

# Evaluation of Adult Basic Skills Pathfinder Extension Activities: An Overview

Michael White  
Policy Studies Institute

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The results and interpretations presented in this report remain solely the responsibility of the author.

## **1 Introduction**

Basic skills, especially reading, writing and numeracy, are of great importance to people in getting jobs, carrying out their work, and in their everyday social lives. Yet many people in Britain have a serious lack of these skills. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has been leading a campaign, with the Learning and Skills Council, to improve the levels of basic skills, with a target to assist 750,000 people in this way by 2004 and 1.5 million by 2007.

It was against this background that, in September 2001, the DfES launched the Pathfinder Extension programme of innovative educational courses for adults. This was a complex initiative, with eight separate strands. The Policy Studies Institute was commissioned by the Department to carry out an evaluation of the programme to assess what its impact was on the progress of those who took part, in terms both of education and employment. The evaluation produced a range of published reports, details of which are shown on page 37. The main purpose of the present Overview is to draw together and interpret the main findings from all these sources.

The brief for the Overview report was to provide a concise, non-technical synthesis of findings. It contains no technical details of the evaluation methods, and few numbers. It does however go further than the other reports in offering interpretations of the findings which cut across the various parts of the evaluation. These interpretations are based on all the different kinds of evidence which the evaluation produced.

As all the reports are being published, it is possible for the reader to examine the evidence in detail, if she or he wishes to go beyond the Overview. As any interpretations in part reflect a personal viewpoint, others may interpret the evidence differently. The Overview's interpretations are put forward in the hope that they will serve as a stimulus to further discussion. They are certainly not 'the last word' on this programme.

Following this Introduction, the next two sections describe and place in context the Pathfinder Extension and the evaluation. Section Four describes what kinds of people came on the Extension programmes, focusing particularly on what disadvantages or difficulties they faced, and explaining why these are important both for policy and for the evaluation. Section Five talks about how the programme was planned and delivered by the teachers, while Section Six tells how the courses were experienced by the learners, and also by employers. Section Seven presents the most important findings of the evaluation, summarizing and explaining the outcomes and impacts of the programme in terms of both education and employment. Finally, Section Eight attempts to draw out the main messages about what has been learned from the evaluation.

## **2 The Pathfinder Extension Programme**

The Pathfinder Extension Programme was part of a continuous stream of development promoted by the DfES to advance the provision and effectiveness of adult basic skills education. In Spring 2001, nine Pathfinder areas commenced new course provision

which embodied the main principles of ‘Skills for Life’, the National Strategy for adult literacy and numeracy. This involved:

- a standard method of assessing the learning needs of individuals
- new core curricula (geared to the National Standards for literacy and numeracy skills)
- teaching provided by teachers who had passed through intensive training in the new curricula
- the use of National Tests at Levels 1 and 2 where this was appropriate for the learners.

Early research on the delivery of the new provision in Pathfinder areas was encouraging (CRG, 2002; TNS, 2002; DfES, 2002). Teachers were implementing the provision with enthusiasm, and learners had favourable perceptions both of the courses and, where these had been taken, of the National Tests. It was against this background that the Pathfinder Extension Activities were launched in Autumn 2001, as a second stage in the programme of innovation.

The Pathfinder Extension courses were aimed at adults seeking to improve their basic skills. Courses could be at various levels within the range covered by basic skills provision. They were open to both employed people and others who were not employed. It was not particularly directed towards unemployed people who claim Jobseeker’s Allowance, because there is a separate programme for this group, with entry via Jobcentre Plus.

The innovations promoted by the Extension were of two main kinds. One was to make the course experience more concentrated, by having the learning compressed into a shorter time or by focusing it more tightly on the learning objectives. This approach was in line with some findings from recent research (Brooks et al., 2001), which suggested that intensive courses with directive teaching improved the likelihood of making progress in learning basic skills.

The second innovation was to offer financial incentives to make it easier for individuals to take part. Underlying this innovation was the knowledge that many of the people who lack basic skills also face financial barriers to taking part in further education, even when the course fees are paid for them. In some cases they cannot afford to take a course because they would need to take time off work and would lose their wages. In other cases they cannot afford to take a course because they would have to pay for childcare or other expenses, such as fares to and from college.

#### *Innovations 1: More concentrated types of course experience*

There were three types of programme within the concentrated type of course experience.

- *Residential courses* were added-on to existing basic skills courses of a traditional type, offering the learners a two- or three-day ‘away break’ in a hotel or conference centre. Around 20 hours of work with the teachers were compressed into that period. Some of these courses also involved the participants’ children, or provided childcare during the Residential period.
- *Intensive courses* compressed around 60 hours of teaching and learning into a

period of no more than four weeks. The usual period of basic skills courses is more like 26 weeks.

- *Highly structured and prescriptive courses* aimed to provide a tightly prescribed programme that focused on pre-agreed and closely monitored targets and outcomes. Although these courses could extend over up to 20 weeks, in some cases they were also compressed into a shorter period. Another feature of these courses was the use of commercially-available teaching packages.

### *Innovations 2: Incentives*

There were two types of provision which used incentives in contrasting ways.

- *Incentives for individual learners* focused on providing financial motivation for attendance and performance, within an otherwise conventional type of basic skills course. Each learner was eligible for a total grant of up to £250, split between payments linked to course attendance, taking National Test qualifications in literacy and/or numeracy, and passing the test.
- *Fixed rate replacement cost* provision was designed to compensate employers for lost time when their employees took part in a basic skills course. This made it possible, in turn, for employees to take part in courses at their workplace and without loss of wages.

Particular course providers in some cases combined more than one of the innovative features in a single course. For instance, as already mentioned there were Highly Structured Prescriptive courses that were also compressed into a shorter-than-usual period, and this also applied to some of the Fixed Rate Replacement Cost provision. Residential courses very often had an emphasis on creative activities such as video production or drama, which provided a distinctive focus for the experience.

### *Pathfinder Extension courses in Prisons*

There is a substantial and continuous programme of basic skills education for offenders, run in conjunction with the Prisons Service. As part of this, *Intensive courses* were also introduced in several prisons as part of the Extension programme. This was expected to have particular advantages in helping offenders to complete the courses before release or transfer.

### *Complementary developments: Other Agencies, ICT*

Two further developments which accompanied these innovative courses were called *Working with other agencies* and *Use of ICT based teaching and learning*. ‘Working with other agencies’ provided additional resources for the educational providers to involve the voluntary sector or similar bodies in devising and providing courses. The ICT component similarly provided resources for the educational providers to strengthen their systems and standards for bringing ICT into basic skills courses.

Table 1 summarizes the elements of the Pathfinder Extension programme. It also shows which areas were involved in each part of the programme. In all, nine areas took part. Most of the areas had consortium or partnership arrangements bringing

together a number of providers to deliver the programme, under the leadership of a co-ordinator.

**Table 1 Elements of the Pathfinder Extension programme**

Programme element	Pathfinder Areas
<i>Intensive/compressed provision</i>	
Residential	All nine.
Intensive	Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership; Thanet Basic Skills Project.
Intensive - Prisons	HM Prisons (7 establishments)
Highly Structured and Prescriptive	Tyne & Wear Local Learning & Skills Council; Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership; Hackney, Islington, Newham & Tower Hamlets Colleges Consortium.
<i>Financial incentive provision</i>	
Incentives for Individual Learners	Leeds Learning Partnership; Cambridgeshire Learning Partnership.
Fixed Rate Replacement Costs for Employers	Liverpool Lifelong Learning Partnership; Nottinghamshire Basic Skills Partnership; Gloucestershire Basic Skills Partnership.
<i>Supporting provision</i>	
Working with Other Agencies	All nine.
ICT Based Teaching and Learning	All nine.

### 3 The Evaluation

The aim of the evaluation was to establish whether the Pathfinder Extension programme made a positive difference to the participants, by comparison with going on a conventional basic skills educational course. For example, were learners on the Extension courses more likely to get qualifications? Were they more likely to be employed subsequently? How much more likely? This section explains how these questions were answered by the evaluation, and the kinds of information which were collected to provide the answers. First, though, a brief discussion of the general reasons for evaluating government programmes may help to put this particular evaluation in context.

