Promoting Access and Progression in Adult Learning

Guidelines to Enhance Cooperation between Back to Education Initiative and Adult Literacy Programmes
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1. INTRODUCTION

These guidelines on effective cooperation between Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) (Part-time) funded programmes and the VEC Adult Literacy Service are one of a number of reports, produced in response to issues identified during the consultation process with BTEI providers that took place in 2005 and published in a discussion document circulated by the Department of Education and Science in October 2006. The discussion document recommended that guidelines should be produced at national level to enhance cooperation between the Adult Literacy Service and BTEI. Strong partnership and cooperation across services was recognised as vital, both in terms of the expertise available and the efficient use of resources. This document sets out the key principles underpinning cooperation between the two programmes.

The report accompanies Guidelines on Effective Planning and Delivery of BTEI Outreach Provision, ‘Widening Participation in Adult Learning’, developed by the City of Limerick VEC in cooperation with the Further Education Development Unit. The guidelines on outreach offer a practical guide for practitioners wishing to engage learners who do not usually access educational provision delivered in institutional settings. They offer guidance on establishing and building educational outreach teams, motivating and involving learners and providing them with a positive and fruitful educational experience.

A third report on Increasing Men’s Participation in Adult Learning ‘Guidelines to Enhance Men’s Engagement with Back to Education Initiative Funded Programmes’ is intended to be read in conjunction with the guidelines on outreach. It highlights the importance of men as a specific BTEI target group and presents a brief statistical analysis of their participation in BTEI provision in 2007. The report is informed by a review of existing related literature and by extensive consultation with BTEI providers and it presents a number of case studies of approaches that have successfully engaged men in BTEI provision.

Other reports on the participation of people with disabilities in BTEI provision and issues relating to the attainment of certification, particularly at FETAC
Levels Three and Four will be disseminated at a later stage. These guidelines on effective cooperation between BTEI funded programmes and the Adult Literacy Service recommend that BTEI programmes systematically develop an integrated approach to literacy support and development. The aim of an integrated approach to literacy in BTEI funded provision is to enable students to participate in and achieve their goals within the core programme. There will be variations between centres in the specifics of how this approach is applied and organised, however the basic features are consistent.

- **Teachers of the core subjects** know and use inclusive, literacy-aware methods and materials. They take account of the specific types of language, reading, writing and numeracy the students need to engage with in relation to each topic or class. They choose and use methods and materials to explicitly support students to fully participate in the core learning programme.

- **Students have access to a dedicated course-related literacy support service.** This is provided by tutors who are trained and experienced in adult literacy principles and practice, and skilled in providing course-related language and literacy development in adult and further education programmes at all levels.

- **There is effective and systematic communication between subject staff and literacy support staff to jointly plan how to support students with their specific needs.**

- **Management have systems in place to facilitate that communication and teamwork.**

It is in that context that these guidelines aim to support local adult education services to plan, design and deliver literacy and numeracy support to BTEI participants in the Formal Strand (mostly VEC provision) and the Community Strand (47 local community groups were funded under BTEI in 2008). The guidelines were commissioned by the Department of Education and Science and were researched and written in collaboration with the Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) National Advisory Group.

## 2. ADULT LITERACY and BTEI PROGRAMMES

**The BTEI Programme**

Following the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life (2000) the Back to Education Initiative was launched by the Department of Education and Science in 2002 to contribute to the capacity of the formal
education sector to meet the changing needs of individuals, communities and society, by providing accredited part-time courses and to complement existing full-time further and adult education programmes funded by the Department. The overall aim of BTEI is to increase the participation of young people and adults with less than upper second level education in a range of flexible learning opportunities leading to formal recognition of learners’ achievements through the National Framework of Qualifications, with particular emphasis on Levels Three and Four. A key objective of BTEI provision is to offer participants a bridge from literacy provision to broader further education and training options. The Initiative has opened up education opportunities to a broad range of new learners, many of whom had been previously excluded from the education system. BTEI funding requirements place strong emphasis on an area based approach through local consultation and partnership and in this context strong links with community education providers have been developed, as evidenced by the Guidelines on Outreach. In 2007 67% of BTEI participants had less than upper secondary education and 27% had only primary education.

