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Adult education: A critical analysis of initial assessment procedures in community learning in the United Kingdom

KEYWORDS

adult and community education, initial assessment, Language Literacy Numeracy, needs analysis

ABSTRACT

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This article aims to examine and make recommendations to the initial assessment procedures in Adult Education context in the United Kingdom. Teachers and learners are constantly making opinions about their development, and formative assessment is one of the tools used to recognise it. In Adult Education, in addition to formative assessment, learners are expected to undergo initial assessment, testing their level of knowledge/abilities in Language, Literacy or Numeracy. Within the Adult Education context, there are several initial assessment methods available. However, it is the providers who decide which methods are most appropriate for their learners, as different methods may be appropriate in different areas. This research project focuses on an Adult Education provider based in the Midlands, United Kingdom, and offers findings that test and sometimes refute the current theory about initial assessment. Two research methods were employed to achieve the aim and objectives. Firstly, secondary data was researched. Secondly, the qualitative primary data was collected using in-depth focus groups. The research included both practitioners and learners who either conducted or experienced

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needs analysis processes in the adult learning context. The findings and recommendations of this article propose the use of a more ethical and reliable way of conducting initial assessment in the Adult and Community Learning context.

Background

Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy (LLN) is a vital area of research at the time when the central government in the United Kingdom is gradually investing less money into improving basic skills in the adult population (Britton et al., 2020). In 1999, Moser (1999) reported that 20% of the British population lack functional skills and criticised the national education system, suggesting it was responsible for the economy's low productivity. According to Reder and Bynner (2009), this concern is the alteration of employment and globalisation, which have been the leading features of many economies since the 1970s. For this reason, there have been many proposals in all societies to improve abilities for which the basic skills provide the foundation. Relying on the National Literacy Strategy and a reassessment of LLN by Sir Claus Moser, the government financed a national strategy for the field, the Skills for Life, setting ambitious targets for enhancement (Moser, 1999).

The UK government reacted by introducing a qualification framework and a set of professional standards to which practitioners must adhere. Core curricula in English for Speakers of Other Languages (Language), Literacy and Numeracy were linked with school subjects. In 2004 the strategy met its aim of 750,000 adults achieving certification. Despite some disagreements about how these targets were set and achieved (Bathmaker, 2005), further targets were defined. The Leitch Review (2006, p. 16) recommended that “the UK commit to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020, with a basic skills objective for 95% of adults to achieve the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy” (a total of 7.4 million adult attainments over the period). However, between 2012 and 2018 the number of adult enrolments on full level 2 accredited courses fell by 87% (Department for Education, 2019). What is more, according to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training – Cedefop (2020) the UK came 22nd overall in the European Skills Index 2020 indicator measuring the performance of EU skills systems, being classed as ‘middle-achieving’, far behind the leading Czechia. The report also highlights that the UK scores poorly in the ‘skills mismatch’ section which includes skills shortages like basic skills.

Context

Midlands Adult and Community Learning Service (a pseudonym for the real service), is an Adult Education provider and is a part of the Children and Young People's Service Department. It operates within the local council's policies and procedures. The service provides learning opportunities at seven centres across the city and focuses its activity on the city wards that are classed as areas of high socio-economic deprivation. Midlands Adult and Community Learning Service mission statement states that the service is committed to offering admittance to high-quality education which is delivered for the benefit of local communities. It aims to meet the needs and requirements of local communities and individuals, by working in partnership with local people and a variety of organisations.

One of the recent Self-Assessment Reviews identified that initial assessment within Literacy, Language and Numeracy (LLN) was an area for improvement. There are several initial assessment methods available in Adult and Community Education. However, it is the training providers who decide which methods are most appropriate for their learners to form a complete picture of their learning and support needs. The responsibility for carrying out the initial learners' assessment rests with the educational authority and therefore the service's Self-Assessment Review clearly determined that the initial assessment and placement procedures in LLN needed reviewing to improve retention and success rates. In response to the aforementioned report, this research project proposes to identify areas for development within the initial assessment and placement procedures. This project also intends to provide a new and improved set of initial assessment procedures that will improve the overall success rate and learner experience. Helping the institution by reviewing good practices currently undertaken in the UK and allowing staff to share their experiences are also important goals of the project. This article aims to identify current good practices in the field of initial assessment, it is important, however, to recognise that these might change with government policies, skills needs of the economy and also immigration policy.