Governments launch trial programmes to find out whether they are worth developing into services for the public in the longer term. A formal evaluation provides part, though by no means all, of the information needed for that kind of decision about services. An evaluation should provide a reliable estimate of what the participants get out of the programme. The evaluation can also highlight the reasons why people need the services provided. This information, combined with other types of information such as service costs, helps to show the value of the programme and to establish its priority in future spending.



An evaluation can also be useful if it reveals what worked particularly well within the programme, and where problems arose. By highlighting these points, it provides lessons that can be used in shaping and improving future provision.

Evaluation is also a way of giving the participants a voice at the centre where policy is made. An evaluation should say whether clients of a programme or service need it, like it, and gain from it.

To apply these general points about evaluation to the Pathfinder Extension, it is important to see the programme in its context. As stressed at the outset of this Overview, the programme took place within an established strategy of developing basic skills education. It was an innovative attempt to find new approaches which would produce advances on existing provision<sup>1</sup>.

Accordingly, the evaluation was not concerned with the effectiveness of basic skills education in general. It took the existing basic skills courses as a baseline, and tried to measure whether the Extension were a step forward from there. Also, because the Extension programme was divided into five different types of course provision, the evaluation aimed to find out whether some were more successful than others.

### *3.1 Key outcomes for the evaluation*

The evaluation focused on two ways in which the Extension might benefit their participants: through educational outcomes and through jobs or job-related outcomes. A focus on educational outcomes is natural for an educational programme. But the focus on job-related outcomes is not so obvious. Why should an educational programme, that is not offered primarily to unemployed people, be assessed partly in terms of jobs?

From the viewpoint of current DfES objectives, the answer can be found in an emphasis on skills, and recognition of the relationship between skills and paid work. For example, the Department aims to raise UK productivity by transforming the skills base, for adults as well as young people. More generally, there is a great deal of evidence showing that lack of employment, either for an individual or on a family basis, is one of the strongest influences on poverty and social exclusion. Furthermore, skills and qualifications greatly affect an individual's chances of getting or keeping a job, and advancing to better pay and prospects. An educational programme that contributes to improved employment chances therefore links to the government's entire welfare-to-work strategy.

It would still not be appropriate to evaluate the Pathfinder Extension programmes in terms of job outcomes, if they could not reasonably be expected to make a difference to prospects of employment. But in fact this could reasonably be expected, even when the Extension courses were compared to existing basic skills courses. By speeding up the completion of the course, the participants would be given an earlier chance of re-focusing on job opportunities after strengthening their skills and self-

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the background to the Pathfinder programme was earlier research which showed that while basic skills education produced worthwhile educational gains, these were generally of a modest rather than a large size. See Brooks, G. (2001) *Progress in Adult Literacy, Do Learners Learn? A Summary*. Basic Skills Agency.

confidence. Again, by providing incentives, participants would be encouraged to see the course through to completion and qualification, which would then give the educational experience more value in the job market.

### *3.2 The types of information collected by the evaluation*

The evaluation was designed to collect a range of different types of information which would provide a rounded view of the Pathfinder Extension programme. The main methods of research, outlined below, covered all five types of course: Residential, Intensive, Highly Structured Prescriptive, Incentives for Individual Learners, and Fixed Rate Replacement Cost for employers.

- A survey of learners on the Pathfinder Extension was carried out. Personal interviews using questionnaires were used to collect information from all learners who could be contacted while they were on their courses. The survey provided background information about the people taking part in the courses, and their reactions to the courses while these were freshly experienced.
- The survey was also used to collect the same information from learners on traditional basic skills courses. The sample from this ‘Comparison survey’ came mostly from the same providers and from courses at the same educational level.
- About six months later, a second personal interview was carried out to find out what had happened since the first interview, for both the Extension learners and the Comparison learners. This interview provided the information about both educational outcomes and employment outcomes.
- In parallel with the first survey, in-depth interviews were carried out with small numbers of learners and teachers from the Extension courses. The aim here was to allow the participants to explain their feelings and their experiences of the courses in a more complete and natural way than is possible through a survey questionnaire.
- A postal questionnaire was sent to all teachers known to have taught on Extension courses. This collected further details about the way the courses were run and about teachers’ assessments of their advantages and problems.

In addition, the evaluation included a single survey of learners on the Intensive courses in Prisons, without a subsequent follow-up. This had the limited aim of finding out how these learners experienced and reacted to the new type of provision, without any assessment of subsequent outcomes.

Finally, three case-study inquiries were carried out. One examined several Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses from the perspective of employers, finding out how they were set up, what they achieved, and what difficulties if any were encountered. Case studies also provided an insight into the other two supporting activities in the Extension programme, ‘Working with other agencies’ and ‘Use of ICT based teaching and learning’.

Table 2 puts some figures to these activities so that the reader can get an impression of the scale of the research.

**Table 2 The Elements of the Evaluation**

Element of evaluation	Number of interviews or other measure
Initial ('stage 1') survey of learners on Extension courses	826 personal structured interviews.
Initial ('stage 1') survey of learners on traditional basic skills courses	517 personal structured interviews.
Follow-up ('stage 2') survey of learners on Extension courses	468 personal structured interviews
Follow-up ('stage 2') survey of learners on traditional basic skills courses	302 personal structured interviews
Qualitative, in-depth interviews	10 interviews with teachers on Extension courses. 23 interviews with learners.
Survey of Extension course teachers	Questionnaires from 46 teachers, providing information on 94 courses.
Survey of learners in Prisons	110 interviews with learners on Intensive courses. 68 interviews with learners on traditional basic skills provision in Prisons.
Case studies	5 employers involved in Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses. 2 areas involved in Working with Other Agencies. 2 areas involved in ICT based teaching and learning.

#### 4 Understanding the learners

Gaining a better understanding of the learners was seen as an important objective for the evaluation. By knowing more about their characteristics and circumstances, the difficulties they face, and their aspirations, the evaluation can better interpret what the programme achieved for its clients. Course planners can check whether their assumptions about the learner groups are correct, and can take account of this 'market research' in future developments. Policy makers are also helped to judge whether the courses were reaching the target groups, or whether the learners had needs which the programme did not take into consideration. This can be of use for future policy.

##### 4.1 Learners' disadvantages

The research in many ways underlines the extent of the disadvantages among the learners on the Pathfinder Extension courses. The most obvious disadvantages concerned previous educational attainment, employment, and health. Although the key points are familiar to those providing basic skills education, they are probably worth re-stating for those less closely involved with this area of education. This information is drawn from the main survey interviews.

Most of the participants in Pathfinder Extension courses had left school at or before the minimum age, one half were completely lacking school qualifications, and few had the kind of school qualifications which would help them get jobs. About one in four said that they were dyslexic or had a learning difficulty, and the same proportion had a long-term illness which affected their ability to take paid work. Three in ten had never held a job, and only one in three was currently employed. Jobs, both present and past, were very often part-time, in many cases temporary, and mostly low-paid. There was a far higher level of dissatisfaction with current jobs than is found among employed people generally.

This outline picture of disadvantage applied to participants on the traditional basic skills courses, that were used for comparison purposes, as well as to those on the Pathfinder Extension. But in some respects those on the Extension were somewhat *more* disadvantaged, especially in respect of ill-health and learning difficulties. This suggests that the new features of the Extension courses had some success in reaching groups most at need, which in itself can be regarded as a positive result. Of course, this was taken carefully into account when estimating the impact of the courses on the participants, which will be discussed in Section Seven.

It is notable that, unlike other participants, most of the learners in Prisons had some previous employment experience. Overall, they had no more disadvantages than those on the other courses, apart from their prison record.

#### *4.2 Damaging experiences at school*

The in-depth interviews showed how educational difficulties lay at the root of the disadvantages that most basic skills participants continued to have. School involved very damaging experiences for many of them. These experiences resulted in a continuing fear of being placed in a classroom situation, which was expressed by many of the learners interviewed, and was also very familiar to teachers. While those who took part in courses had had to overcome this fear or anxiety to some extent, it was still present, especially in the early stages.

The adverse experiences of school took many forms. Some said that they “hated” school, or particular subjects at school, such as Maths. In some cases they described experiences of being neglected or victimised by their teachers. There were also frequent mentions of bullying, usually as a short-term problem, but in some cases persisting for years. Often they had simply not been supported through their difficulties at school, had got behind and given up. As they saw it, teachers paid attention to the “clever ones” while they fell out of sight. The experience of one-to-one help in the basic skills courses made them still more aware of the lack of such help in their schooldays. Lack of parental support was also mentioned by some, including those who were now keen to provide more support to their own children.