The BTEI currently provides for participant entry at a number of levels:

- Access to FETAC Level Three or Junior Certificate or equivalent levels of basic education for those who have no prior educational qualifications. A key priority at this level is to provide an effective bridge to certified learning for those progressing from the literacy service;
- Access to FETAC Level Four or Leaving Certificate or equivalent options for those who enter having completed lower second-level education; and,
- Access to FETAC Level Five or Six programmes for those who have completed upper second-level education or who are in a position to successfully complete a programme at this level. Within this area, key priorities are areas of skills shortages such as childcare and social care.
- Access to FETAC Levels One and Two is available where providers have submitted programmes for validation to FETAC. These options are particularly appropriate for some learners with disabilities.

**The VEC Adult Literacy Service**

VEC Adult Literacy Services grew out of a community response to a clearly identified need for basic skills support amongst the adult population. At Government policy level, adult literacy and basic education were identified as a priority area in Ireland with the publication of the White Paper on Adult Education by the Department of Education and Science but also the Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning (2002) by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. These policy initiatives were a direct response to the findings of the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey, in which Ireland scored relatively poorly. 25% of the Irish population, at least 500,000 adults
were found to score at the lowest level (Level One on the OECD scales). A further 32% scored at Level Two. The OECD estimates that Level Three literacy skills (broadly equivalent to Level Four on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications) are the minimum to function in modern society.

As a result a significant increase in government funding commencing in 1998 facilitated the appointment of Adult Literacy Organisers and the development of a professional service within the overall Adult Education Service.

The focus of the Adult Literacy Service has been the provision of adult literacy and numeracy tuition, in both one-to-one and group based settings, through a variety of initiatives including context/themed courses and participation projects focused both on the unemployed and the low skilled in employment, in partnership with the National Adult Literacy Agency, FÁS and other stakeholders. Students typically attend tuition in the Adult Literacy Service for two to three hours per week, classes are free of charge and while accreditation is an option it is not the primary focus.

In 2006 the Department of Education and Science funded a pilot intensive literacy tuition project (ITABE) which was mainstreamed in the following year. The pilot project, carried out across all 33 Vocational Education Committees established that a more intensive basic education programme resulted in an accelerated level of learning.

ITABE offers adult students an opportunity to take part in a locally devised 14 week programme of 84 hours comprising of a combination of four areas of study; literacy, numeracy, oracy and computers. Participants may take part in a number of ITABE projects until they have reached the maximum skills level of FETAC Level 3.

A unique feature of ITABE is the requirement for an initial assessment upon entry and a summary assessment after each 14 week programme. This provides an opportunity to gather useful information regarding levels of progress unavailable elsewhere.

3. Consultation Process

These guidelines are informed by extensive consultation with VEC further and adult education service practitioners, including Adult Education Officers, VEC staff members responsible for provision of BTEI programmes and Adult Literacy Organisers.

This consultation provided a clear picture of a varied landscape of provision where programmes were managed and delivered in response to local needs and within a variety of existing structures. Current practice indicated a creative approach to the planning, development and delivery of BTEI programmes.
where the need for collaborative planning within an overall strategy for adult education provision was valued and promoted.

The consultation highlighted that effective literacy support depends on services working collegially as part of the broader further and adult education provision, with structured cross referral strategies. These guidelines set out the main elements of this collaborative process below.

4. Shared Landscape: An Integrated Adult Education Service Model

Literacy support to BTEI funded programmes is best served through the integrated approach outlined in the introduction, involving joint planning and collaboration, whereby subject tutors are aware of learners’ potential literacy needs and provision includes direct literacy support where necessary. This integrated approach involves effective, flexible and timely communication and teamwork between subject teachers and literacy support tutors, to identify and respond to students’ course-related literacy needs.

The integrated adult education service model adopts a cross-service approach to needs analysis, planning, development and delivery. It promotes teamwork and centres on the provision of accessible, flexible and student centred adult education opportunities. The structure leads to a high support opportunity for students with clear progression routes.

In order to deliver efficient and effective adult literacy support to BTEI programmes there must be clarity in relation to roles and responsibilities of subject teacher and literacy support tutor, and how the partnership between them will operate. The main focus should be on the provision of support to the learner, rather than on departmental or programme based structures.

