

Research Summary: The Effectiveness of Eight-week Short Intensive Basic Skills Provision

The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy, *Skills for life*,¹ identified unemployed people as one priority group where literacy and numeracy needs are prevalent and where support could be targeted. Since April 2001, the majority of unemployed people have been screened at six months of unemployment, and if necessary have their basic skills assessed through independent assessment (IA). Following IA, those assessed as at or above Entry level but below Level 1 are normally referred to four-week Short Intensive Basic Skills (SIBS) provision (eight-weeks in the pilot areas and four-weeks in other districts). However, clients in six pilot areas were referred to eight-week SIBS provision.

The aim of the research was to determine whether basic skills support could be effectively provided in eight weeks.

Key findings from the study were as follows.

- Take-up of eight-week SIBS was lower than expected. Providers were concerned that clients who would benefit from this type of provision were being missed by screening and IA.
- Good induction helped to put clients at ease regarding basic skills support, tutors and other students.
- Clients entered provision at different levels and providers found it difficult to predict accurately whether it was possible for them to get to Level 1 in eight weeks.
- Once on provision, clients' attendance was good.
- Providers welcomed the change to the new core curriculum.
- Tutors focused learning on clients' interests and hobbies to capture and retain their attention.
- Providers used various teaching methods including one-to-one tuition, interactive group working and IT.
- Confidence, motivation, self-esteem and practical job-search skills were notable benefits for clients attending SIBS provision.
- Few clients were passing the National Test in eight weeks; providers knew that this needed to be addressed. Flexibility in the length of time in training and opportunities to re-sit need to be explored further.
- Clients expressed regret and frustration at not being able to re-sit the test.
- There was no support in place for clients not ready to sit the test.
- Full-time attendance gave clients purpose, structure and routine, and this experience could be transferred to a work situation in the future.
- Few clients leaving SIBS moved directly into employment. Providers who had higher proportions of clients entering employment identified that intensive job search and external careers advice sessions helped clients to access work.
- Providers encouraged clients to proceed to further training by offering them a six months' aftercare service or encouraging them to enrol on further projects.

¹ Department for Education and Employment *Skills for life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills*, 2001, DfEE.

Executive Summary

Introduction

In response to the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy, *Skills for life*,² the Employment Service (ES) implemented its National Basic Skills Programme in April 2001 (the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) now has strategic responsibility for the programme). The programme comprises screening, referral to independent assessment (IA), the IA itself, referral to basic skills provision, and assessment or testing at the end of provision.

Jobcentre Plus contracted basic skills provision³ takes three forms: Short Intensive Basic Skills (SIBS) courses; Basic Employability Training (BET); and provision through the New Deal for Young People's Full-time Education and Training (FTET) option.

In January 2002, the Department's Jobseeker Analysis Division (JAD) commissioned ECOTEC Research & Consulting and BMRB Qualitative to conduct a qualitative evaluation of Jobcentre Plus contracted basic skills provision in the National Basic Skills Programme. The evaluation comprised two key elements: research examining BET, four-week SIBS and FTET provision in nine 'national model areas', and research focusing on eight-week SIBS provision in six pilot areas. This summary reports on the results from the research on eight-week SIBS.

Qualitative research was conducted in six Jobcentre Plus eight-week SIBS pilot areas. Interviews were conducted with individuals involved in delivering SIBS,

clients, Jobcentre Plus Advisers and Contract Managers.

Basic Skills Provision

The diagnostic assessment and induction process on entry to eight-week SIBS was an important element of the provision. Clients appreciated a full induction in which they received information about all the course elements and were introduced to staff and other students. Tutors used the assessment and induction process to start building up trust-based relationships with clients.

The content of the SIBS training covered the core elements of basic skills and job search. Soft skills were also covered during basic skills training, and many providers offered additional elements such as health and safety training and careers advice sessions. Tutors used a variety of teaching styles and focused learning on the interests and hobbies of clients, to capture and retain their attention. IT and interactive computer packages were often used to deliver elements of the course.

Providers welcomed working to the new basic skills core curricula, which made it easier for them to focus on clients' support needs and achieve positive results.

Providers registered all clients to sit the National Test. Initially, there were problems in registering clients for the test, receiving test papers on time and getting test results back promptly. Improvements were reported, though some providers were still experiencing problems with getting test results.

