends.

Quote 18

"I got a hug from one of my friends because she is proud that I've come back to school and have actually done something about it. Whereas before I used to hide away. So she's proud of me that way. Because I'm actually doing something about it." (Jessica)

This type of emotional support was not just provided by family and friends. Learners were keen to emphasise the extensive and, as they saw it, essential emotional support they received from tutors and other college staff. This support played a key role in motivating learners from week to week and helping them believe that they could finally, after all these years of struggle, improve their literacy and numeracy.

In addition to providing emotional support, family and friends provided practical help. In some cases this was directly related to learning – for example, the wife who checked her husband's essays for mistakes. In other cases, support was indirect. A prime example of indirect support was the relative or friend who offered to watch learners' children while the learner was in class or doing homework.

By presenting an expanded range of opportunities to practice literacy and numeracy, technology served as an enabler for a number of learners.   "I'm always texting me friends," said Jo. Jade said that since beginning her course, she felt more confident when texting, because she was better at spelling and expressing herself through the written word. Christine said that she was constantly using her smart phone and computers to read and write: "I can't go two minutes without having to read something on my phone", she said. Andy also indicated that technology was a central part of his life, and us a key context for literacy and numeracy practices. Andy said he used his computer to chat to friends and play games, some of which had a numeracy element.

Quote 19

"You know these diagrams when you put DVDs in – I can actually read them now and understand them better than I used to be able to.... I can understand all those things, technology stuff, a bit better." (Jessica)

Just as the presence of technology increased many learners' opportunities to practice, its absence reduced other learners' chances. For example, one said that she used to write emails at home, but no longer had a computer, so did less writing than she would have liked. Technology could also serve as a challenge to some learners' confidence. For example, Jade and Laura both said they lacked the confidence to use email.

Learners also spoke of institutional or systemic enablers. These included government subsidies, without which many learners could not have afforded courses, and flexible schedules offered by providers. Such schedules allowed learners to choose course times that fit in with their work and/or caring responsibilities.

3.6.2. Barriers to learning

Some learners spoke of obstacles limiting their ability to practise literacy and numeracy. Some of these obstacles were situational. For example, Jade said that when she could not find childcare for her younger son, she was not able to attend class or do her homework. Jade also noted that her oldest son had health problems. When these problems flared up, she had no choice but to put her learning on hold.

Despite courses being free, some learners pointed to cost as a barrier to attending classes. For example, one learner said that she was not always able to afford bus fare to get to and from college.

Just as family could serve both as an enabler of practice and an obstacle to it, so too could employment. As detailed earlier in this chapter, some learners saw work as an opportunity to practice and develop new skills, for example by filling out forms, running a till, and helping customers with calculations. For example, Nicola, said that instead of using a calculator at work, she honed her numeracy skills by doing pen and paper calculations. Peter, a football coach, said that writing out instructions for training sessions provided him with frequent opportunities to practice and improve his literacy, with a particular emphasis on context-specific writing.

Several learners, however, said that their work was an obstacle to practice, not an enabler. This was related both to the type of work people did, and that work's impact on their free time. Some reported doing manual labour that did not require literacy or numeracy skills, and thus did not offer opportunities for practice. For example, Anna said that, as a cleaner, her on-the-job opportunities to practise literacy and numeracy were non-existent. Others reported working long hours, which left little time and energy for literacy and numeracy practice. For example, Geraint worked six days a week in a supermarket, and felt he only really got to practice his skills on the seventh day, which is when he attended his course. However, he also reported that his workplace supported him in his desire to improve his literacy/numeracy: his schedule was fixed so that he always had the same day off each week, in order to attend his course.

3.7. Links to course

In the interviews with learners, interviewers took care to avoid asking specifically about links between learners' daily literacy and numeracy practices and what they did on their courses. This is because we were interested in seeing whether or not learners would make spontaneous, unprompted links themselves. Several learners did make such links,

discussing the ways in which their daily activities related to what they were learning and doing on their courses.

Andy, for example, said that he spent a great deal of time on his computer, and that he used some computer activities to practise skills learned on his course. For example, Andy made an effort to use emails to friends as a context for practising, spelling, punctuation and grammar.

As discussed previously, other learners used numeracy techniques they learned in class to make DIY easier and more accurate. Nicola had been introduced to spreadsheets in her numeracy course, and was using them to monitor her household budget.

Others learners pointed out the ways in which their literacy and numeracy studies were helping them do better in other courses they were taking. For example, Jo said that her literacy course made her more capable of doing well in a job skills course she was taking.

3.8.   Summary

This section has looked at learners' self-reported evidence on opportunities to practise the literacy and numeracy skills they were learning on their courses. Learners spoke of practising literacy and numeracy across a range of contexts: in the home, in their social lives and at work. In these settings, learners said that their improved skills and confidence enabled them to engage in completely new activities, such as writing postcards to family members or helping their children with their maths homework. Learners also said they were engaging in old activities but no longer shying away from literacy and numeracy challenges that were part of those activities. For example, learners spoke of adding up the bill when eating out with friends, or no longer avoiding forms or calculations at work. Finally, learners said that they were doing their customary activities with uncustomary confidence and competence. In the home, parents were doing a better and more enthusiastic job of reading with their children and helping their partner calculate the bills. At work, they were performing tasks with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

In all these contexts, and across all different types of activities, learners pointed to a range of enablers and obstacles influencing their literacy and numeracy activities. Most significantly, they emphasised the tremendous impact that their courses were having on their daily lives. By improving their skills and confidence, learners said, their courses were making them better parents, more inspiring friends, and more helpful, productive workers.