Cross Referral System

A student-centred integrated service approach necessitates a predefined cross referral policy within VEC services backed up by operating procedures, to ensure students can avail of appropriate learning opportunities at specific stages in their learning journey.

In addition to providing clear progression pathways the cross-referral process should allow for students to be given alternative options should they prove to be unable to deal with the literacy requirements of the course even with intensive support. Alternatives may include flexible options within their particular course, (for example, extending the timescale within which the course can be completed, or modifying the particular accreditation goals),
and information about and access to suitable alternative courses, with built-in supports.

The following case study offers an example of such a cross referral system in operation and highlights the main factors that enable successful transition from Adult Literacy Service programmes to BTEI funded programmes.
Case Study One
Progression from Adult Literacy Provision to BTEI
Co Carlow VEC

This case study details the progression of students from the Adult Literacy Service to Back to Education Initiative provision in Co. Carlow VEC, including the practical and operational steps taken. Key factors in successful progression as well as potential obstacles are also identified.

Origins of the group in the Adult Literacy Service

In July 2008 Carlow Adult Learning Scheme composed a new group under the ITABE scheme. There were eight participants in the course; two men and six women. Of these students four had progressed from one-to-one tuition, two had progressed from other groups to ITABE and two were new students to the scheme. This mix in the group created specific dynamic that provided different experiences and perspectives on progression.

Developing Progression Awareness

At Week Four of the programme the Adult Education Guidance Counsellor met with the group with the aim of exploring possible progression options. Follow-up one-to-one guidance sessions were offered to all participants.

At Week Ten further discussion commenced on progression options at the end of the ITABE programme. The class tutor explored the day to day aspects of starting a full programme in BTEI and participants were encouraged to drop into the BTEI centre in order to familiarise themselves with an alternative education venue. Between four and six participants voiced an interest in attending BTEI provision on completion of the ITABE Programme and the literacy tutor assisted these students to complete application forms.
Planning and Referral

The BTEI Coordinator and Adult Literacy Organiser met to discuss progression options between the schemes. The BTEI ‘Return to Learning’ programme presented as the most appropriate progression option for these students, providing an opportunity to gain a full award at Level Three. Preparatory work was undertaken by the Adult Literacy Organiser to ensure learners’ confidence in their ability to undertake the progression. Similar induction was provided by the BTEI Coordinator to instill confidence and assure the learners of support in their undertaking. Continuous networking between the centres has ensured a smooth transition for the learners involved.

Key factors in the successful progression of students to BTEI:

- Development in students’ self-confidence through ongoing work in the Adult Literacy Service, creating readiness to progress to a semi-structured programme in BTEI
- Strong Guidance input in early stages of the ITABE programme
- Follow-up to Guidance input in one-to-one sessions where necessary and via the course tutors
- Practical support with completion of application forms
- Strong lines of communication between ALO and BTEI co-ordinators ensuring that support can be offered where needed
- Shared pool of tutors so that students can have some continuity of contact while expanding their experience through new subjects with other tutors
- Shared understandings of the desired outcomes and expectations in relation to progression between centres
- Good support from the AEO for co-operative endeavours
- Sharing of FETAC presentation nights between services
- Cross referrals where appropriate
Potential obstacles to successful progression

- Students need to be clearly identified as ‘progression-ready’
- Programme managers need to have an agreed understanding of above
- Lack of agreement between key workers in both services on ground rules for progression
- Lack of structured exit strategy from ALS and subsequently from BTEI
- Success may be personality and relationship dependant
- Basic education learners may become over-dependant on tutors/coordinators

5. Learning support

Defining Support

Key elements of learning support may be defined as:

- Literacy support to acquire or improve reading, writing and spelling skills specifically linked to the course subject
- Numeracy support to assist with number based skills required to cope with the requirements within certain courses
- Language assistance for speakers of English as a second language
- Guidance support to ensure appropriate placement on a course, learn study skills and identify progression routes
- Broader learning support in relation to time management, note taking, essay writing and exam preparation

Central to the provision of literacy support is the need to identify a structure for planning and delivery of both the main subject based course and the additional course-related literacy support.
Literacy support may also involve:

- A specific focus on the key concepts of the main subject by the core subject teacher
- Additional, dedicated course-related literacy support provided by literacy tutors

There may be overlap between ‘literacy support’ and ‘learning support’ because of the holistic nature of ‘literacy’ and of ‘learning’. Students on BTEI programmes may need or want help with the specific types of reading, writing, or language involved in the course they are undertaking as well as in time-management, note taking or materials. They may also need help to develop strategies to avoid panic and fear when faced with a new unfamiliar task or with the prospect of exams or assignments. Literacy support and development needs to be provided in line with a holistic definition of literacy that involves such emotional and personal and social dimensions as well as the technical skills dimension. However, there is a need to be clear too on the boundaries of literacy support, and to recognise the range of other supports students may need. These might include, for example, counselling, access to specialised assessments such as those provided by an education psychologist, supports relating to specific learning difficulties and the use of assistive technology. Systems should be in place to identify the range of supports that may be needed and to ensure access to them.

BTEI provision takes place in a variety of settings with a multiplicity of subjects and primarily at FETAC Levels Three to Six. In general terms it is preferable for adult learners new to education to undertake a preparatory course before commencing programmes leading to specific qualifications, particularly at Level Five.

Supports should be related to specific subject contexts and linked to NFQ standards required for specific accreditation levels. While learners may not always be at Level Five in general reading and writing in order to succeed on a Level Five course some aspects of the programme may present particular challenges. These challenges may be overcome with the support of both subject tutors and literacy tutors. Such partnerships will involve joint planning to develop literacy-aware ways to deliver the core subject, and to identify and plan effective responses to students’ specific literacy needs. They may also at times involve joint delivery of particular aspects of the course.

Further detailed guidelines on the provision of literacy support are available in other publications, as listed in the Reading Guide at the end of this document.

**One-to-One Literacy Support**

An effective model of embedded or integrated literacy support includes direct tuition by tutors with literacy training for students who may require
more intensive literacy support. This tuition should address students’ subject specific literacy needs and provide them with sufficient skills to cope with course content, assignments and accreditation requirements. One-to-one tuition should be the exception rather than the norm in these contexts and volunteer tutors should not be used to provide this type of literacy support. The investment required in training and support of Adult Literacy Service volunteers makes them a scarce resource recruited to address a specific need and their use to provide this level of support to BTEI participants is not appropriate.

**Adult Education Guidance**

The Adult Education Guidance Service has an important role to play in the learning support structures established for BTEI funded programmes.

The Adult Education Guidance counsellor should be closely involved, not only in the planning of the recruitment and induction process, but also in the design of an overall support structure that will help students to make informed decisions about their learning, develop a realistic personal learning timetable, acquire the skills and confidence required to enter a new learning environment and identify progression routes.

The Adult Education Guidance Counsellor should be involved in:

- The consultation on and development of the screening process for applications to BTEI, in conjunction with the Adult Literacy Service, to be carried out by BTEI tutors / coordinator
- The establishment of a referral system to the local Adult Education Service and Adult Literacy Service if, at screening point, it is considered that the proposed BTEI programme is inappropriate for the learner’s needs
- Clarification of a referral system between Adult Literacy Service and Adult Education Guidance specifically relating to BTEI learners
- The development of a suitable induction programme at the beginning of the actual BTEI course
- Participation in the induction programme
- Discussion with the BTEI co-ordinator on the establishment of the extent and content of the guidance provision to the BTEI group, where and when appropriate

The following case study demonstrates the development of a literacy support programme for students undertaking a BTEI funded FETAC Level Five programme in childcare. It outlines the elements of this support programme and the specific organisational steps taken to ensure its success.
Case Study Two: Literacy Support Programme for FETAC Level Five Students  
South County Dublin Adult Education Service, Co Dublin VEC

Rationale and background

Adult Early School Leavers are one of the major target groups for BTEI programmes. Childcare qualifications at FETAC Level Five are linked to skills shortages in the economy and many adult female early school leavers have engaged in childcare community projects and Community Employment Schemes. While this has enabled them to gain valuable work experience in an area that offers employment opportunities they lack the necessary qualifications to gain permanent employment.

