



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

## 7<sup>th</sup> National Skills for Life conference

Setting the scene:

Dreams, triumphs, compromise,  
nightmares and the cold light of day



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# The history in a nutshell

- 1970s On the Move: 1<sup>st</sup> wave literacy campaign: liberal, loose, practitioner-driven;
- 1980s Gradual build-up of practice: job-focused; individual learner-centred
- 1993 Schedule 2 of F&HE Act breakthrough: statutory role for colleges to provide
- 1997 OECD International literacy survey: shock, upheaval
- 1998 Reform-hungry labour government gets going
- 2001 Ten-year Skills for Life strategy launched: target-driven, tightly-managed



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## Since 2000: high national & international profile

- All UK countries have had basic skills strategies
- Strategies in New Zealand, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway...
- EU: Key Competences and Adult Learning Action Plan: basic skills at the centre
- European BS network launched Oslo 2010
- RAPAL & Adults Learning Maths strengthened
- Working links worldwide: unprecedented
- UN initiatives



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# Dreams in a brave new world

- New dawn, new age
- Respect
- Literacy as human right: worldwide
- A basic education for all – through a rich, wide ranging curriculum
- Basic skills at the centre of adult learning
- Progress & achievements for learners
- ESOL and numeracy taken seriously
- A lasting policy priority across the world?



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# Triumphs

- Millions of learners, better teachers, infrastructure
- Public understanding, policy understanding
- International research. cooperation and national reviews: ESOL, numeracy
- Open debate: policy, practice, pedagogy
- Innovation, initiatives, breaking new ground
- Embedding – going with learners’ motivation
- Families and workplaces
- Repeating the 2003 baseline survey – 2010



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# Unease and compromise

- The price paid for high policy: top down to practice
- Economy or society; skills or social practices: false divides
- Narrow or ill-fitting assessment models: writing second class
- The 'deficit' model': skills hierarchies
- Strong infrastructure, weak philosophy
- The most in need, the least favoured – entry level learners
- Waste: materials never used; research reports fading on Whitehall desks



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# Nightmares of a dystopic future

- Targets achieved, job done: end of story?
- Not reaching those people left out
- No money, no learning
- Oblivion or marginalisation
- Greater inequality: education, poverty, housing, civic participation, health
- Another generation neglected?



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# Waking up

- Big society - what support for basic skills?
- Functional skills: a basis for writing?
- Unemployment – adult learning or the CV curriculum?
- IT - a workplace necessity, motivator and medium?
- Low policy, low funding: opportunities for practitioners to lead?
- The workplace: no-one left behind in age of IT and multi-tasking?
- UN Confintea decision: a better view - continuum not 'either or'
- PIAAC – a new international survey
- Time to think again, time to campaign?