4. Course experience

This section looks at the course experience of learners, looking at the evidence on the role of wider college environment and support, and the effects of courses, for example on confidence and learner horizons.

4.1. College support

Although all learners interviewed were doing literacy and/or numeracy courses through a General Further Education college (GFE), in many cases they were actually attending small local centres. Interviews were therefore conducted in a wide variety of contexts including city centre main sites, local community centres and *Sure Start* facilities.

Many learners re-entered learning at College with either low expectations or even trepidation. As identified in Section 2, just over one-half reported negative experiences of compulsory education and this coloured their expectations significantly, and others believed that the school system had not worked for them. This may be why interviewees were so very positive about their experience at College and their tutors in particular.

Quote 20
"I felt a bit edgy at first about coming back to college, but having the support worker and easing into the class, getting used to it, it's good." (Ben)

Jade spoke passionately and very highly of the teaching experience which she felt encouraged persistence. Charlotte did not want to "*let her tutors down*" by not passing her exams while Laura and Jessica spontaneously praised their tutor for her wonderful qualities; Jessica described meeting her tutors as "*one of the most important*" encounters she had ever had. Peter spoke passionately of the teaching style he found at college while Bradley praised the motivational style of her tutors, "*I love them telling me I can do*…[X].. .*"* Many learners such as Jo noted that tutors had time to spend with their learners, while Victoria described their tutor as "*the real highlight"* of the course.

Pedagogically, learners spontaneously mentioned the prevalence of one-to-one teaching which was personalised and set at exactly the right level. This was in contrast to their school experiences; Section 2 identifies larger class sizes as being a factor why compulsory education had not worked for them. The one-to-one teaching was both unexpected and very welcome. Learners reported feeling that tutors had time for them, and the motivational impact of telling learners that they 'can do' things was striking; many of this group have clearly suffered problems with their self-confidence and self-esteem. Many learners did not have the pedagogical knowledge to do more than talk about their tutor's competence, expressing a feeling that the teaching was high quality and tutors knew what they were doing.

Quotes 21 and 22

"The teacher- she's very good at what she does. [....] she's very articulate and she gives you good help on your spelling and the way in which you're writing. You know, she puts in the comments that inspire you." (Peter)

"Being here you've got a teacher who can guide you the proper way, how to- how to build words up and how- and not go too far above me station." (Geraint)

Adult learners also expressed pleasure in 'going back to basics', feeling they were gaining mastery of topics they felt they should have learned at school. For instance:

Quotes 23 and 24

"So they teach us more about like commas and the way to put commas, and the way to put certain words and the meaning of the words and everything that- things like reading into dictionary, which is good to understand the meaning of the words that you're actually writing or reading." (Dani)

"To start off with, it's back to basics, back to the basic commas, paragraphs, you know, how you'd write a letter. Just getting you familiar with the things you just basically you do forget, I think, over time." (Heather)

Although the tutors gain the most praise, there is an appreciation of the benefits of being in the College environment. One of these is being with people operating at a similar level and having had similar experiences (see Jade's view below).

Quote 25

"[I'm enjoying it] because it's not in school, it's completely different. everyone in the class is in the same situation, so you're all Entry 3 or Level 1 or Level 2. So you're not having to prove yourself to anyone. You're doing it at your own time I think. And it's enjoyable, there's no pressures." (Jade)

It is clear that good tutors create a strong group ethos. Many of the learners interviewed have spent a long time not talking about their problems and hiding their low skills. To be in an environment where they can openly share their concerns and frustrations appears to have had a liberating effect. The group ethos was also identified as being 'non-competitive' (see below for the views of Alistair and Christine). All learners were able to enjoy, and to some extent 'feed off' the success of others in the group. Related to this, there is also an appreciation that those attending the courses really wanted to learn; the negativity towards learning, so often commented on from compulsory education was absent from these adult groups (as noted by Nicola).

Quotes 26, 27 and 28

"Knowing I wasn't the only one, is a bit of a morale booster..." (Alistair)

"When you pass your exams, everyone's really, truly happy that you've passed, no-one's- there's no competition or nothing, everyone's cool." (Christine)

"Nobody is any better than anybody else, you've got smaller groups, so you've got a lot of one-on-one attention from your tutor, and not only that but everybody who's doing these classes actually wants to be there." (Nicola)

There were a small number of negative comments received about learners' course experiences. Mohammed had failed an exam and this gave him a negative attitude, feeling that tutors had marked him too hard, while Helen, who was attending her course as part of a programme targeted at NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) felt her tutors 'had a go at her' over "*the smallest thing*". Chris also commented on the 'number of hoops' that needed to be gone through in order to enrol on a course.

4.2. Course effects

4.2.1. Effect on learner confidence

Interviewees were asked about their level of confidence in English or mathematics at three points: on leaving school, at the start of their course and at the time of interview. In general the pattern of responses we received was of growing confidence. Most responses showed a rise between each of these points, though only marginally fewer reported a flat line between school and the start of their course and rise thereafter. Two responses showed a fall between leaving school and starting the course and no one reported a fall in confidence after joining the course.