Literature review

Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) courses are funded by The Education and Skills Funding Agency. Centres delivering LLN are inspected regularly and there are several requirements to be fulfilled, including detailed paperwork. The Education and Skills Funding Agency requires specific documentation and tho-

rough evidence of learning and progression taking place (Lavender et al., 2004). However, there is no model documentation to follow and such LLN providers are expected to develop their own systems, standards and procedures. A vital part of the documentation includes a set of assessments used for placing learners on appropriate courses.

Tummons (2011) points out that assessment is a term that has more than one meaning. Within the area of education and training, it is traditionally associated with testing. In general, a test is carried out to judge whether a student can perform a specific task or has mastered a set range of information. Lavender (2004) claims that assessment is an essential part of learning, and this is further supported by Tummons's (2011) claim that teachers, and learners themselves, are constantly making opinions about their progress, and that formative assessment is one of the tools used to recognise it. In addition to that, Weaver (2006) concludes that assessment and feedback are essential components in the learning cycle, providing for reflection and improvement. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, Tummons's (2011) four points of successful student assessment are used. These are as follows:

- investigate if learning has occurred,
- identify learners' requirements,
- grant accreditation,
- evaluate learning courses.

In Adult and Community Learning (ACL), in addition to formative assessment, learners are expected to undergo an initial/diagnostic assessment stating their level of knowledge and abilities. Gravells (2016) explains that an initial assessment is a set of procedures that determine what previous experience, aptitudes and abilities a learner has. This is to guarantee that learners are on the right programme, at the right level and that, if necessary, they receive support. This claim is further supported by Looney (2007) who concludes that initial and diagnostic assessments commence the procedure of getting to know a learner and building a rapport with them. The results of the initial assessment ought to update individual learning plans so that tuition and support are delivered to meet the needs of each learner (Gravells, 2016).

Elder and Randow (2008) state that if initial screening is appropriately used it provides a valid, practical and ethical means whereby students with limited skills can be targeted for further diagnosis and intervention. What is more, according to Gravells (2016), if the needs analysis process is constructive, dynamic and engaging, it will assist to develop an environment in which learners can discuss and be accountable for their learning. Summarising Gravells (2016), an accurate and

supportive initial assessment can assure that learning and assessment are genuinely grounded in an individual's needs and priorities, but more importantly, also reduce the time and resources spent by learners going over established knowledge.

Paraphrasing The Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (2008), high-quality initial and diagnostic assessments make a major input to the general quality of learning programmes by:

- ensuring that learners are placed on the right course,
- retaining motivation,
- developing learners' progression routes and celebrating achievement.

On the other hand, if the initial assessment is conducted poorly it might lead to a high number of misplacements and transfers. Abedi (2008) suggests that needs assessments based on questionable measures may cause discrepancies. Learners who are inadequately assessed may be misplaced and receive inappropriate tuition. They may even be misclassified as learners with learning difficulties, which may greatly impact their academic careers. Summarising Abedi (2008), an inadequate initial assessment might contribute to learners struggling with their work, dropping out of their programme or failing to gain as much as they could from the tuition received.

However, Gravells (2016) claims that not every course needs to be preceded by initial needs analysis as the course could be the starting point itself. Elder and Randow (2008) further point out that some providers carry out initial assessment procedures as it is a funding requirement, and institutions need to adhere to it to attract funding, and the assessment does not carry much educational purpose. Looney (2007) gave an example of a provider in France that eliminated the initial set of diagnostic tests altogether. The rationale behind that was, also suggested by Armitage and Renwick (2008), that formal diagnostic tests can be off-putting for individuals who had negative experiences in school. What is more, Looney (2007), echoed by Armitage and Renwick (2008), concluded that an informal interview should be the first step in an ongoing assessment process, so there is no pressure on building a profile of learners. On the other hand, Armitage and Renwick (2008) argue that there are questions about the reliability of interviews to prognosticate future student achievement. This is supported by Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (2003) who also note that there are uncertainties about the validity of an interview as a means of assessing how well a student will perform on a course demanding practical or academic skills and abilities.

Even though interviews appear to be the most popular means by which student suitability is assessed, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that many providers use additional tests to assess applicants. Although such testing may be to

supplement admissions interviews, they are increasingly being used for screening and diagnostic purposes (Armitage and Renwick 2008). Such diagnostic assessment may also have a guidance purpose, be part of an induction process or be linked with an individual development plan. Scaife and Wellington (2010) conclude that students do value assessment that carries no grade, provided that it gives them valuable and constructive feedback, which is set in a no failure, no loss context. Finally, such 'practice' can be of value when it comes to grading and certification.