The students on the Childcare Level Five programmes usually have reasonable levels of functional literacy but have no experience of study, research, examinations, essays and assignments at this level. However they are usually keen to undertake the Childcare course at FETAC Level Five and have no desire to undergo a preparatory course because of time factors. Many have concerns about their spelling and grammar skills and consider that they need additional learning support to complete their studies satisfactorily.

Programme aim and objectives

The aim of the learning support programme was that students would improve these generic competencies, which are transferable skills. The important objective for the link between the BTEI and Literacy services was to establish a working relationship for the benefit of students in order to improve their ability to complete the programme and achieve accreditation.

Joint planning and referral

The Adult Education Service Team who developed the programme involved the Adult Education Officer, BTEI Coordinator and the Adult Literacy Organiser, with input from the Childcare tutor and the Literacy tutors. While the Guidance Service did assist with study skills, it was considered that the type of learning support needed most would be best delivered by the Literacy Service.

The support programme for students focused on Improving English for assignments and involved the following generic competencies which would transfer to other modules and programmes:

- Reading comprehension
• Improving spelling and grammar for written assignments
• Vocabulary building
• Research methods
• Note taking
• Structuring an essay or assignment
• Editing and proof reading

The students were able to avail of this support on a voluntary basis and it was not a compulsory element of the programme. It was delivered for two hours per week for a set period of time to small groups. One-to-one support for FETAC Level Five participants was not an option offered to students. Interim reviews and feedback were an essential element of the initiative, in order to ascertain the impact of the learning support and to make changes as required.

Sixteen students contacted the Literacy Service to request support and eventually three groups were formed, consisting of twelve students in total. The support service ran in parallel with BTEI programme.

This programme did not aim to complete a childcare module or course for the students but to help them to develop the skills to complete their assignments and examinations successfully. Nevertheless they were able to use their own assignments and drafts to learn new skills such as editing and proof reading.

The learning support programme highlighted additional elements which can have an impact on successful outcomes for students:

• While the initial BTEI induction session emphasised the need for students to study and complete assignments outside of class time, a significant proportion of them did not do so.

• Many found it difficult to organise study time and would not necessarily have the space to study at home.

• While IT equipment can be useful to assist students with spell checks and other aids for written work this requires that the student has not only access to a computer, but also the necessary fundamental skills to use the equipment in this way.

• Where it was appropriate, some time and space was allocated to students for working on their actual assignments. Where this occurred it was approximate to an open learning situation with tutor support.
Review and Positive Outcomes

All the students benefited from the additional support. Their core competencies improved and they were better equipped to meet the demands of the course with regard to examinations and assignments. Improvements in the areas of spelling, grammar, proof reading and editing were particularly significant as well as the knowledge and competence to structure essays and assignments.

The students who availed of the support tended to be motivated. The group who benefited most were aiming to achieve merits or distinction. They developed a good learning network and supported each other throughout the programme.

Students availed of the support on a voluntary basis. This meant that some of those who needed it most did not take up the opportunity. However the voluntary aspect was considered to be an important element and the support programme will be available on an identified needs basis in the future.

6. Screening, Assessment & Induction

Placement on the right course at the appropriate level of accreditation is fundamental to a successful learning experience for adult students.

A key objective of BTEI is to promote flexible accessible provision adapted to learners’ needs and which offers useful progression opportunities. BTEI participants aiming to seek employment or further progression opportunities will need to access vocationally based accredited courses at a level appropriate to the area of work with which they wish to engage. Every effort should be made to facilitate learners, including the development of preparatory courses where appropriate.

A combination of screening-for-inclusion, diagnostic skills assessment where necessary, guidance and support is essential to enable BTEI participants make an informed decision as to where their studies should begin and to plan a realistic timeframe for that learning journey.

The recruitment of students for BTEI funded programmes should facilitate the delivery of screening-for-inclusion, assessment and induction support. Screening-for-inclusion and assessment should be viewed as an integral part of the overall needs analysis process and in order to be effective needs to involve key staff members with appropriate expertise and experience.
Current Literacy Assessment

With the exception of the assessment process developed for the Intensive Literacy Programme there is currently no literacy and numeracy screening or initial assessment tool standardized against the Irish National Framework of Qualifications in operation across the VEC sector. Screening and initial assessment typically:

- Is based on the informed judgement of the programme coordinator
- Identifies the motivation of the learner
- Provides an initial informal assessment of literacy need in terms of reading, writing, and spelling, and often numeracy, computer skills and English For Speakers of Other Languages - ESOL
- Identifies what the learner can do, and what they would like to do
- Supports tutors in terms of a starting point and provides indications about learners’ levels, goals and interests, as well as contributing to an individual learning plan for the learner
- Assists the matching of learners to a group appropriate to the availability, times, level, interests, and comfort of the learner as far as possible.

