

UCU's submission to the Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee inquiry into Adult Literacy and Numeracy

Written evidence from UCU submitted by Gila Tabrizi, Policy Officer gtabrizi@ucu.org.uk

1.1 The University and College Union (UCU) represents more than 120,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians and postgraduates in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK. As the largest Union in the FE sector, UCU represents many literacy and numeracy teachers and tutors in colleges and adult and prison education services.

What is the Government currently doing to help adults improve their reading, writing and maths skills?

- 2.1 The literacy and numeracy challenge facing us was highlighted by the OECD (*Survey of adult skills, 2013*) who found that in England, adults aged 55-65 perform better than 16-24 year-olds in both literacy and numeracy. England was the only country in the survey to have a higher proficiency in the older age group. The implication is that the skill level of the population will decline over the next decades unless significant action is taken to improve skills proficiency.
- 2.2 The funding of literacy and numeracy work is crucial due to the type of intensive help and support the client group needs. In the NIACE literacy inquiry (*Work, Society and Lifelong Literacy, 2011*) learners reported responding better to flexible, bespoke learning programmes which can respond to individual learner needs. These are more expensive services to provide.
- 2.3 UCU welcomed the funding increase for functional skills provision for adults and apprenticeships that was applied to 2012/13 and 2013/14 especially in the context of an overall decreasing budget for adult skills. It was important for enabling learners to succeed within the new functional skills framework. However we are still awaiting a skills funding statement for 2014/15 and so it is unclear whether this increased funding is to be sustained. We would urge the Skills Funding Agency to publish the statement without any further delay to allow providers to plan properly.

- 2.4 We need experienced and qualified literacy and numeracy teachers to be able to support the complex learner needs. The role of specialist continuing professional development (CPD) for these teachers is paramount - for instance using curricula flexibly, responding to dyslexia, developing speaking and listening skills, confidence building, integration of numeracy and literacy in other activities, use of ICT, also linking to early years/family learning. However UCU is concerned that employers may reduce their commitment to staff CPD both in funding and time both because of the revocation of the 2007 workforce regulations and the downward pressure on FE budgets. Specialist CPD for literacy and numeracy teachers is not only a place to share knowledge, experiences and materials and learn of new initiatives and innovative teaching and learning, but is also crucial for staff morale and retention.
- 2.5 For new teachers, we welcome the bursaries for FE ITT in English, maths and SEN. It is good to see financial support going into the system to help attract high quality, committed teachers who have specialist subject knowledge. However we are concerned that the bursaries won't have the desired effect because only pre-service trainees are eligible when in fact for FE, the most common route to qualification is part-time, in-service study. The recruitment onto these programmes should be carefully monitored to ensure that the supply of teachers is sufficient and the government should be willing to modify the eligibility criteria to include those already teaching if necessary.

How can the Government make sure that adults have the right skills that can help them find a job, which in turn will help the country, and more widely?

- 3.1 Unemployed adults need education programmes, including literacy and numeracy support, through which they can upskill themselves to be successful in re-entering the labour market. However adults are subject to a punitive 'work first' approach with little regard for the existing skills, experience and personal ambition of the jobseeker. Not enough emphasis is placed developing skills for building careers and many adults end up moving in and out of low skilled, low paid temporary work. Skills assessments should be used to tackle skills deficiencies and identify skills need. They should provide proper diagnosis rather than going through the motions of a tick box exercise and they should not be a tool for applying sanctions. Many FE colleges have a wealth of knowledge and experience of working with those furthest from the labour market, and combined with their links to local employers they could play a major role in providing these bespoke skills solutions for unemployed adults.
- 3.2 UCU is concerned by the increasingly narrow interpretation of literacy and numeracy. In the prison education sector this interpretation is often driven by an employability agenda and is limited to basic literacy and numeracy skills. Learners need a variety of routes into learning and embedded literacy and numeracy have been shown to increase learner engagement. The sufficient and full funding of arts subjects is necessary so that embedded learning has the two-fold benefit of

increasing learners' ability and desire for learning; and fostering self confidence, resilience and ability to work with others. These are the very skills that are valued by employers. Unfortunately, our members report that the prison education funding regime means that they are pressed to provide a series of short, low level course that are likely to secure high success rates for providers, but do nothing to provide real progression for learners.

What are the best ways to help adults learn how to read, write and do maths—through formal education providers or in a different way?

- 4.1 For adults in work, Union learning representatives (ULRs) are an important source of support and access to English and maths. ULRs are experts when it comes to understanding their learners and are ideally placed to get employers on board. Employer engagement is critical because low skilled workers are less likely to participate in education and training than higher skilled workers. The OECD found that 75.3% of adults who score at Level 4/5 in literacy participated in adult education during the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with 40% of adults who score at Level 1, and only 29.6% of those who score below Level 1. This is characterised by the OECD as a vicious cycle, whereby low skilled workers risk being trapped in a situation in which they rarely benefit from adult learning, and their skills remain weak or deteriorate over time, making it even harder for these individuals to participate in learning activities. Moreover our training participation rates are in a general long-term decline (pre-dating the recession of 2008-09) as evidenced by the national skills and employment survey 2012. It is vital to reach these low skilled adults to raise our literacy and numeracy rates. UCU advocates a statutory right to paid education leave through an expanded ULR system helping to foster a lifelong learning culture among workers and employers and flexible, responsive and well-funded adult and community learning services as a way to hook hard-to-reach people in to learning and on to literacy and numeracy provision.

February 2014