Absence from school played a part in many individuals’ histories. For example, one person had missed a large amount of schooling because of multiple operations for a disfiguring condition. Others said that they had played truant, but more commonly they used minor illnesses as a reason not to attend, with parents sometimes colluding. One person graphically stated the vicious circle which followed:

“Well, the more time you took off school, the less you wanted to go back, because by the time you did go back you was behind with everything, you’d feel the idiot of the class and it’d make you not want to come the next day, so you wouldn’t come the next day. So you get behind in more and more things.”

Overall, most of the learners taking part in the in-depth interviews felt that they had got very little from their years of compulsory education.

#### *4.3 Other learner characteristics and their implications*

Learners’ background of educational disadvantage is the starting-point for basic skills provision, but there are also some other characteristics of the course participants with possible implications for course design.

##### *Women outnumber men*

A point with some practical implications is that women outnumbered men three-to-two on the courses. This applied just as much to the traditional basic skills provision as to the Pathfinder Extension. The majority of these women had dependent children and three in ten were lone mothers. Childcare issues obviously arise; of course, these can also arise for men who have a role in childcare.

This point was underlined by course teachers on various Pathfinder Extension, who tended to see childcare as the biggest barrier. Some colleges offered free childcare on-site while learners were attending classes, but this was not general. Learners at one course with this facility emphasised that it was a major factor in making the courses that they were attending accessible for them.

##### *Employed people are in a minority*

Only about one in three of learners in the basic skills courses as a whole were currently in paid jobs, although seven in 10 had been employed at some time. The major departure from the general pattern was the Fixed Rate Replacement Cost provision, which consisted entirely of employees and was laid on at the workplace. Learners on these courses also differed from the remaining learners in some other respects, for example with men outnumbering women two-to-one. A contribution of the Fixed Rate Replacement Cost provision was that it helped to improve the overall balance in terms of getting more employed people, and more men, into basic skills courses. As workplace provision of basic skills courses continues to expand, it is possible that the overall composition of learners will change in a variety of ways that are connected with employment status.

##### *Ethnic minorities on the courses*

One in three of the basic skills participants were members of ethnic minorities, but this should not be regarded as typical of the national pattern. Two of the nine areas taking part in the Pathfinders were Birmingham and East London, with large resident populations of ethnic minorities, and most of the ethnic minority participants were from these two areas. Teachers generally reported that the ethnic composition of

their Pathfinder Extension courses was in line with their locality. The majority of the participants in Birmingham and East London were from ethnic minorities, with very diverse ethnic origins.

Most of the sample of learners in Prisons were also from the West Midlands or London, and were largely from ethnic minorities.

The members of the ethnic minorities had on average more years of schooling than the course participants from the white majority, but they were also considerably less likely to have jobs, which suggests the additional disadvantage they faced.

The evaluation did not directly investigate language needs in the sense of 'English as a second language', since ESOL provision was not an aim of the Pathfinder Extension. But there were some signs of language/ESOL issues among the ethnic minority members, and in fact ESOL Pathfinders have subsequently been established to respond to this type of need. The majority of learners from ethnic minorities had spoken a language other than English at home until at least the age of six, and many still spoke this other language at home for part of the time. A refugee dimension could also be involved in some cases, but this was not directly investigated by the evaluation.

#### *4.4 The motives of participants*

Those taking part in basic skills courses evidently have some serious barriers to overcome, both from their previous experiences and in their current circumstances. What are the motivations which help them across those barriers?

The desire for qualifications was the most widespread motivation on the Pathfinder Extension. Nearly four in five of learners entered their course hoping to get a qualification. When the learners talked about their future educational aims (most of them had these), they also usually wanted to make sure that their next course would carry a qualification.

Beneath this common interest in qualifications, there was a great variety of motives of a deeper kind. Some expressed a desire to prove themselves, or to prove their former schools and teachers wrong in writing them off. Connected with this, there was often a determination to confront and overcome their fear of learning.

Course participants also had solidly practical concerns and objectives. Those with children wanted to help them with their schooling. Those without jobs wanted to pave the way to employment, perhaps after progressing somewhat further with their education. Those with current jobs hoped for a better job, for promotion, and in some cases just wanted to do the present job better. Many wanted to be able to deal with everyday things such as budgeting, reading or writing letters, or finding their way round with a street-map.

#### *Job-related motives*

As employment is a focal-point of the evaluation, it is important to understand the job-related motives in more detail, and there were some complexities here. Many of

the people without a job had a desire to move into paid work, but without a firm timetable. They were probably still quite far from being ready, and would need to get there through some intermediate stages, including further courses. On a more positive note, some learners had worked, in their courses, on preparing CVs and found encouragement in this to apply for jobs. Others expressed more confidence about coping with job interviews as a result of their course. There was a general feeling, among those not employed, that the course was improving their prospects.

More focused motives could be identified in those who were already employed. In some cases these motives could be described as 'escape'. Examples were a woman who wanted to break out of a cycle of low-paid, unsatisfying work, or a man who had been in the same job for 20 years and no longer enjoyed it. These people wanted to take the initiative through their basic skills course, and show that they could do something to change their own situation. In other cases, the motive was to advance to a particular kind of job. This included one learner who wanted to become a nursery nurse, and another who saw an opportunity to get promotion to supervisor.

Those who were taking their course at work, usually in a Fixed Rate Replacement Cost course, were in a different position. The majority of these felt that they were improving their prospects with the employer by taking part, and this may have influenced them. Employed people on other kinds of course also saw improvements in their own work, or an extension of what they could do, because of the course. It was usually not obvious whether this was something they had foreseen at the outset, or whether they had discovered the gains in doing the course. Examples of these improvements included very specific tasks, like making stock calculations or writing out a shift handover report in a care home. In addition, learners mentioned 'soft skills', such as increased confidence, self discipline, team working, organisation and planning, communication skills and general familiarity with IT.

It is worth noting that the participants on Intensive courses in Prisons were particularly closely focused on how they could improve their prospects in looking for work after release.

#### *Helping children's development*

Among the other motives for taking basic skills courses, helping children with their educational development was prominent among those with children. For some participants, this was very much the primary motivation. Some of the courses within the Extension programme were directed specifically at this motive, being presented as 'family learning' opportunities. One course of this type that we visited was held in a school, while another was a Residential which included family activities like competitions or a zoo visit with a learning dimension. But the value of being able to help children with homework and other aspects of schooling was also expressed by participants on other types of courses. The participants were more aware of this because of the disadvantages which they had sometimes experienced in their own education through lack of parental support.

## **5 Delivering the courses**

This section is the first of two which reviews how the Pathfinder Extension courses were experienced by those who took part in them. The next section will look at the courses from the viewpoint of learners, and also of employers, while the present section takes the viewpoint of the teachers who had to deliver the programme. It is from the teachers' viewpoint that any difficulties with the programme tend to stand out. None the less, the overall experience of the programme was highly positive for teachers.

### *5.1 Planning*

The evaluation did not reveal much about the planning of the courses, partly because it began well after the planning phase had ended. Also, not all the teachers delivering the courses had responsibility for their planning. However some comments about planning were made by the teachers in retrospect.

The main point was that the courses were planned and prepared under tight time-pressures, and sometimes involved additional dimensions which added to work-loads. This theme of time-pressures runs through a number of the course delivery issues, and reflects the fact that the Extension programme was an experimental development which had to be carried through in the space of one year.

One of the courses which posed special planning complications was Residentials. There were few teachers with any experience of this type of event, and it involved numerous planning requirements like booking venues, making group travel arrangements, checking people's dietary or other special requirements, and (in some cases) laying on childcare and/or incorporating children's activities or family activities into the course. Some Residentials also involved outdoor activities, and these required another layer of planning.

Another area which proved time-consuming was the courses with financial incentives. For instance, they required more control documentation to be prepared. For individual incentives, implications for benefits had to be resolved with the relevant authorities. The employer-based courses also tended to require substantial lead-times, to obtain management approvals, and this proved difficult within the time-frame. As a result, some potential courses were lost to the initiative. Moreover, the provider organizations had to limit their efforts to employers already participating in other kinds of education and training activities with them, rather than attempting to extend participation to new employers. However, the employers taking part were generally new to basic skills education and training.