On the five point scale used to measure confidence the maximum gain was 4. Most learners reported a rise of 2 points between starting their course and the time of interview, but provided a split picture for overall confidence since leaving school, with most reporting a rise of either 4 or 2 points in this period.

The eight learners who reported the maximum rise in confidence from school to the present were taking both literacy and numeracy courses at a variety of levels, and had all been out of school for over 10 years.

Few interviewees failed to talk spontaneously about the effect on their confidence of being on their English and maths courses. While in some cases, this was directed to their confidence in those subjects, in other cases their comments were wider, reflecting increased confidence in other walks of life.

Laura saw herself as now capable of learning, '*I've improved a lot more here than I ever did at school*' a feeling echoed by Jessica:

Quote 29

"On Monday a girl couldn't do something and [the tutor] *asked me to show what to do and I felt great because I could actually do it. I wouldn't have been able to have done that before. I've really come on. I'm proud of myself."* (Jessica)

Ed shared this feeling when able to advise a fellow learner that they were using an American spell-checker and so were still not getting their spelling correct. Charlotte reported seeing herself as capable of doing maths, something she could not have imagined before starting her course. Peter was thrilled that others on his course saw him as one of the best, something that had never happened to him in school. Bradley had gone from someone who was afraid of Maths to someone who loved it, while Katherine now felt capable of helping her children with their homework. As a result of their course, Heather and Christine both felt able to write 'official' letters that previously they lacked the confidence to do.

While we might expect learners' confidence in the subject they are studying to increase, the wider effects on confidence appear more wide-ranging. In many cases, such as Jessica and Katherine below, this is simply the result of individuals who have spent many years being told they are not capable of doing something, discovering that they are capable:

Quotes 30 and 31

"I know I can do it now. Before I was scared of looking stupid." (Jessica)

"...now I'm realising I'm not as thick as what they said. I would like to have gone back to my school, if there was still teachers there, and said, "Look at me now," because this is the person you thought would not do nothing in their life." (Katherine)

Jade felt her course helped her to become a better parent, a view shared with Peter who felt his children were proud of his achievements and Bradley who now saw herself as a good role model for her son; she now encourages her friends to enrol in adult learning. Charlotte is an older learner who enrolled as part of rebuilding her life after the death of her husband. She reports that succeeding in her maths course has had a transformative effect on other areas of her life; she reported feeling more capable of learning, of being more focused on her own self rather than other members of the family and has a self-image of someone who is aging admirably. As a result of doing her maths and English courses, Jo, a very unconfident person, was beginning to feel that she could make more of herself while Katherine stated that "*I came from nothing and now I'm going somewhere. I have got a future now."* (See her story in the box, Case study 3).

Case study 3: Katherine

As far back as she could remember, Katherine hated school, hated having to sit at a desk, and hated the way teachers talked down to her. She was told she was 'thick' and she believed them. So she left school, became an unmarried mother, threw herself into childcare and never thought about education, or maths or English again.

However, she became worried that her children also think she is 'thick', that she hasn't been able to help them with homework and now she cannot help her grandchildren.

This all changed just a few weeks before we interviewed her. At the Jobcentre she agreed to enrol on a *Launchpad* course for single parents where she could meet others in a similar situation. Most of the group wanted to get into work now that their children were older. She assumed she would be looking for work as a cleaner or similar, but instead was offered the chance to go to College and train for better jobs. She signed up to do a basic English and maths course and to work towards doing a Teaching Assistant course. The transformation has been extraordinary. And in her own words, it is because:

"I was told I can do my English. I can do my maths. I had somebody there - people there who are supporting me."

After spending most of her life thinking she had no choices and no chances, she is now relishing ambition and harbouring the hope of change. Her new confidence is such that she is prepared to fail, secure in the knowledge that if necessary she can go back and do it again and pass. Having never had a job in her life she is passionate about working in a school. She feels she has a future now, and she loves the fact that: *"I'm not an idiot any more. I'm not thick any more."*

4.2.2. Effect on learner horizons

Taking part in English and maths courses also had an effect on the personal horizons of around three-quarters of the learners. These relate to personal well-being and social horizons, to those related to economic opportunity through learners' education and careers.

For Laura, for instance, the course has enabled her to expand her horizons on a practical level, which has helped her extend her personal and social horizons. Before the course, she was not confident enough to take a bus on her own but she can now get around independently, has joined a music group and is overcoming her depression. Life is no longer spent hiding away in fear; she feels active, confident and involved. Similarly, Charlotte had felt life was getting worse as she became more socially isolated, but as a result of the course has grown as a person in ways she did not anticipate. For Saskia, doing the course was also a social stepping stone, allowing her to feel more equal with people she admired who had come from better educated backgrounds. For Jason, his ambition was much more specific and related to his personal interest in history and in particular World War Two history. He indicated in the interview that he now feels closer to his own personal ambition, to read 'Dunkirk to D-Day', before he dies.

Other learners have now increased their horizons and ambitions in relation to their education and careers, including in voluntary work that aligns with their interests and

passions. Jessica is a cleaner who is now thinking she may aspire to a better job, not something she had ever previously contemplated. Jade also felt she was now moving towards obtaining a 'regular job' while Peter believes that the course may be a step into regular employment. Geraint now realises he has the potential to move into management, while Christine is looking at starting her own business. As well as a stepping stone to a Level 2 Beauty Therapy course, Heather has become involved in charity for autistic children as she now feels she can contribute (see her story in the Box, Case study 4).