Issues – the wider picture

There are still too many providers who neglect initial assessment of key skills – and probably even more where information is collected, perhaps taking up quite a lot of the learner's time, and then never really acted on.

The Key Skills Support Programme (2006, p. 21)

Education and Training Foundation (2021) notices that common inspection areas for improvement are:

- poor assessment of attainment,
- inadequate identification and use of prior knowledge and experience,
- insufficiently comprehensive and ineffective initial assessment.

Furthermore, a number of other areas are also mentioned:

- initial assessment is often not set in context or linked to learners' aspirations,
- results are often not rigorous, are not used effectively or are poorly interpreted,
- wider key skills are rarely assessed as part of the initial assessment,
- initial assessment is rarely holistic – it does not take the whole person as a learner into account.

According to Department for Education (2021), the result of the needs assessment must show the level at which the learner is presently operating and subsequently notify which level they should enrol onto. Both the outcome of the initial assessment and the learner's level must be recorded as evidence in an Individual Learning Plan (ILP).

Needs analysis in Skills for Life should include the use of an assessment instrument that is founded on the literacy and numeracy core curricula benchmarks (Department for Education, 2021). It must be conducted by a trained practitioner who is familiarised with the assessment instrument and who is able to:

- understand the assessment process,
- use a variety of approaches appropriate to the individual learner and the context for learning,
- interpret results appropriately and give professional feedback to learners,
- recommend learning programmes and be able to refer learners for further expert assessment (Department for Education, 2021, p. 39).

According to The Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (2008) assessment data should be collated and analysed to ensure that the programmes offered are appropriate for the learners' skills profiles. Key messages from the assessment data relating to particular programmes should be fed back to curriculum teams to inform the development of appropriate teaching and learning strategies so that all learners are provided with suitable opportunities to develop and progress.

Education and Training Foundation (2021) suggests that an effective initial assessment uses a blend of six techniques:

- documents – give evidence of achievements,
- self-assessment – give learners information of where their strengths and weaknesses are,
- discussions – allow the teacher and learner to get to know each other,
- observations – provide opportunities for feedback,
- structured activities – allow learners to apply specific skills,
- tests – put learners in the centre of the assessment process.

Additionally, Education and Training Foundation (2021) states that an effective initial assessment depends on having a robust well-developed system and coordinated processes. A well-developed needs analysis system is basically defined as:

- fair – all individuals are treated equally, and there should be no discrimination, even implicitly,
- positive – the initial assessment experience should be positive for learners, and should keep stress to a minimum,
- consistent – providers need to be confident that the results of the initial assessment are right the first time and every time,
- rigorous – it is equally important that the results of the initial assessment are sound and provide a true picture of the learner's skills, knowledge and learning needs,
- documented – the system should generate records that are simple to use and understand,
- linked to a dynamic individual learning plan which informs the individual's development and is continually reviewed and updated.

To sum up, the literature found does not focus on any specific examples but highlights the importance of Individual Lesson Plans and SMART targets – a strategy that provides evidence of learning taking place. The main focus seems to be on assessors but no particular strategies, tasks or systems are recommended.

Identified good practice

Education and Training Foundation (2021) highlighted some areas of good practice. In particular, the researchers found that for a rising number of providers the borders of initial and formative assessment are getting less noticeable so that initial assessment is seen as the first point of formative assessment rather than a process that takes place in the first part of the course. What is more, there are signs that, when this happens, retention and success rates improve: learners are more likely to complete their skills programmes and achieve qualifications.

Example of good practice I

Provider I – Linking initial assessment to individual learning plans

The report observes that clear interim goal setting and constant observation of learners' progress, lead to adequate retention and good success rates. Authors of the report notice that an important aspect of a successful system is an efficient use of individual learning plans and progress assessments which monitor learners' development based on precise targets. The key element of the learning plan is setting interim goals and meeting the particular needs of the learners. The achievement of these goals and the regular re-evaluation of aims motivate learners and enhance their assurance and aspirations to succeed. The authors of the report conclude that the result of progress assessments and short term reviews are used to adjust the individual learning plan. Progress meetings are also used to give the learners new aims and comment on their improvements.

Example of good practice II

Provider II – Comprehensive initial assessment

The authors of the report conclude that a good way of improving the initial assessment procedure is setting up a preliminary course where the assessment takes place and only learners who meet certain criteria are allowed to join qualification courses. Provider II decided to name their preliminary course a 'pending' programme and its qualities are as follow:

- no change in initial assessment documentation,
- no change in learners' induction,
- six weeks of introductory course placement,
- review with employer and provider after six weeks,
- a detailed record of a placement decision.