Particular examples where planning had fallen short included unmet childcare problems which had prevented some learners from attending Residentials, and problems with ICT software or support on some courses which relied on this feature.

### *5.2 Recruiting learners*

The total numbers of participants recruited to the Pathfinder Extension courses fell below the targets that had been set in the initial plans. Courses were often running at



only two thirds of capacity, and sometimes at half. It was also necessary to extend the time for completion of the courses by three months. In part this reflects the time-pressures which have just been referred to, but there were also other issues with recruitment, which deserve further thought in the future.

A wide range of promotional methods was brought to bear in seeking recruits for the Pathfinder Extension. This included the use of brochures and leaflets, letters, personal presentations or visits by teachers (for example, to employers), and the use of various intermediaries. However, teachers believed that no method was as effective as word of mouth recommendation. If initial courses were successful, course numbers would tend to build up through repetition. But, a programme running on a trial basis for one year could not get the full benefit of this process.

The teachers' views tended to be confirmed by what the learners said. Most of them had got to hear about the courses from direct personal contacts, especially with teachers, other parts of the colleges, and other people taking courses. The written media informed or influenced only a small minority. There is an issue here for trial programmes, like the Extension, which need intensive recruitment within a shortened period. For example, the increased use of community outreach activities to promote new courses could be considered. There could also be an underlying issue for basic skills provision as a whole. If most people who take part are either already active learners, or hear through family, friends and other social contacts, this could leave other groups who lack these channels excluded from opportunities because they never hear of them. This again suggests a possible role for outreach.

Some teachers felt that mistakes had been made in the way that their courses had been promoted to potential participants, and that there had also been insufficient time to check out individuals' needs before the courses started. As a result, there had occasionally been a lack of fit between courses and learners, although they had generally been able to get around this by adapting the course and/or by splitting the intake into groups. As will be seen in the next section, few learners were aware of any mismatch between their course and their needs. Some however felt that the ability range of their course was too wide, and that this reduced the course's effectiveness for them. A specific problem on one or two courses was over-emphasis on the computing/ICT element, which it had not been possible to deliver in practice, leading to some disappointment.

Despite these problems and criticisms, teachers claimed success for recruitment in one important respect. They believed that the courses had attracted people whom it is usually difficult to get onto basic skills courses, including those with significant barriers such as low income. This judgement tallies with descriptive information on the participants, outlined in section 4.1.

### *5.3 The innovations*

What did teachers think about the innovations that were built in to the Pathfinder Extension, and especially how these affected their teaching methods?

The first key innovation was to make courses more intensive or concentrated, and this was a focus of many teacher comments. Overall, teacher support for this innovation

was strong. Many of them commented that the gains in learning during intensive provision were plain to see. But careful judgement was needed, because it was easy to go too far in this direction. Learner fatigue, and the difficulty of maintaining interest and motivation, then became problems. A number of courses needed to be modified ‘on the hoof’ for this reason. Among teachers on Residentials, about one in five thought that they were too intensive, and some felt that a slightly more relaxed approach on these would make it possible to allow more time for individual practice. Overall, the impression was that the degree of intensiveness in teaching could not be pushed further than in these Extension programmes.

Another issue was that intensive and highly structured provision made it harder to teach courses of varied ability (see also the learners’ points on mixed ability, above). More pressure was placed on prior assessment of recruits, but this could be jeopardised by short recruiting periods and resulting low numbers of applicants. A teacher on a course which was of uniform ability remarked on the excellent progress made under intensive teaching, but doubted whether this would be possible with a less well-balanced course. Teachers however took steps to cope with varied abilities, as illustrated by a teacher on a Highly Structured Prescriptive course:

“Every effort was made to keep the group together so Extension activities had to be built in for faster learners which slower learners took away as homework. Extension activities and homework were marked and feedback given as rapidly as possible to ensure that learners were ‘tracked’ the whole time and were ready for the material prepared for the following week. [Some of the] learners attended my Basic Skills class later in the week and benefited from explanations given under less pressure of time and ongoing monitoring.”

Teachers had comparatively little to say about the use of financial incentives as such. But some did notice more of an impact on learners’ attitudes than they were expecting. In the case of the Incentives for Individual Learners courses, the incentives (which could only be paid for a weekly attendance of at least four hours) were valuable in getting people to make the time commitment. The effect of Fixed Rate Replacement Costs, in getting employers to provide release for training during working hours, was still clearer. One teacher had asked such a course whether they would have taken part if this had not been the case, and obtained a universal ‘No’ in reply - despite the obvious enthusiasm of course members for the educational experience they were receiving. Learners’ accounts of how they reacted to incentives are described in Section Six.

#### *5.4 Implications for teaching methods*

Teachers used a mixture of individual, group and whole-class teaching methods, with small-group working being the dominant method on Residentials (which generally had larger numbers than other types of course), while individual working was the dominant method on other Extension courses. The overall picture was that these methods were brought together in a flexible way, facilitated by team teaching on the larger courses. Throughout, the emphasis was on linking learning to the tasks and requirements of everyday life.

Residentials provided distinctive opportunities for the teachers. They used them not only to teach learners in a fresh setting, but to introduce a different and often a more challenging content to learning. About half the teachers on Residentials made various kinds of creative activities, such as video production, creative writing, or drama, into the mainstay of the course. Outdoor activities were also used on some Residentials, especially for younger groups. All the teachers who adopted these approaches felt that they were highly successful, especially in developing self-confidence and 'soft skills' (such as team working) which are important to employers. The additional activities usually involved an extension of the teaching team, for example by bringing in a drama teacher or an outdoor activity specialist.

The Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses also offered distinctive teaching opportunities, although these are presumably similar on other work-based learning courses which are being offered by educational providers. As one teacher who organised such courses stressed, it is essential to offer teachers for these courses who have knowledge of employers' requirements and of workplace realities. The courses were tailored to use materials from the workers' daily environment, such as forms and reports, and to emphasise team-working. The need to fit in with employers' work schedules sometimes imposed practical time-pressures on these courses.

A theme which ran through many teachers' comments about teaching methods was the need for a flexible approach. The teaching for a particular class had to be adapted to the numbers recruited, to the level of ability, to individuals' needs and sensitivities, and to the rate of progress. The range of teaching methods available on the course helped to achieve this flexibility, especially with team teaching.

### *5.5 Using ICT*

ICT was used in a supporting role in many of these courses although it played a more central role in only a few. Teachers who were using this approach felt that it helped to motivate learners, was readily accepted by younger groups, and could provide specific advantages in providing more opportunities for individual practice. Lack of access to ICT was a form of social exclusion for some groups (an example mentioned was a course mainly of Bangladeshi women), and for these ICT provision on basic skills courses was of extra benefit. Comments from learners tended to support teachers' perceptions, and stressed the gains in confidence when a person who had never used a computer found that it was not so difficult.

On the basic skills courses using ICT, learners were taken through the initial steps, from switching on a computer, and were soon using applications packages or the Internet. On one Highly Structured Prescriptive course which featured ICT, ways in which learners had used computers included in plotting graphs, using Clip Art to design party invitations, letter-writing, working out percentages, ordering from catalogues, performing Internet searches, taking maths quizzes and spelling tests, sending emails, and updating CVs. On this and other courses, computer games were used to give interest to the practicing of grammar or sums.

Practical problems with software or support services constituted the downside of the technology for teachers. There were cases where insufficient PCs had been made available, where the software supplied was incompatible with computers, or where

Internet access had failed for a substantial period. Underlying these surface problems were longer-term issues concerning the development of ICT. These included system and software standardisation, which became a more complex issue when numerous educational providers in an area - or perhaps even across areas - were involved in a collaborative initiative. They also included the general issue of funding the hardware and software (with frequent updates) and the technical support staff.

Another issue closer to home for teachers was their own proficiency. While some teachers were adept, others found it difficult to reach and maintain a sufficient level of expertise with ICT, especially with continually updated software and hardware. This can be addressed through a programme of ICT training for teachers. Provision for such training was stressed in two areas which had special programmes of ICT development for basic skills. In one of these areas, for example, software was not released for use on courses unless the teachers first attended a formal training session.