Case study 4: Heather

Heather had a very difficult and disrupted home and school life. A child of a violent marriage, she and her mother ended up living in a series of refuges, meaning that she attended seven different primary schools. With so many changes of school, by the time she went to secondary school her work was far behind. Upon moving back to London she refused to set foot in school and again and 'left' in Year 9. Soon after dropping out of school she became pregnant and a single parent.

Despite this chronic lack of formal education she has a long and successful job history, working in a nursery, a school and a bookmakers.

Her second child, a son, was born severely autistic. This has resulted in different demands on her. From early on she has been involved in making her son's case with the local authority for appropriate schooling and care, and she is involved with a charity dealing with Autism. Dealing with these issues made her aware of her lack of skills in written English.

She discovered the English and maths course through her local Sure Start Centre. It was free for her to attend and child care issues were automatically taken care of, so she joined up over 15 years after 'leaving' school. Her progress has been swift and her confidence gain enormous. She feels able to deal with the bureaucratic processes required for her son, including confidently writing formal letters. She has enrolled on a Beauty Therapy course and hopes to start her own business. She is a passionate believer in adult education: *"It's the best thing that I did. I know I encourage everyone at the centre now, especially with the young ones that come that have got like little kids and the same situation I was in. I wish I had had someone at 18, 19 to say to me, you know, 'Right, you're going to work, but go to college. Do a little course, do something.'"*

It is clear that for many learners, their initial horizons were severely limited. Laura, for instance has enlarged her horizons, but these are still quite small in objective terms – for example, even though she is in her 40s she still lives at home with her mother, and she does not work. Jo is thinking of an apprenticeship but will need a great deal of further help and encouragement to make this a realistic ambition. For some, re-entering learning is a reality check. Chris now understands just how hard it will be to go on a take a degree course.

4.2.3. Other effects

Many of the learners interviewed had very restricted geographical horizons as well as social and emotional ones. A significant number of learners come from social groups that tend to be solitary and cut off from areas of wider society, the unemployed, single parents and those with mental or emotional disabilities. Perhaps for this reason, the act of going to college was seen as a positive social experience, an opportunity to get out of the house, to

meet people and have social discourse. Going to college, rather than simply attending the course, was seen by many as a highlight of the week. Many interviewees come into this group, including Jo, Katherine, Charlotte, Laura and Jessica. For these people, attending college, meeting people and socialising was a major benefit.

4.3. Summary

The overwhelming impression given from this group of interviewees is that attending English and maths courses as adults is a positive experience in its own right. One of the main reasons for this is the quality of the tutors and the colleges they work in. A significant number of these learners were worried about a return to education because of their own poor experience of schooling, and the style, attitude and professionalism of tutors was in itself a transforming experience for many. Learners have also found that being in a group of adults in a similar situation is also motivating and thrived on the group ethos of many courses. Adults with literacy difficulties in particular can often be isolated, and being able to meet, work with and talk to others is a liberating experience. When combined with the social experience of being able to meet people in a friendly environment, attending a course can be seen as a social good before taking into account any actual improvement in subject specific skills.

Improved confidence does seem to be linked to skills acquisition, in this group at least. Confidence within the subject area increases rapidly once learners enjoy success, even if that success seems to be quite limited. And success within the confines of English or maths, being able to help fellow learners for instance, seems to spread to increased confidence in other areas of life, in this group most usually within the family setting or in terms of work ambition.

Improvements in personal and social horizons do seem to follow from increased confidence, though we need to be aware of the extremely limited starting points that some learners have. Many of these learners started with a very limited spread of ambition or aspiration, and now some are taking on wider roles at work, in charities or within the family. For others, there remains a long way to travel to realise these improved ambitions.

5. Concluding remarks

This last section sets out our concluding observations on the main findings from this qualitative research. In doing so, we cover three key themes:

- the variation in backgrounds and previous experiences of the learner group, even within this small sample

- what the evidence says about how learners practise outside of the classroom, and the role this appears to have in skills development, as well as improving confidence

- the different outcomes that appear to be the benefits of courses and the application of skills outside of the classroom.

5.1. Variation across the learner group

Learners do not enter courses from the same or even similar backgrounds and have very differing previous experiences of education and training. For example, we identified at least three different sorts of school experience across the sample of 28 learners, with some cross-over between the groups:

- The largest group were those with negative experiences of school, with issues such as truancy and bullying being prevalent.

- A second group did not feel that they got as much as they could from their school life, because of the environment (e.g. large class sizes) and/or teaching styles.

- A third group had relatively successful school careers, but had perhaps struggled with a particular subject (e.g. maths) or had seen their skills eroded over time, which had prompted them to consider an adult skills course.

In addition, a variety of personal, social and economic factors were evident across the learner group. For example, some learners had, or were, dealing with personal issues such as alcoholism, depression and bereavement. Others had young families, and were considering their own role in helping them prosper in education. Yet others were trying to get on with work and careers, or had suffered from redundancy.

These different contexts were reflected in the motivations for taking part in courses. These ranged from the predominantly economic motivations (such as gaining qualifications, helping with career development) to the personal desire to improve oneself and become more independent, or to be able to assist children with homework.