Provider II introduced a structured introductory course placement element so learners get a real 'feel' for the area they are going into. Learners only progress onto qualification courses once their attendance and attitude are satisfactory. If necessary, the introductory course placement can be extended.

To conclude, Midlands Adult and Community Learning Service needs a new set of initial assessment procedures. To develop a system certain questions have to be answered. The primary research will help to answer several of them, but after the analysis of other providers' procedures and the government funding requirements, some initial proposals can be made. Firstly, the system should make sure that only learners who are serious about their education are accepted to join LLN courses. Secondly, it should be the right tool to screen previous knowledge. And lastly, it should identify learners whose presence is irregular and perhaps LLN accredited courses are not the right option for them. In summary, the system should:

- check attitude
- check attainment
- check attendance

Also, the initial assessment could help to:

- develop individual learning plans,
- identify each learner's initial learning needs, appropriate and practical ways of achieving them,
- determine learner's potential and the likely learning needs which will have to be addressed.

Data collection

A multi-method approach to data collection was used. This is said to be quite common and allows for different methods to be used for different purposes (Saunders et al., 1997). In the first instance, secondary data was collected using a variety of sources such as books, journals and reports which have been critically analysed in the Literature Review chapter. Secondly, the analysis of a sample of initial assessment records was undertaken. Each academic year circa 300 Literacy and Numeracy learners undertake an initial assessment and therefore a 10% sample was

analysed for placements' accuracy and learners' outcome. A number of 30 is said to be the minimum number if researchers want to use some form of statistical analysis on their data. Cohen et al. (2017) suggested that a convenience sample may be the sampling strategy selected for a case study. Finally, a focus group was chosen, because as Kitchin and Tate (2000) recommend, focus groups are one of the best sources of primary data used for the purpose of phenomenological research, which aims to provide information from people who have experienced the phenomena in question. A focus group allows for relatively large amounts of information to be collected from a relatively small number of people. In contrast, questionnaire-based surveys tend to gather small amounts of data from a large number of people (Cohen et al., 2017). Content analysis was chosen to analyse the focus groups' data. Krippendorp (2004) defines it as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use. Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2017) point out that content analysis is a multi-purpose research method developed specifically for investigating a wide range of questions in which the subject of communication is a basis of inference, from a word it counts to categorisation.

The author used focus group meetings of the LLN tutors as a tool for main data collection. The changes in the procedure of placements of new learners and a review of the process were discussed in detail. All LLN tutors employed at the institution were invited to take part in the project and 12 participants were recruited. Research consent forms were used to inform all the participants about the purpose of the study, ethical considerations and their right to anonymity and withdrawal.

In addition to the tutor focus group, a learner focus group was set up. All learners who attended introductory courses were invited and seventeen learners attended the meeting. Learners were asked about the:

- teaching they receive
- materials and resources the institution provides
- procedure of placements
- programme of classes the institution offers

As in the case of tutors, research consent forms were used to inform all the participants about the purpose of the study, ethical considerations and their right to anonymity and withdrawal.

Data Analysis

The initial assessment interviews were introduced in 2001 as a part of the national Skills for Life initiative. All learners wanting to join LLN courses had to go through

an initial interview which was carried out by a suitably qualified and trained tutor. The aims of the interview were:

- assessment of learner's attainment and attitude,
- completion of availability, enrolment and crèche (if required) forms.

All assessment materials were prepared by the interviewer who decided on the learner's attainment and suggested an appropriate course. The interview assessment pack was then passed onto the curriculum coordinator who decided on the learner's course placement. Communication with learners was the administrator's role who was also responsible for crèche arrangements.

Secondary research suggests that a good initial assessment can help improve the retention rate. Initial assessment and placement procedures were discussed at the LLN focus group meeting. The main reason for the debate was an ineffective system of placements that allowed uncommitted learners to enrol on LLN courses.

At the meeting, it was pointed out that,

The numeracy assessment pack has inconsistencies and does not seem to be a valid and reliable testing resource. Literacy assessment is shallow and does not focus on testing anything else other than writing skills. Overall, the assessment materials used seem inappropriate to judge learners' levels and guarantee placement on suitable courses.

The procedure after the assessment is unclear and long-winded – It does not guarantee the best use of staff time.

The assessment does not check learners' attendance and attitude towards the institution and learning.