### *5.6 Teachers' views of Pathfinder Extension course effectiveness*

Despite the pressures and difficulties they had experienced in delivering the programme, there was overall a strong feeling among the teachers that the Pathfinder Extension had been effective and that they constituted an enriching professional experience. These feelings were even more marked among teachers on Residential courses, who observed a rise in motivation and confidence among participants which was transferred to the traditional basic skills courses afterwards.

On effort, interest shown, relationships with other learners, relationships with teachers, and self-confidence, the majority of teachers considered that learners' performance was on average better relative to traditional courses. The views of teachers were however somewhat more positive in the case of Residential courses than of Non-residential courses. About one half of teachers on Extension courses apart from Residentials had also seen improvements in attendance and in commitment to taking the attainment test.

The majority of teachers on both Residential and Non-residential courses endorsed their innovative nature, rating them as 'significantly different' or a 'radical departure' compared with their previous teaching experience. The majority also got enhanced satisfaction from teaching on Extension, in both Residentials and Non-residentials.

### *5.7 The need for follow-up and continuity*

Teachers were anxious, however, that the successes of these courses should not be exaggerated. Learners all had a long distance still to travel, and they would need further educational support along the way. The excitement generated by rapid progress on, say, Residentials could mislead individuals into thinking they had got further than was realistically the case. These kinds of comments from teachers suggest the potential value of further advice and guidance for learners as their courses come to an end.

The Fixed Rate Replacement Courses, also, had only scratched the surface of the problem at each workplace, and raising the overall standards would need a continuing programme.

## 6 Experiencing the courses

This section is about how Pathfinder Extension courses seemed to those on ‘the receiving end’. Most obviously these are the learners who take part, but employers are also included. The evaluation collected a great deal of material under this heading, and most of it is very positive in tone. However, it needs to be stressed that from the viewpoint of the evaluation this kind of material is secondary or peripheral. The evaluation was primarily concerned with educational and employment impacts after the courses, not with whether the courses were popular. All the same, it is worth knowing about learners’ responses to the courses. If there had been a substantial level of discontent, then something would be going wrong that needed to be seen to, irrespective of subsequent outcomes. In fact, very little appeared to be going wrong, from the learners’ viewpoint, and the teachers’ comments, presented in Section Five, were much more informative about difficulties within the programme.

Accordingly, the responses of the learners will be presented very briefly. But some additional attention will be paid to the employers’ viewpoint, since this is the only place in the evaluation which directly considers their needs.

### *6.1 Learners’ experiences*

In the in-depth interviews, learners not only expressed satisfaction with the courses, they were for the most part positively enthusiastic. Instead of describing the courses in terms of learning, they talked of excitement, enjoyment and fun, something to look forward to and not want to end. The role of the teachers was repeatedly acknowledged. Contrasts were drawn with previous experience of schooling, especially in terms of the personal support given by the teachers. Learners were aware of their own self-confidence progressing in leaps, and felt this was one of the great benefits of taking part.

The surveys tried to summarise what learners liked about courses more formally. Learners pointed about equally to the content, the teaching methods, and the teachers. They also enjoyed the social contact with others on their courses. The great majority of participants were satisfied with the course structure and timetabling, the level of difficulty, one-to-one contact with the teachers, opportunities for practicing skills, and clarity of instruction and feedback. On clarity and feedback, however, the Highly Structured Prescriptive provision did somewhat less well than other courses, which was puzzling as these should have been strong-points for this type of provision. But even here, the great majority of ratings were positive.

The majority of those on Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses stated that being on an employer-based course made them try harder. Similarly, those on Incentives for Individual Learners courses felt that the incentives helped them to improve their attendance and increased their commitment to taking and passing their qualifying test. A particularly large proportion on the Incentives for Individual Learners courses reported that they had been prevented from taking courses in the past by various barriers to participation.

When asked how they thought the courses might be improved, participants struggled to find shortcomings. One in three concluded no improvement was possible. The

suggestions made were of an extremely miscellaneous nature, and only one idea had substantial support (from about one in five learners). This was to extend course time or class time, especially so as to give more time for practice. This comment can also be connected to learners' desire to enter further courses, a desire shared by three-quarters of them.

Where ICT was mentioned, its role in the course was generally appreciated. Participants valued the chance to use ICT in part because they saw a positive impact on employability. For many of the learners, this was their first time in using computers, or particular skills, such as searching the Internet. Some learners also referred to ways in which computers suited their way of learning, allowing them to work at their own speed.

Finally, the positive response of the learners on the Pathfinder Extension courses can be illustrated with a few simple statistics:

- 96 per cent regarded their course as 'interesting'.
- 81 per cent regarded the difficulty of the course as 'just right'.
- 96 per cent stated that they would recommend the same course to a relative or friend.

One note of caution needs to be sounded about this favourable picture of learners' experiences. Those who enter basic skills education as adults are mostly a self-selected group who have overcome difficult obstacles to resume their education. Their desire for education must therefore be strong. The same results would not necessarily be obtained with a different kind of group with less of a spontaneous desire for education. To illustrate this, unusually negative views of a course came from one young person who had been 'pushed' into taking part.

Another point to bear in mind is that for practical reasons the evaluation was not able to cover participants who had dropped out of courses early on, and it also probably missed some participants who were often absent. From the information provided by teachers, drop-out and absence were not large problems. None the less, these gaps in coverage reduced the information about people for whom the courses did not turn out well.

## *6.2 Employers' views of workplace courses*

Section Five mentioned some of the practical difficulties involved in setting up courses with employers, under the Fixed Rate Replacement Costs programme. The result was that colleges tended to work with employers where they had an existing relationship, which generally meant larger or medium-sized employers with a commitment to staff development and training. The majority of employees participating in Fixed Rate Replacement Costs courses came from the public sector. In an established programme rather than a pilot programme, the time constraints in setting up employer-based courses would be reduced and some shift towards private sector employers could be expected. The majority of the case-study research carried out in the evaluation in fact focused on private sector participants.

Even though these were employers with an organized approach to training, getting the courses approved by senior management was not always plain sailing. An important role was usually played by training officers and also by trade union representatives in making a case to run the courses. Although direct wage costs were compensated by the programme, management was sometimes concerned about the possible disruption to work which might result from a number of employees being absent on a course.

There was also, in some cases, a considerable task in persuading employees to take part, once the course had been approved. Various methods were used to publicise the courses internally, but individual selling or persuasion was also often needed. This was carried out variously by line managers, by training officers, and by trade union representatives. In one case, for example, the learner representative in a retail company spent three days telephoning stores to persuade individuals – an exercise which proved successful. In another company, the agreement of some managers and supervisors to take the course themselves was a key step in getting others to join in.

In view of these initial difficulties, the judgements of management on the Pathfinder courses was all the more remarkable. In short, the reaction was extremely positive in every case-study organization. Moreover, a feature of managers' comments was that they saw positive impacts *immediately*.

Employers were able to cite specific ways in which participating employees had changed and developed. One dimension was staff confidence and morale. Staff were happier at work, showed more commitment, and “walked around with big smiles on their faces”. This also affected how they carried out their work. Management perceptions included increases in commitment, more pride and self-confidence in doing the job, and better relationships with others. All the case-study organizations reiterated this theme.

These changes in individuals had concrete effects in the workplace. Increased pride in the job meant better customer service, and there were reports of improvements in productivity, absenteeism and work relations. While these general comments could be a type of ‘halo effect’, managers supported them by specific examples. Areas where improvements had been noted immediately following participation in the course included the following:

- Staff ability to follow organisational systems, practices and instructions.
- Reduced wastage of cleaning fluids through attending to instructions about dilution.
- More accurate stock-taking and ordering.
- More effective checking and chasing of incomplete deliveries.
- Reduced delays with, and losses of, paperwork (staff previously were taking paperwork off-site, perhaps to obtain family assistance in completion; now they were completing it promptly on-site).

At a more general level, several employers noted that the courses had made people more adaptable. They felt that this was particularly important in the face of rapid organisational change and the need for a flexible workforce that could provide cover and adapt to new technologies.

Earlier in this section, we noted participants' belief that they were improving their prospects with the employer by taking part in this type of course. This was supported in a general way by employers, who saw the courses as ways of developing employees. In one organization, it was reported that several people who had taken part in the first course had already been promoted, and the responsible manager saw this as a positive step forward. The learner representative at another organization believed that the course had given staff the chance to move up by showing their potential.