Client Take-up and Performance

Take-up of eight-week SIBS was lower than expected for the majority of providers. They were concerned that clients who would benefit from this kind

² Department for Education and Employment *Skills for life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills*, 2001, DfEE.

³ References to Jobcentre Plus should be taken to also refer to Employment Service which operated until 31 March 2002

of provision were being missed at screening or IA.

Providers recruited clients with differing basic skills support needs. However, the majority of providers had so few clients that it was difficult for them to gauge whether it was possible to bring all clients up to level 1 in eight weeks.

Attendance rates for clients on SIBS provision were good, and few had dropped out once on provision. The small number of clients who had left the course were experiencing multiple barriers to learning and work. Providers and clients cited illness or domestic problems as reasons for irregular attendance.

Clients found that the course gave them purpose and routine and the majority were happy with the course content. Some providers encouraged clients to proceed with further basic skills training following completion of the course.

Overall, the National Test pass rate was low. Providers were aware that they needed to look hard at areas for improvement. There was no evidence to suggest that providers had implemented strategies to support clients who were not ready to take the test.

Good Practice

The research findings have identified the following examples of good practice:

- Providers operating an in-depth induction use this opportunity to start building trust with clients, to help encourage continued attendance.
- Diagnostic assessment on entry to the course helps providers to understand clients' capabilities and needs. Assessment linked to the new core curricula is a useful tool to determine precise support needs and

to help inform the development of learning plans for clients.

- Learning plans help to monitor how clients' basic skills are developing. Frequent monitoring of clients' progress, often on a one-to-one basis, helps to identify the distance travelled and determine next steps.
- One provider accommodated clients with care responsibilities by introducing some flexibility in the hours, which encouraged clients to remain on provision.
- Tutors also modify associated learning materials to reflect clients' interests and hobbies to keep them interested and engaged with the learning process. For example, interests and hobbies were used to modify work sheets to make them real and interesting.
- Clients respond well to a variety of learning methods and approaches, including effective use of information technology. It is also important for clients to transfer their learning to real-world situations.
- It is important that clients are able to transfer what they learn to real-world situations. As appropriate, clients with basic skills needs can interact with clients on other courses, and meet employers and tutors other than those they work with on a day-to-day basis. Trips and excursions are also valuable.
- Personality and teaching styles are important characteristics for basic skills tutors. The right tutor(s) contribute to clients believing that they have personally gained from their training experience. Clients' own motivation is a factor here too.
- Providers were using a number of ways to encourage clients to sit the National Test, the most popular was

getting clients to take mock tests either throughout the duration of the course or in a concentrated block at the end.

- An important by-product of the focus on basic skills and job search for clients is an improvement in their soft skills. Addressing clients' lack of self-confidence, self-worth and motivation are important in increasing their employability.
- Providers encouraged clients to proceed to further training in a number of ways:
 - offering a six months' aftercare service, including signposting to other training
 - encouraged clients to return and enrol on further courses
 - reinforcing clients' confidence so that they would want to go on learning
 - encouraged clients to access IT training to develop their basic skills further.

Recommendations

The recommendations listed below result from building on the key findings from the research and identified examples of good practice.

- arrangements in place for those clients wishing to re-sit the test. However, any arrangements to re-sit the test must be supported by additional coaching time to overcome problems clients faced when they first sat the test. Guidance on rearranging test dates and re-sits for clients needs to be issued to providers and Advisers.
- There are clients who would benefit from a more extensive 'intermediate' course that sits between SIBS and BET, with a duration of 13 weeks for example.

- The majority of providers keep to contractual arrangements but there remains the need for Jobcentre Plus to monitor providers adherence to these arrangements.
- Providers should be encouraged to use a full induction process for clients.
- Tutors should be encouraged to develop flexible and innovative teaching methods and materials that reflect clients' interests and hobbies, for example, sport, gardening, body art or DIY activities. They should avoid long periods of self-managed learning and heavy reliance on worksheets to lessen the likelihood of clients becoming bored and demotivated.
- Providers should recognise the importance of building in enough practice sessions in test conditions to lessen the nervousness of clients who have not been examined under test conditions for a long time, if at all.
- Providers should implement strategies for those clients who are not ready to sit the National Test, and should also put
- Clients require additional support in accessing further training or securing employment, and they suggested that this support should be delivered by basic skills providers. Clients should leave provision with a clear exit strategy that identifies next steps both in terms of follow through basic skills support, other training and job search.