A project to produce a standardized initial screening and assessment tool for use in adult and further education programmes which operate at levels 1-6 of the National Framework of Qualifications is currently underway. The first phase of the project has involved research and some consultation with stakeholders to inform decisions in relation to the proposed assessment tools.

Screening-for-inclusion

Literacy and numeracy skills screening for students enrolling on BTEI funded programmes is crucial to the design of the support programme.

This process should be brief and is meant simply as a signposting exercise to allow students and staff to decide on the required level of support. In this context it should be seen as ‘screening for inclusion’ rather than a selection process. The screening should be undertaken by the appropriate adult and further education programme staff during registration. It is preferable that staff involved should have received sufficient literacy specific training to enable them to carry out the screening. BTEI programme coordinators should develop this process in collaboration with the adult literacy service and the Adult Guidance Service. Particular note should be taken of the need for sensitivity and the use of

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1Exploring Assessment for Accountability in Adult Literacy 2007: Report from Mapping the Learning Journey Mainstreaming Committee to the Department of Education and Science, Dublin, NALA
appropriate language when raising the issue of screening, assessment and induction with potential participants.

**Diagnostic Assessment**

Diagnostic skills assessment measures the gap between what the student can do and what needs further work in a more detailed manner than initial screening. The purpose of this type of assessment is to identify student goals and support the development of a learning programme.

Diagnostic literacy and numeracy assessment should be provided by the Adult Literacy Service where it is agreed that this is necessary to plan and design a support structure for students. While focusing on skills assessment it should take into account the complementary soft skills that influence literacy skills improvement and application.

**Induction Module**

Where feasible a short induction or access module provided to students new to BTEI could be designed locally with inputs from the Adult Literacy Service and the Adult Guidance Service. This module may also provide a vehicle for basic skills screening and assessment as well as centre orientation, familiarising students with FETAC requirements for their course and some study skills advice. The following case study illustrates how such induction modules can work in practice.

**Case Study Three**

**Screening for Inclusion**

**Co Dublin VEC Fingal Adult Education Service**

**Background**

During 2006/2007, the Adult Literacy Service in Swords in conjunction with the BTEI linked with an outreach centre. The initiative aimed to ensure that students accessing FETAC accreditation achieved positive outcomes, as some of those enrolling in specific BTEI programmes were found to be experiencing difficulty due to low literacy levels.

Coordinators of both the Adult Literacy Service and the Back to Education Initiative worked together to ensure the development of a system that integrated literacy support into the recruitment and delivery of BTEI programmes at FETAC Levels Three and Four. A five-step process was implemented, as outlined below:
1. **Planning** between Services took place well before recruitment. Enrolment dates, curriculum outline, expected target group were communicated to the Adult Literacy Service.

2. **Screening** The Literacy Service was then able to carry out a preliminary screening of prospective students prior to the commencement of the programme. Students who identified themselves as possibly needing literacy support were then invited to engage in a more thorough assessment.

3. **Referral** If students were found to assess at Level Two or below (based on ITABE/NALA/DES guidelines to literacy levels) they were offered the opportunity to enrol for literacy tuition before commencing FETAC Level Three accredited programmes. Needless to say, such actions had to be undertaken in a sensitive and respectful manner. The development of FETAC Level Two programmes has been helpful in this regard. The student is not refused access to accreditation but rather re-directed to another level.

4. **Delivery** The Literacy Service delivered a Learning Support Module to students prior to the delivery of the FETAC Level Three module. This module aimed to ensure that those who were anxious about undertaking the written components of the course could access some support before commencement. BTEI tutors also provided inputs relating to course and accreditation requirements. A close working relationship was fostered between Adult Literacy Service personnel and tutors delivering the various FETAC components. This action ensured on-going support for students.