The improvements in performance which followed these courses suggests how much the effectiveness of many organizations must be impaired by lack of basic skills in their workforce, affecting day-to-day tasks. From that point of view, it seems easy to extend the achievements of these courses to many other employers. However, it may not be so easy in organizations with no tradition of training and developing their employees. Also, the requisite amount of experience and skill involved in designing effective courses of this type should not be under-estimated. These courses were not off-the-peg offerings, but were tailored to the needs of each workplace, and involved the ability to understand and interpret the employer's needs, as well as the individual's. There was also a more detailed level of course design in which the procedures, systems, forms and even the products used at a particular workplace were made into course materials. Without this attention to detail, these courses might not have provided such immediate gains for employers.

Despite the generally high level of success of these courses, some limitations were acknowledged by management. One was the rather rigid way in which classes were scheduled (there was one organization however where a more flexible approach was developed). As a result, those who worked shifts or rotas, or were in departments where no cover could be arranged, were excluded. This problem is one which will have to be solved if workplace courses are to develop into a major route for basic skills education.

Another issue where there was some dissatisfaction was ICT. Employees expressed a clear demand for ICT skills, and promoting courses as relating to ICT overcame some of the stigma attaching to literacy problems. However, managers felt that a 60 hour basic skills course did not provide adequate time for ICT issues to be tackled in any depth. There were some reports of employees leaving courses disappointed on this aspect.

Finally, employers were concerned about continuity in training provision. Both employees and managers became enthusiastic about the potential for further courses, either to take those who had already participated on another stage, or to give the same opportunities to other employees. Managers are apprehensive about raising expectations which they cannot fulfil. Further development will require longer-term provision, and also a more strategic commitment by senior management.



## 7 The impacts of Pathfinder Extension

The preceding three sections have described the participants and their motives for learning, and summarised the experience offered by the programme from the viewpoints of teachers, learners and employers. Those sections all concern secondary objectives of the evaluation, relating to the processes involved in Pathfinder Extension. In Section Seven, the focus is finally on the primary questions for the evaluation:

- Did the programme make a difference to the educational and employment outcomes of the participants, compared with going on a traditional basic skills course?
- If so, how large were those differences?

### 7.1 Understanding the estimation method

The answers to the central questions for the evaluation are obtained by statistical methods, making use of the information from the learner surveys. This report is intended to be non-technical, but an outline explanation is needed to empower the reader.

The follow-up survey reveals what happened after the Pathfinder Extension courses – for example, whether qualifications were obtained, whether new courses were started, and whether the participants were in paid work. This has to be assessed against what would have happened if they had gone on traditional basic skills courses instead. Then, and only then, is it possible to say how much difference the Pathfinder Extension made.

To judge what would have happened if the Extension participants had gone on traditional courses, we use the Comparison sample of people who did actually go on traditional courses. As noted in Section Three, this Comparison sample was taken from the same areas, and nearly always from the same education providers, as the Extension sample. However, it is not enough simply to compare the overall outcomes for the Extension sample with the overall outcomes for the Comparison sample, because there may be some differences in the make-up of the two groups which could affect subsequent outcomes. For example, at various points in the preceding sections we have noted that:

- There were somewhat more people with health disadvantages and learning disadvantages in the Extension sample.
- The teachers also believed that the Extension courses had reached more people with serious disadvantages including low income.

If this was not taken into account, then the evaluation could be biased against the Pathfinder Extension. The evaluation analysis therefore only compares the Extension participants with those people in the Comparison sample *who closely match someone in the Extension sample*. For this reason, the evaluation method is known as ‘matching’.

One way of picturing this is as follows. Suppose that for each person in the Extension sample, we find that person's 'double' in the Comparison sample. Then the evaluation is between Extension participants and their 'doubles' who took traditional courses instead. Of course, it is not literally possible to find 'doubles', but the method used picks those people who come closest, and a great many background characteristics are taken into account when doing so<sup>2</sup>.

One possible limitation on 'matching' is that there is not much information about attitudes and motivations *before* going on the courses. However, since everyone in both the Extension sample and the Comparisons sample took part in a basic skills course, it is reasonable to assume that the levels of motivation towards education were rather similar. In fact, the present evaluation is better placed in this respect than most other evaluations.

## 7.2 Educational impacts

Sometimes the assessment of educational outcomes is carried out by means of scores on tests. This information was not available in the present evaluation since it had not been possible for the colleges and other providers to carry out testing in a comprehensive way. Instead, the evaluation considered the following outcomes:

- What proportion of learners had completed their course.
- What proportion of learners started a new course afterwards.

In addition the evaluation looked at qualification rates in the Extension and Comparison courses, but it was not possible to apply the 'matching' method here. This was because quite substantial minorities, especially of the learners on traditional courses, stated that they were still continuing with the same courses and so had not reached the point where a qualification was attainable. Qualification therefore had to be assessed in a more provisional way.

### *Course completion*

Because some people were still continuing on the same course, course completion rates could be calculated in two ways. One was to include everyone and to count someone still continuing with the same course as a non-completer. This is a reasonable interpretation, since continuation probably means re-enrolment on the same course in the following year. Alternatively, those still continuing with the same course could be excluded from consideration and completion could then be based on the remainder.

(a) *Results based on the whole sample.* On this basis, being on an Extension course raised the completion rate by 14 percentage points, relative to being on a traditional basic skills course.

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<sup>2</sup> The statistical method for combining a large amount of information for this purpose is called 'propensity score matching'. It is further described in the main report.

(b) *Results based only on those not continuing with same course.* On this basis, being on an Extension course *reduced* the completion rate by 6 percentage points, relative to being on a traditional basic skills course.

The difference between the two estimates came about because of the larger proportion of traditional basic skills learners who did not complete but continued with the same course in the following year. In fact, twice as many learners on traditional courses did this.

- A reasonable way of reconciling the results is to conclude that learners on Extension courses were *more likely to complete within the year*, but that learners on traditional courses who did not complete within the year *were more likely to continue in the following year*.

### *Qualification rate*

As some people were continuing with the same courses in the next year, the picture of qualification rates provided by the follow-up survey is incomplete and provisional. Up to the time of the follow-up survey, 73 per cent of the Extension course participants reported getting a qualification, while the corresponding figure for those on traditional basic skills courses was 64 per cent.

But 12 per cent of those on traditional courses were still either waiting to take their test or waiting to hear results, while only 4 per cent from the Extension courses were still waiting. So it is possible that the traditional course learners would eventually ‘catch up’ to the rate of qualifications on the Extension.

### *Starting a new course*

The majority of participants from both the Pathfinder Extension and the traditional basic skills courses had started a new course by the time of the follow-up survey, which underlines the high level of commitment to further education across these participants. But it was the traditional courses which had the higher rate.

- Being on an Extension course *reduced* the entry rate to new courses by 9 percentage points, relative to being on a traditional basic skills course.

The participants in Extension courses, however, were more likely than the traditional basic skills learners to *take more than one new course*. About one in five of the former did so, by comparison with one in seven of the latter. Also, quite a few of the new courses taken by learners from the Extension programme had already finished by the time of the follow-up survey. It looks as though the experience of being on relatively intensive or compressed courses had given some of the Extension participants a preference for shorter courses.

### *7.3 Impacts on job-related outcomes*

The importance of employment and other job-related outcomes for the evaluation was outlined in Section Three. To carry out this aim of the evaluation, several job-related impacts of the programme were estimated by means of the ‘matching’ method:

- The proportion employed at the time of the follow-up survey.
- The proportion who were not employed but were interested in having a paid job, at the follow-up survey.
- The proportion who were not employed and expressed no interest in having a paid job, at the follow-up survey.
- The average number of months in employment between January and September 2002.

Each of these will be explained further as the section progresses. At the end of the section, there is also some additional descriptive information about the kinds of jobs which were held at the time of the survey.

#### *The proportion employed at the time of the follow-up*

An increase in the employment rate is generally regarded as the strongest indication of a programme’s contribution to the financial well-being of a participant and to the economy. In the present case, the employment rate could be affected by the programme in several ways. An increase in employment could come about by helping those already in employment to remain employed, or by helping those wanting work to move into jobs, or by encouraging those not wanting work to do so, and then helping them to get jobs.