The variety in the learner group is understood: feedback from colleges highlighted the disparate backgrounds and varying challenges of individual learners. This means that provision, and indeed wider support from providers, needs to be able to target different needs and motivations. In addition, the qualitative research highlights that whilst skills gains may be a common goal across the learner group, these will not manifest in

economic outcomes (such as employment and wage effects) for all learners. Rather, for some learners the intended and actual outcomes are likely to be personal and socially-related.

5.2. The evidence on practising outside of the classroom

In section 4 of this report we identified three broad contexts within which learners were practising outside of the classroom:

- There were **entirely new activities** that learners had not been able to do or had not considered in the past, but which learners could now complete. These were normally home or family-related such as writing postcards, helping children with homework or picking up a book to read.

- Learners were engaging in **new practices within old activities**. This meant that learners were undertaking old activities but no longer shying away from literacy and numeracy challenges that were part of those activities. These practices were across a range of settings, home, social and at work. For example, learners spoke of adding up the bill when eating out with friends, no longer avoiding forms, and undertaking calculations at work.

- Learners were doing **old practices more effectively**. Learners said that they were doing their customary activities with uncustomary confidence and competence. Again, these were across a range of setting. In the home, parents were doing a better and more enthusiastic job of reading with their children and helping their partner calculate the bills. At work, they were performing tasks with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

This data on practising outside of the classroom provides useful qualitative evidence on the skills gains that learners have made as a result of their courses. Unprompted, many learners made specific links between the practical teaching in their courses and the tasks that they were undertaking outside of the classroom. For example, learners had undertaken 'rounding up' exercises within class and were using this skill when doing grocery shopping. The role of homework was noted by learners as a key part of the process of developing their skills. This was particularly so if learners wanted to practise in a non-threatening environment before they had the confidence to try new skills in a real-life situation.

5.3. Economic and social outcomes

Given the various motivations of learners, and also the different home, social and work situations of practising skills, the data highlights the fact that economic and social outcomes are important for the learner group, but that both types of outcome might not necessarily result for (or motivate) all learners.

Given that the research was undertaken with learners currently on courses, or just having finished courses, it was too early for evidence on job-related economic outcomes. There were some favourable indications as reflected in ambitions and perceptions of learners:

- For some learners, they believed that they were moving towards regular employment. Within this group, learners recognised that the basic skills course provided the stepping stone to a different qualification, which would open up employment prospects. For some, as highlighted in our case study example of Katherine, the potential improvement in the chance of gaining employment is huge.

- There was evidence of other learners believing that they may be able to aspire to a better job, which ranged from stepping up from unskilled work to one learner who believed that they have the potential to move into management.

Other types of economic outcome were in evidence from the research, notably around personal finance. The improved skills on personal finance, through being able to round up shopping bills and through new-found or improved abilities to do household budgeting, could be an intermediate outcome towards reduced likelihood of financial difficulties and indebtedness.

There was more evidence on personal and social outcomes. As noted in Section 5 in particular, there was evidence of improved confidence and self-esteem. This, along with feelings of improved independence, had had some marked effects on some learners. For example, one learner was now able to get the bus by themselves, and so able to attend a social group, all of which was contributing to helping this learner deal with depression. There were other examples of learners who noted how the course had helped them grow as a person, thereby enabling them to feel less socially isolated.

Therefore, in understanding the contribution of adult literacy and numeracy provision, a focus on effects relating to qualifications, employment and wages will only tell a very partial story. A significant part of the skills and confidence development manifests itself in other types of outcome, for example relating to improved personal finances, and contributions to improving mental health and well-being. These outcomes will be trickier to quantify (and indeed monetise), but are a critical part of understanding the impact of basic skills provision.

Annex A: Research tool

First interview

NB: Check basic details of interviewee in order to populate the proforma, including when they left school, before checking details of their course…

Course (guide: 5 mins)

1. Can I just check that you are on the <<CHECK COURSE TITLE>>?

NB: If learners are doing both literacy and numeracy courses, we should base the interview on just one of these. Choose at the start, taking into account the need to get a balance across literacy and numeracy learners across the 30 interviews.

2. When did you start the course?

3. When does the course end?

4. Can you tell me about the course that you have been doing? *Further prompts if necessary:*

   ➢ Tell me about what you did on the course today/the last time you attended.

   ➢ What else have you been doing recently on the course?

   ➢ *Potentially follow-up on things they say they have enjoyed or not enjoyed on the course, e.g.* "X is interesting, can you tell me more about that part of the course?"

NB: DO NOT ask how they think their course has benefited them or affected daily tasks.

Daily life (guide: 10 mins)

5. I'd now like to talk about when you <<read or write>> OR <<use numbers>> in your daily life, for example in your job or voluntary work, or in day-to-day activities. Can you tell me about a recent time when you <<read or wrote>> OR <<used numbers>> in your everyday life?

6. [FOLLOWING THE ANSWER] Can you tell me about other occasions?

   ➢ *Be alert to or prompt using locations, e.g. if they refer to examples when they are out and about, ask if they read or write or use numbers at home (and vice-versa). And for those in work, ask if they read or write or user numbers in their job.*

   ➢ *Be alert to or prompt using routine tasks, e.g. if they say they use skills every day. Ask* "Do you do that every day or most days" *and* "Is it at the same time every day"?

> ➢ *If the respondent relates use with things that they have done in their course, ask* "Can you tell me more about when you did X?" *and* "Can you tell me more about when you learnt X in your course?"