5. **Evaluation** demonstrated very positive outcomes after the initial roll out of this system. A team approach across the services ensured that students did not drop out of the programme. Students reported that they were clearer about course content and the skills required, and tutors reported that they felt supported. Those students who were re-directed/referred to the literacy service indicated that they were happy to take time to improve their skills rather than undertake a programme with which they were not able to cope. The Adult Education Service continues to operate this system in relevant provision delivered under the Back to Education Initiative.
7. Integrating Literacy: an Embedded Approach

Embedded Literacy & Numeracy

Literacy support need not simply be restricted to direct provision through parallel tuition. It can also take the form of integrated or embedded literacy support where the focus remains on the main course subject and teachers are trained in embedded literacy techniques. Following development work in the mid-1990s with NUI Maynooth, the National Adult Literacy Agency published guidelines on the provision of integrated literacy in Further Education settings. The guidelines were intended to assist centres of Further Education and Training to embed literacy support into their programmes. They were intended to apply across a wide range of settings, including adult and community education and training centres funded by a range of government departments including the Department of Education and Science but also the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

The provision of embedded literacy and numeracy improvement opportunities in tandem with specialised literacy support has proven to be significant in not simply improving basic skills but also in raising accreditation levels. It has also addressed high course dropout rates and increased self esteem levels leading to improved transferability of new learning.

A recent study in the UK found where embedded literacy support was available retention rates increased by 16% (26% at lower levels of accreditation) and accreditation levels rose from 55.5% to 70.5%. In fact, literacy qualifications achieved within these embedded courses showed even higher benefits with accreditation levels jumping from 50% without embedded support to 92.8% when an embedded approach was applied. The most effective courses were those where subject tutors embedded literacy into their own teaching, and where they and the students also had the support of and teamwork with literacy tutors who were skilled at course-related literacy development. The research study’s conclusions provide a clear and consistent message: vocational courses at the equivalent NFQ Levels Three and Four in which literacy and numeracy support is embedded are linked to more positive outcomes for learners than courses for which support is provided separately. The report recommends that literacy and numeracy support should be embedded as the norm, not the exception for equivalent NFQ Levels Three and Four vocational courses.

Since embedded literacy support is built on the premise of a whole centre / service approach and is best provided through teamwork it lends itself
well to delivery by the VEC Adult Education Service team. It emphasises a planned and purposeful process that focuses not simply on the improvement of literacy and numeracy skills but prioritizes better access to the vocational or subject based skills as the primary objective.

Features of embedded provision might include:

- A common timetable for subject and support tuition
- The provision of screening and diagnostic assessment
- Embedded tuition undertaken by trained subject tutors
- Literacy and numeracy support themed to vocational subjects
- Vocational materials adapted to take into account different literacy and numeracy needs
- The involvement of adult literacy staff in planning
- All staff sharing a common goal.
8. CONCLUSION

An integrated local Adult Education Service facilitates collaborative working practices between programmes in order to support adult students with basic skills difficulties who are returning to learning. Such practices can facilitate the development of a high support approach to fulfilling the needs of BTEI students and should include a process that includes screening-for-inclusion, diagnostic assessment where necessary, guidance and continuous support. A structure that clearly indicates the placement of BTEI courses within appropriate sections of the Adult Education Service, based on accreditation level and efficient use of existing expertise, is important to the success of any efforts to address the basic skills needs of students. This structure should be supported by VEC policy in keeping with FETAC Quality Assurance commitments.

It may be necessary to review the current structure of the Adult Literacy Service to refocus some of its activities towards the provision of such a support service in partnership with the BTEI programme, closely linked with the Adult Guidance Service, and under the management of the Adult Education Officer.

There are clear benefits to students when BTEI programmes are supported by embedded literacy, or additional literacy support tailored to subject areas as well as access to general literacy support within the Adult Literacy Service. A training programme to compliment existing BTEI and Adult Literacy Service tutor skills, and including guidance awareness training, is pivotal to improve cooperation and should be seen as a priority area for development.

Further Reading

Casey, H. et al, 2006. “You wouldn’t expect a maths teacher to teach plastering...”: Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes – the impact on learning and achievement. London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