- The overall impact of Pathfinder Extension on employment at the follow-up interview was positive. Being on an Extension course raised the employment rate by 9 percentage points relative to being on a traditional basic skills course.

A possible fault in this estimate was that it included the people on Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses, who were all by definition employed at the time of their courses. To check whether this affected the result, estimates were also obtained excluding the Fixed Rate Replacement Cost course participants. This however did not affect the result: if anything, the effect of Extension on employment became slightly larger.

Some additional descriptive information about job entry helps to interpret the results. For the Extension participants, 25 per cent of jobs had been entered within the six months before the follow-up interview, whereas for the traditional course participants, the figure was 22 per cent. This difference may seem small at first sight, but in view of the higher proportion of disadvantaged people in the Extension courses, it is potentially important. It seems likely that a substantial part of the impact of Extension on employment consisted of new jobs entered.

### *'Distance from employment' at the follow-up*

For those people not in a paid job at the time of the follow-up, the survey established whether or not they wanted to find employment. Those wanting a paid job can be regarded as relatively close to employment while those not wanting a paid job are relatively distant from employment. Any increase in employment must be equalled by a fall in the other two groups combined.

- The relative gain in employment of 9 percentage points for the Extension participants as a whole corresponded to a fall of 7 percentage points in those wanting a job, plus a fall in those not wanting a job of 2 percentage points. In other words, if the gain in employment had not come about, this would mainly have meant that more of the participants would have been left wanting paid work but not able to get it.

### *Number of months in employment, January-September 2002*

The number of months employed was a potentially useful addition to the employment outcomes. Months between January and June were included because part of the potential advantage of the more compressed Extension courses was to give participants more scope to take a job in this period. The period from July to September was included so as to reflect some short-term movement into jobs after the end of the Summer term.

- For the whole sample, including Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses, average employment was higher for the Extension participants by about two-thirds of a month. But this measure clearly was affected by the Fixed Rate Replacement Cost participants, all of whom were continuously employed throughout the period. With them excluded, the estimate was still positive but was no longer statistically reliable.

To get a more reliable estimate of the amount of time spent in employment, one would really need a longer follow-up period and/or a larger sample.

### *Job quality*

For those in jobs at the follow-up, comparisons were made of 'job quality' in terms of whether the job was permanent or temporary, whether any training was being provided, and what was the hourly wage rate. There were no differences in any of these respects between the jobs held by Extension course participants and traditional course participants. Overall, eight in ten of the jobs were permanent, four in ten provided training, and the average wage rate was about £4.70 (50p above the National Minimum Wage adult rate at the time).

### *Barriers to looking for a job*

Of those not employed, a little less than one half were either actively looking for paid work at the time of the follow-up survey or wanted to move towards paid work, while

somewhat more than one half did not want paid work. These figures are important in assessing what scope there is for further help with employment among basic skills participants.

Those not wanting work mentioned various barriers between them and employment. Interestingly, these barriers differed between the Extension learners and the traditional basic skills learners. Learners on Extension courses were significantly more likely to mention their own ill-health and lack of childcare as barriers to job search, and these have already been flagged up as important issues in earlier sections.

- A practical lesson is therefore that further attention is needed to employment barriers alongside the innovative development of basic skills education.

#### *7.4 Differences between types of Extension programme*

An aim of the evaluation was to evaluate differences between the Extension programmes, such as Residentials, Intensives, etc. Because the numbers recruited to the programmes were below the planned level, it was not possible to do this in the way originally envisaged, which was to compare each programme with each other programme. But it was still possible to address this aim to some extent.

##### *Impacts for Residential courses*

Residential courses had much the largest number of participants among the Extension, with 210 interviewed at the follow-up. They were also spread across all nine areas which ran the Pathfinder programmes. So it was possible to treat Residentials as a kind of national evaluation on its own, ‘matching’ Residential participants to traditional basic skills participants as before.

On *course completion*, Residentials did not do so well as the whole Extension sample. They did not gain significantly by completing within the original year, and they were also less likely to continue into the following year. This is partly understandable because Residentials were grafted on to traditional courses.

On *starting a new course*, Residentials were still somewhat behind the traditional learners, although with a smaller gap than for the Extension as a whole.

On *qualification gained*, Residentials were at about the average level for the Extension as a whole. This meant that they did somewhat better than the traditional courses up to the time of the follow-up, although there was still scope for the traditional courses to catch up because of their higher level of course continuance.

On *current employment*, Residentials gained by 10 percentage points over their traditional course ‘doubles’, a result that is virtually the same as for the whole Extension sample.

This gain in employment corresponded mainly to a reduction in those who were disinterested in paid jobs, rather than a reduction in those looking for a job.

There was no clear gain for the Residential course participants in terms of the average number of months spent in employment over the study period.

#### *Intensive and Highly Structure Prescriptive courses*

A similar approach as for Residentials was applied to the Intensive and Highly Structured Intensive courses, considered jointly. These provided 154 interviews at the follow-up survey. With these numbers, only one of the analyses was statistically reliable. But it is still possible to draw some conclusions from the overall pattern of results, provided that this is done in a cautious way and without drawing over-strong conclusions. The results are based on ‘matching’ the learners on these types of innovative provision with traditional participants from the same areas.

On *course completion*, the Intensive/Highly Structured Prescriptive grouping more or less followed the overall pattern of results, showing a positive tendency to complete the course within the original year.

However, on *starting a new course*, Intensive/Highly Structured Prescriptive had significantly negative results. Participation in new courses was 19 percentage points lower than if the participants had gone on traditional basic skills courses.

In terms of qualifications gained up to the time of the follow-up, the Intensive/Highly Structured Prescriptive courses also achieved rather below the average for all Extension (and it was Highly Structured Prescriptive in particular which pulled the results down).

Overall, then, the Intensives/Highly Structured Prescriptive courses did not seem to perform well on educational outcomes except for course completion. And they also failed to produce positive results on the employment outcomes.

On *employment at the follow-up*, there was virtually no difference between the Intensives/Highly Structured Prescriptive courses and the traditional courses. The same applied to the other job-related measures. In short, the Intensives/Highly Structured Prescriptive courses did not seem to make any difference to job-related outcomes.

#### *Incentives for Individual Learners and Fixed Rate Replacement Costs*

These two financial incentives programmes had relatively small samples interviewed at the follow-up (35 for Fixed Rate Replacement Costs, 69 for Incentives for Individuals). Also, they are too dissimilar in composition to be combined. Accordingly, it was not possible to apply the ‘matching’ method to these as a separate group. We can only offer descriptive points, comparing the results for these types of provision with the other Extension courses. It should be stressed that none of these comparisons takes into account the differences in the participants’ characteristics across different types of Extension course.

The Incentives and Fixed Rate courses had higher levels of course completion than the other Extension courses. They also had the highest qualification rates, up to the time of the follow-up (with Incentives for Individuals particularly high). In terms of

starting new courses, Fixed Rate courses were the lowest of any Extension course type, while Incentives for Individuals was at the overall average level for the Extension.

The employment outcomes are meaningless in the case of the Fixed Cost courses, since all the participants had to be employed in order to take part. Incentives for Individuals had the highest rate of employment at the follow-up out of all the Extension course types except Fixed Cost. In addition, the average months employed of the learners on Incentives for Individuals courses were higher than for other Extension courses, except Fixed Rate.

Overall, the descriptive results for the ‘incentivised’ Extension courses looked promising, but sample size limitations prevented a more complete evaluation of this part of the results.

## **8 Learning from the evaluation**

This final section brings together the main lessons of the evaluation, under two headings: Delivery, and Impact. The first heading is based on Sections Four to Six, and addresses the secondary objectives of the evaluation concerning programme implementation. The second heading is based on Section Seven, and relates to the primary aims of the evaluation concerning what difference the programme made.

### *8.1 Delivery of the Pathfinder Extension programme*

#### *Extending the reach of basic skills education*

The first lesson of the programme is about extending the reach of basic skills in terms of the kinds of people who are attracted to take part. The Pathfinder Extension had some success in this respect, especially in reaching more people with disadvantages in terms of ill-health, dyslexia and other learning difficulties. Many learners, especially on Incentives for Individual Learners courses, reported barriers which had prevented them from taking part in educational courses in the past.