NB: DO NOT relate reading or writing or use of numbers in daily life with their course, unless the respondent does so unprompted.

Education history (guide: 10 mins)

7. I'd like to talk a bit about your overall experience of education and training over the course of your life. This doesn't just include time in school or college, it also includes anything where you've tried to learn something new. *Refer to the graphics on life trajectories, and explain that some people's experience of education gets better over their lives, some people's gets worse and for yet others it is characterised by both ups and downs.* Can you tell me which of the graphics best represents your experience?

> ➢ Can you tell me what happened at the points where your experience got better/worse AND/OR the reasons for choosing this graphic?

8. Does your experience with <<reading and writing>> OR <<numbers>> follow a similar course or a different one? [IF A DIFFERENT ONE], which one?

> ➢ Again, can you tell me what happened at the points where your experience got better/worse AND/OR the reasons for choosing this graphic?

9. And focussing on your <<reading and writing>> OR <<numbers>> in the last six months, which best represents your experience? [YOU CAN CHOOSE A DIAGRAM YOU HAVE ALREADY CHOSEN, OR A DIFFERENT ONE]

> ➢ Again, can you tell me what happened at the points where your experience got better/worse AND/OR the reasons for choosing this graphic?

> ➢ IF APPROPRIATE (i.e. if the graphic for Q9 is different to the one for Q8): can you tell me what has made your experience in the last six months different?

NB: DO NOT refer back to the basic skills course that they are on (unless they do, in which case ask for further details).

1.

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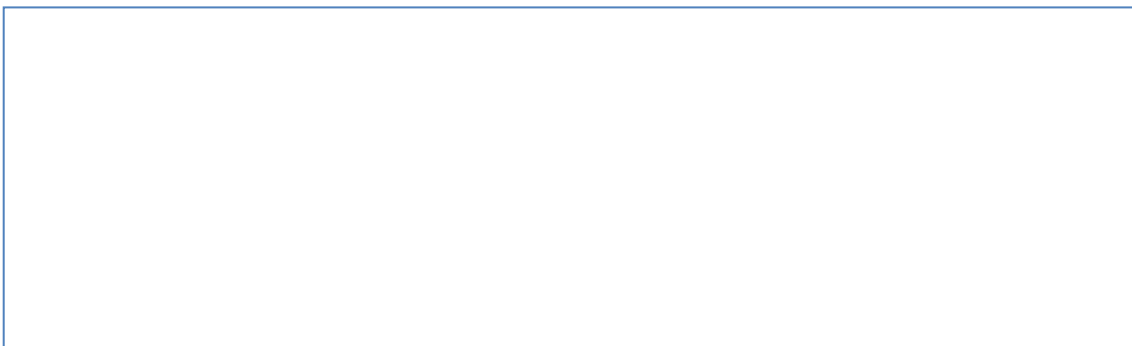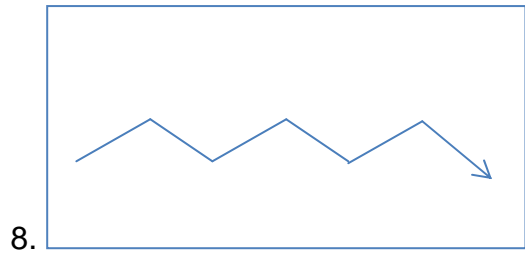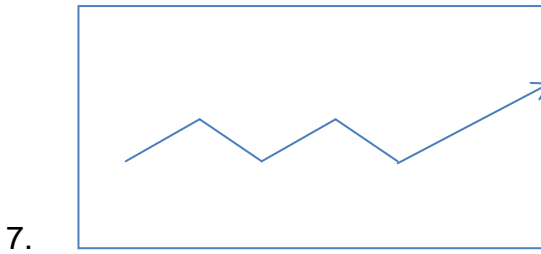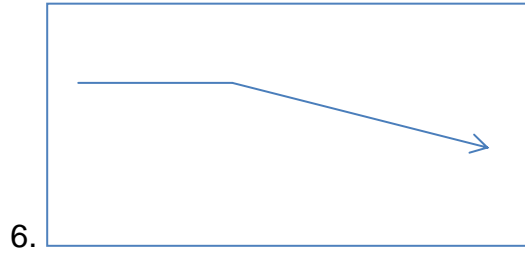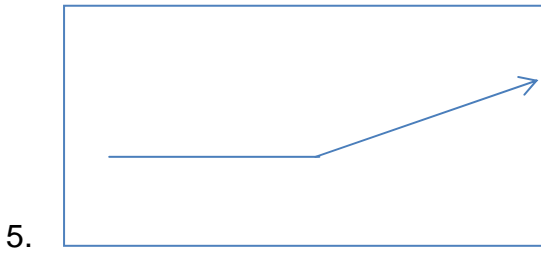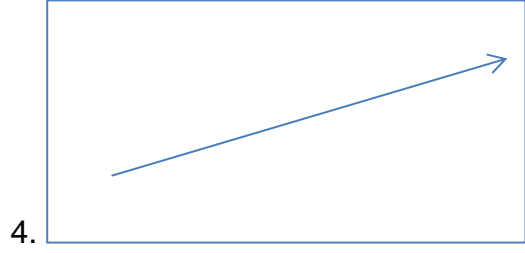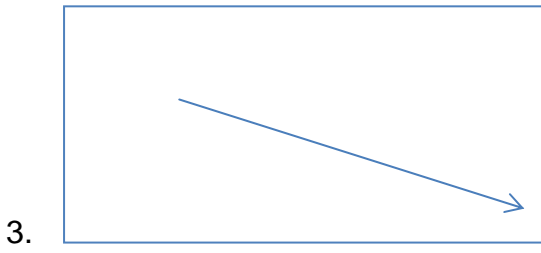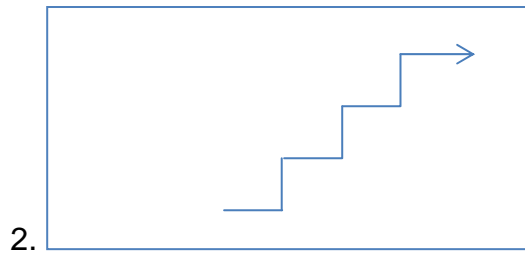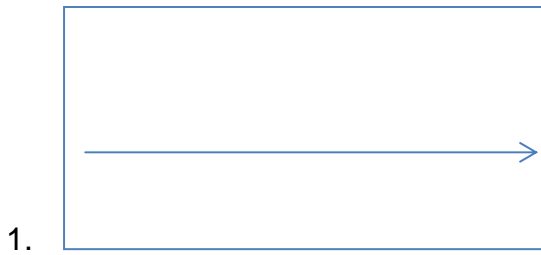
Confidence (guide: 10 mins)