Some statistical data was also shared. The analysis presented revealed that only 23.08% of learners achieved their learning aims after being placed in qualification courses. However, the reason for such a low success rate may include a low number of guided learning hours received by the learners. All attendees agreed that rapid action was required to change the system and improve the success rate. It was proposed that all LLN learners would be placed in 10-hour introductory courses, before placement in the Employment and Skills Funding Agency funded provision. The aim of the introductory courses would be to check:

- Attendance
- Attainment
- Attitude

The tutors would be responsible for placements and crèche arrangements. Also, a new set of paperwork would be developed – learner trackers, individual learning plans, standardised lesson plans and schemes of work. To progress onto the qualification course all learners would need to:

- attend 100% of classes,
- show progress and a good attitude towards learning,
- meet all targets set by the tutor.

At the first procedure review, the following issues were raised by the tutors,

Placements – Some tutors find the last session for learners the most difficult as they are asked to place the learner onto a course if they are satisfied with attendance, and attitude and are sure the learner will achieve a single unit in the time remaining or attend the non-accredited course.

The last session was changed as it had not been conducive to learning and occasionally the whole session could have been taken by placing learners in courses. Tutors were asked to refer learners (one learner at a time during the last session) to office staff with the level of the course the learner requires.

Learners joining late / Absentees – Some learners join the course at the second session and it makes it impossible for them to attend the full 10 hours.

According to the new procedure, all learners are allocated 10 hours blocks and they must attend consecutive sessions. If a learner is absent for one session tutors are asked to decide if this is a one-off and possibly allow continuation. If tutors recognise a lack of attitude or commitment, they can decide that any continuation on the course would not be appropriate at this time, and return to it when the timing is better for the learner. If a learner does not arrive on week 1 but arrives on week 2, the tutor should find out why they were absent as it might have been a valid reason (e.g. hospital appointment) and they could prove commitment by attending the remaining 8 hours.

Level differences / High numbers / Differentiation – Some tutors have mentioned that teaching a variety of levels is challenging and requires a lot of preparation.

The 10-hour intro Scheme of Work was discussed, too, and appropriate changes were made – it was agreed that a workshop-style class with a lot of activities planned is needed in this situation. Also, the 10 hours introductory courses were mainly designed to assess learners' levels and provide placement information rather than teach the subject. Changes after the first procedure review:

- introduction of roll-on / roll-off introductory courses,
- learner placements to be carried out by administration staff members,
- the maximum number of learners per course is limited to 15.

At the second procedure review the following issues were discussed:

Roll-on / roll-off courses proved to be complicated to monitor – a very high number of learners joining every session.

Inadequate lesson plans – need for one standardised session plan.

Lack of adequate resources – smartboard resources, Moodle learning platform area.

Changes that were implemented after the second procedure review:

- learners are only allowed to join every five sessions,
- introductory courses area on Moodle learning platform created,
- more diagnostic testing resources ordered.

Also, all learners who attended introductory courses were invited to join a focus group meeting and share their feedback.

Some learners felt that the resources used were mostly paper-based and included old books and practice test papers. Most of the sessions were spent on testing, but at the same time, not enough feedback was given. One learner felt that the introductory course was just a 10-hour test with very little interaction. Some learners complained that classes were too large and there were too many levels in the same class.

The learners' focus group provided useful information and confirmed that a new set of resources was needed. All learners but one seemed satisfied with the system and the pace of learning. Learners felt that their learning was more individual and tutors spent a sufficient amount of time with them on a one-on-one basis.

At the final tutor focus group meeting, introductory courses retention data was shared with all tutors and the number was 75.9%. It meant that 24.1% of learners were not allowed to join LLN accredited courses after attending the introductory course. Consequently, it showed that the retention of the accredited course could increase by as much as 24.1%. It was emphasised that all LLN learners would have to attend a 10 hours introductory course before any accreditation courses are offered. Also, instead of running 10 hours courses, all classes will run for a full year and new learners will be placed at intervals. Learners' feedback was also taken into consideration, and a simplified Individual Learning Plan and interactive e-resources will be used in all introductory courses.

Evaluation of research

This study is located in an interpretivist paradigm. It is a qualitative case study, focused on the opinion of tutors and learners in the adult learning sector. It is

a small-scale research project in an area where, currently, there is little work evident in the literature. The focus group meetings allowed all LLN tutors within the institution to take an active part in the process of forming a new placement procedure whereas the questionnaire would have only checked tutors' opinions once. It was important to gain a wider range of experiences from the tutors, and focus group meetings would generate more data, with the learners' focus group to check the validity of the interpretation of the findings.