In addition, Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses held at employers’ workplaces helped to bring more men into basic skills education and to get people in semi-skilled jobs to take part. In the absence of this type of course arrangement, these employees would not have been taking part in basic skills education.

Lessons of the evaluation for further steps in this area included the following:

- To extend recruitment to basic skills education among disadvantaged groups, there is a need for increased cooperation between educational providers and other agencies working with various client groups in the community.
- Childcare barriers to access were seen as particularly crucial by many of the teachers on these courses. If a more intensive approach is to be used on basic skills courses in future, this issue will become more prominent.



- Another barrier which the Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses brought to the forefront was working times. Employees working shifts or in jobs where cover could not be arranged were excluded from the courses. More flexible course arrangements would be needed to overcome the problem.
- Further development of employer-based courses will need to bring in new employers rather than, as in this pilot stage, relying on the employers which the providers already knew. There is a particular problem in reaching employees in smaller workplaces and as yet there is a lack of good-practice examples to draw on.

*How did learners and teachers respond to the innovations?*

A simple lesson from the programme is that both learners and teachers responded very favourably to the Pathfinder Extension courses. Because of the innovative elements involved, this was not a guaranteed outcome. The basic conclusion is that there is a readiness to accept innovation in basic skills provision. The following points expand on this conclusion.

- Course intensity was not obtrusive for learners, a tribute to the skilful way in which it was handled by teachers.
- Incentives were seen by both learners and teachers as a motivational support, useful in overcoming barriers but not central to individuals' motives for taking part.
- Because shorter, intensive courses have obvious practical advantages in a Prisons context, there is a good case for them there provided that the learners are also satisfied. In fact, learners in Prisons seemed if anything more satisfied with the intensive provision than learners outside.
- Teachers were more sensitive to the innovations, as they had to deliver them on the ground. They made critical comments about what went wrong on occasion, or what could have gone wrong. But despite this critical awareness, they strongly supported the programme and found it a professionally rewarding, if also exhausting, experience. Teachers' commitment to innovation is not a new lesson, but it is one that is confirmed by the evaluation.

*How could delivery be improved?*

Indications for how programme delivery could be improved came chiefly from the teachers. Most of their critical comments and suggestions related to the time-pressures under which the programme was planned and implemented.

The main casualty from time-pressures was recruitment. Overall, the programme achieved about two-thirds of its target numbers.

- A longer-term lesson from this, is to develop more outreach capabilities in basic skills education, possibly by extending links with voluntary bodies and other agencies that could assist with promotion of new programmes.

ICT was identifiable as an area needing further work but the lessons at this stage remain unclear. Evidently, ICT provision was an attraction for many learners but sometimes it was being 'over-sold'. There were also various technical issues in the background, such as system and software standards, availability of technical support, interruptions to access, funding implications, and the training of teachers to keep abreast of continual changes. These issues are not of course unique to the Pathfinder Extension, but innovative and intensive provision will bring such matters to the foreground because of increased reliance on ICT.

The majority of learners wanted to continue their education, both in the near and the longer-term future, and most also had an employment aim. Teachers also stressed that however successful the present course, the learners would need to continue through subsequent steps.

- Advice and guidance services, as well as continuing access to courses, could help to secure further progress and continuity.

Continuity was also an issue for employers who had taken part. They wanted to offer follow-up courses, but were anxious that funding constraints and (in some cases) lack of interest from top management would make this impossible.

- Responding to employers' needs for continuity would require a development of provision, and stronger commitment by senior management.

#### *How could evaluation be improved?*

A key aim of the Pathfinder Extension programme was to learn what innovations would produce enhanced outcomes from future basic skills programmes. The evaluation attempted to meet this aim, but in some respects fell short of what it set out to do.

The main limitations of the evaluation arose from the fact that the numbers recruited to the programme were lower than planned. As a result the evaluation's main conclusions were less precise than they would otherwise have been, and comparisons between the various types of Extension course were restricted. Such problems of recruitment often occur in trial programmes and may be unavoidable because of short lead-times and uncertainty about the demand for new kinds of provision.

It would have been possible to strengthen the evaluation if it had been feasible to start it sooner, preferably at the same time as setting up the Pathfinder Extension themselves.

## *8.2 Interpreting the Impacts of Pathfinder Extension*

The main findings of the evaluation concerning the impacts of Pathfinder Extension are briefly summarised below. In each case, the result states what the learners on Extension courses did *relative to* counterparts in traditional basic skills courses.

- They achieved a higher rate of course completion within the year of the course<sup>3</sup>...
- ... and a higher qualification rate within that year.
- But they were less likely, if not completing the course, to re-enrol for the same course in the following year.
- They were also less likely to start a new course, though more likely to start two courses.
- They were more likely to be in employment at the follow-up survey.

To put this more simply, Pathfinder Extension produced positive impacts in terms of short-term educational outcomes and short-term gains in employment. But they led to less new educational entry than did traditional basic skills courses.

By the standards of previous evaluation experience relating to education and training programmes for adults, the employment impact, at nine percentage points, was substantial. Because of the sample size there is inevitably some fuzziness around the estimate. However, confidence in an evaluation's findings depend not only on statistical estimates but also in part on whether they tell a 'story' which makes sense. The present results, when coupled with what is known about the design and delivery of the Pathfinder Extension, do seem to tell a convincing story.

By providing more intensive and compressed learning experiences, some of the Extension helped learners to make gains in attainment and in self-confidence at an earlier stage. The financial incentives programmes meanwhile helped participants to complete their courses and gain their qualifications. While a course is continuing, they may find it difficult to focus on job possibilities as well. Earlier completion and qualification permitted job aspirations to come to the fore sooner.

When the individual switches her or his priority to employment, it becomes harder to focus on educational next-steps at the same time. Furthermore, working hours clash with course schedules, and waged employment reduces the financial aid available for courses. An employed person tends to become dependent on the employer for any further educational participation.

Two main lessons follow from this interpretation:

- The main lesson is that it is possible to achieve increases in employment for basic skills participants through innovations of the type embodied in the Pathfinder Extension. Moreover, these gains take place alongside, and in part through, better short-term course completion rates.
- The second lesson is that to reconcile increased employment with continuing learning, more development is needed of basic skills provision within employment. (The Fixed Rate Replacement Cost programme is one development which addresses this need.)

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<sup>3</sup> Meaning the academic year ending in July.

### *Which innovation was more effective?*

The Pathfinder Extension programme incorporated two main kinds of innovation. What lessons can be learned about these, when they are considered separately? Does the evidence suggest priorities for future development, among the various types of Pathfinder Extension?

### *Intensification*

Residential provision was tested on a bigger scale than the other Extension provision and was crucial to the overall effectiveness of the programme. The employment impact of this three-day intensive educational experience was similar to the average impact for the Extension as a whole. This was not achieved by early course completion although there was possibly a gain in the qualification rate. The feeling of making a rapid advance may have been enough to arouse learners' job aspirations.

For Intensive and Highly Structured Prescriptive courses, evaluation was impeded by the relatively small numbers of participants. The limited evidence indicated that these courses had a high short-term completion rate but they did not have a clear positive impact in other respects. However, whereas Residentials were tried out across all nine Pathfinder areas, the Intensives were tried in only two areas and Highly Structured Prescriptive in three areas. It is possible that Intensive and Highly Structured Prescriptive courses would have had more impact if offered in some of the other areas.

- The main conclusion regarding intensified or compressed provision is that Residential courses offer an effective vehicle for this type of innovative development.
- The impact of Residentials might be still greater if combined with shorter overall course length, so as to increase short-term completion rates.

### *Financial incentives*

Small numbers of participants prevented the evaluation from reaching firm conclusions for the Incentives for Individual Learners and the Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses.

At a simple descriptive level, it seems that the Incentives for Individual Learners courses were particularly successful across the range of outcomes. But these results could have been affected by characteristics of the two localities where they operated, or by characteristics of their participants. The descriptive results must therefore be treated with caution.

In the case of Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses, the small numbers of participants made numerical conclusions impossible. The main positive support for the Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses came from the qualitative part of the evaluation, where they were strongly endorsed by employers, as well as by participants.

- While no firm conclusion can be reached about the separate impact of the courses based on financial incentives, the available evidence suggests that they merit a more extensive trial.
- This applies to both the Incentives for Individual Learners and the Fixed Rate Replacement Cost courses.

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