10. How happy were you with your <<reading and writing>> OR <<use of numbers>> when you left school? *Ask respondents to mark a point on the graphic.*

11. How happy were you with your <<reading and writing>> OR <<use of numbers>> just before you started your current course? *Ask respondents to mark a point on the graphic.*

12. How happy are you now with your <<reading and writing>> OR <<use of numbers>>? *Ask respondents to mark a point on the graphic.*

13. Can you tell me why you have marked on the graphic at these particular points?

14. Can you say anything about the changes in your happiness with <<reading and writing>> OR <<use of numbers>> between these points? NB: DO NOT prompt as to whether changes in happiness are due to the course; if they refer to their course unprompted, then ask if they can provide more details, e.g. on what from their course has made them happier/less happy.
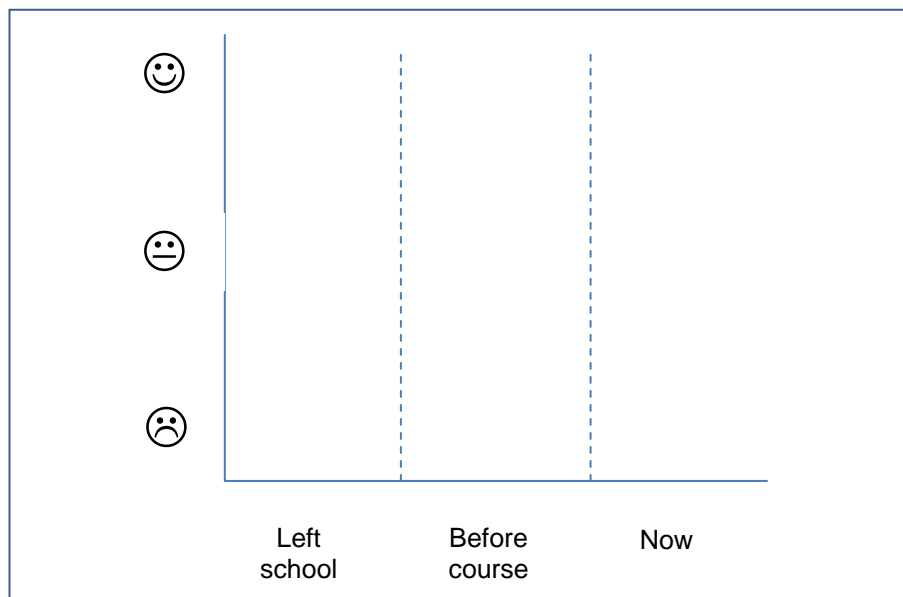

Who is affected by their skills? (guide: 10 mins)

15. I'd like to talk now about people who are or might be affected by your skills in <<reading and writing>> OR <<use of numbers>>. If you improved your abilities in <<reading and writing>> OR <<use of numbers>>, who would be affected?

16. Can you put these people on this picture to show who would be affected the most and who would be affected the least? The most affected people should be in the centre of the circles, and the least affected on the edge of the circles.

  ➢ *Prompt for people who might be missing, e.g. family members, friends, work colleagues.*

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> ➢ *Ask the learner to talk about several of the people they have identified, including those in the middle, on the edge and in between:* Can you tell me more about this person and the reason you have put them there?

17. UNLESS ALREADY COVERED: Are any of the people you have identified a reason for you doing your course?

18. Can you tell me if there are any other reasons from those that we have already discussed as to why you are doing the course?