After the first meeting, tutors reported that they were given significant responsibilities rapidly, in terms of planning and preparation of introductory courses. The availability of support was limited and initially it was mainly tutors who were responsible for the content of the courses and the researcher was only involved in a consultative manner. All views and experiences were later on shared, and standardised courses developed.

Furthermore, working across three areas and subjects seemed to lead to a variety of problems and complications in registers, course placements and funding. The biggest difficulty was attracting Skills Funding Agency funding for non-accredited literacy and numeracy courses. In hindsight, setting up a variety of workshop classes that learners could join at any time of the year with additional non-qualification registers could lead to similar results. However, it would mean a lot more work for tutors adding more documentation and complexity to already complicated procedures. Also, managers had a clear brief to prioritise value for money and such classes could impact an institution's minimum level of performance by affecting the number of guided learning hours learners receive. The focus group meetings were a good way of evaluating staff judgement and allowed all LLN tutors and managers to reflect and comment on any issues that arose. The Moodle learning platform made tutors share documents and e-resources used in LLN courses.

As for the learner focus group, it also worked well, learners were happy to attend; they did not all know each other but were comfortable discussing the issues that they had confronted as learners. Ethical guidelines were adhered to in all cases, especially the right to anonymity and withdrawal. The focus group, although using structured questions, was subject to interactions between participants not within the control of the researcher, where non-verbal communication and other factors are not recorded so many elements of the dialogue are lost. The learners' focus group helped the researcher to listen to the learners' opinion and make necessary adjustments to the needs analysis procedure. However, this research would also benefit from setting up an additional focus group of learners who went through the whole process of placement, tuition and achievement. It would be interesting to see what other things they would comment on and how the process worked for them.

Future research and recommendations for practice

In future studies, it would be valuable to have a wider range of focus groups and look more closely at how the needs of learners and tutors change. It would be interesting to distinguish the sector into its element groups, Adult and Community Learning, Probation, Private Training Providers etc. and select a representative sample, comparing the specific needs of learners in different settings. During the process of setting up introductory courses, certain criteria were used to categorise learners which would later be allowed to join LLN classes. This led to the development of:

- new non-qualification Maths and English courses accredited by another board,
- short non-accredited non-qualification courses based in outreach community venues funded by the lottery fund.

Introductory courses act as a sieve and allow Midlands Adult and Community Education Service to categorise the learners whom they offer tuition. The new system focuses on learners who want to achieve qualifications rather than attend free classes for leisure purposes. It allows the funding to be used in a more efficient way and to maximise the success rate. However, at the same time, it caters for learners who are not likely or simply do not want to achieve accreditation and signposts them to leisure or non-qualification courses.

To secure the funding and avoid special measures in the future, the LLN area should improve needs analysis and placement procedures even further. Additional improvements to protect the success rate of accredited courses are needed. The development of non-qualification courses and the use of different accreditation boards would be advisable. Another alternative worth researching would be an introduction of so-called safety net courses which are non-accredited courses running alongside accredited ones. The idea behind them is that all learners start their learning on a non-accredited course and only progress to the accredited one once their attendance is satisfactory and the tutor is confident that the learner will pass the exam. Both courses take place in the same classroom and there is no noticeable difference for learners.

Conclusion

The findings of this study agree with Armitage and Renwick (2008) and argue that initial assessment interviews should not be used to test future learner attainment.

Instead, following Elder and Randow's (2008) suggestion, a system has been developed, providing suitable, sensible and ethical means by which learners who do not meet the qualification course criteria can receive a further diagnosis and additional tuition. This research discovered that the key to improving Midlands Adult and Community Education Service success rate was the development of a robust needs analysis system where all learners were placed in suitable courses. To date, the literature has given a lot of attention to the subject of initial assessment. However, a fully developed needs analysis and placement system has not been carried out. Therefore, this article aimed to provide some qualitative findings to add to the understanding of the needs analysis of learners in adult and community learning.

Certain findings of this article supported the information that the main objective of the successful initial assessment procedure is a strict selection of willing learners who can commit to formal education and are prepared to go through accreditation procedures. However, the layout of the courses allows tutors to thoroughly assess and identify learners' needs, styles and abilities, which improves the quality of teaching and learning. Initially, all changes in the layout of the introductory course were made to improve the retention rate. Simultaneously, high quality of teaching and learning had to be maintained with the minimum impact on administrative and support staff.

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