Least affected by your skills

Most affected

by your skills
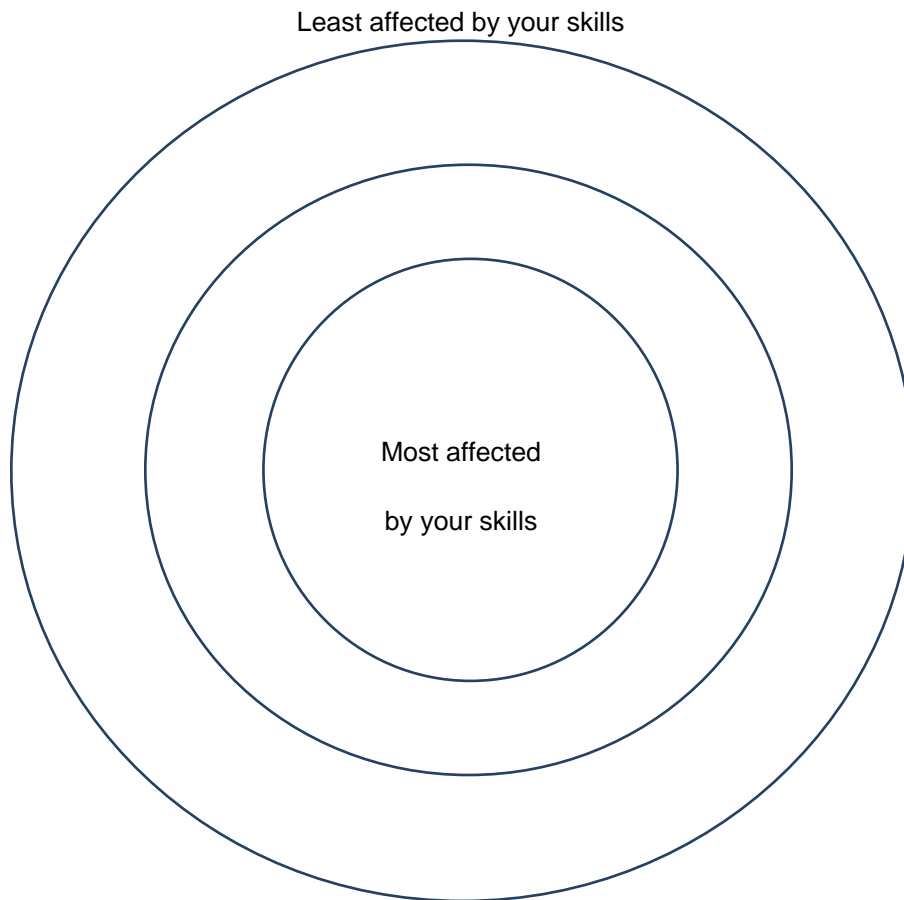
Wrap-up (guide: 5 mins)

19. Can you tell me what you have most enjoyed in your course so far?

20. And what have you least enjoyed?

Thank the interviewee, and give them their £20 high street shopping vouchers.

Decide whether we want to offer them the opportunity to do the video diary component. If YES, then move on to the video diary instructions.

Video diary instructions

We'd like to find out more about how people use their <<reading and writing>> OR << numbers>> in their daily lives. This means when you are at home, at work or out and about. We are asking a small number of people to keep video diaries for two weeks so that they can record their experiences of using their skills. **We'd then like to come back and speak to you again about what you have done and to collect your diary recordings.** In return we will give you another £20 high street shopping voucher, and you can also keep the mini video. Would you be interested in taking part?

If yes, check that we can easily arrange the second interview, and provide instructions as follows:

➢ We'd like you to record your experience of <<reading and writing>> OR <<use of numbers>>. You can record yourself or ask someone to record you whilst you explain what you are doing, or you can record yourself at the end of a day talking about any things you may have done using <<reading and writing>> OR <<numbers>> that day. It would be useful to include how the experiences made you feel.

➢ You do not need to record everything or necessarily record something every day. But it would be useful to try to do several recordings over the two weeks.

➢ If you want to, you can also collect items that may relevant to the things that you have been doing. This might help you to discuss with us some of the things you have done.

Check that they are still happy to take part. If 'yes', show respondents how to use the mini video, and check that the instructions make sense.

➢ *Arrange the second interview – including time and venue (preferably on college site). Take/check the contact number of the interviewee so that we can confirm the interview time and venue nearer the day.*

➢ *Tell the interviewee that:* At the second interview we will review your video and talk about your experiences. At the end of the interview, we would like to take the data card so that we can analyse the video experiences. **Only the research team will see the videos, and we will not identify you by name in our research. We will delete video material once we have finished our research.** We will also provide you with a new data card that you can use in the mini video, which you can keep.

Second interview

1. *Ask respondents to talk through their video diary entries. Allow them to talk about these in their own words, but it would be useful to collect, as a minimum, information on:*

   ➢ What they were doing when they were <<reading and writing>> OR <<using numbers>>?

   ➢ When they were using it? E.g. time of day.

   ➢ Where they doing it?

   ➢ Who they were with when they used their skills (family/work etc.)?

   ➢ Why they were doing it?

   ➢ Their emotions at the start of the experience, during and at the end?

   ➢ The extent to which this <<reading and writing>> OR <<use of numbers>>is a normal part of their lives or not?

2. Have any of the experiences you have shown me been related to what you have done in the classroom as part of your course? If so, which ones?

3. Has your course prompted you to use certain <<reading and writing>> OR <<number>> skills in ways that you didn't before? Can you tell me more about these skills, and how your course has prompted you to use them?

4. How much have these different experiences (including those on the video and others) that you have talked about today helped you to develop your skills? Which have been most useful? Which have been least useful?

Thank the interviewee and give them their £20 high street shopping voucher.

Remember to take the data card with the video entries with you at the end of the interview, and provide the interviewee with a new blank one for their own use.