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## **Adult Learning and Literacy in the United Kingdom**

Volume 1: Chapter Seven

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Like the United States, the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup> started a literacy campaign in the early 1970s characterized by dependence on volunteers, one-to-one tutoring, and ad hoc, often creative approaches to teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> The British Right to Read campaign, initiated by volunteer activists and supported by politicians and the broadcasting services, aimed to mobilize national and local government resources, raise public awareness, and achieve widespread involvement in the teaching and learning of adult literacy. Although first seen as a temporary response to a short-term crisis, the campaign in fact laid the groundwork for a new, publicly funded adult basic education (ABE) service. In the process, some distinctive styles of provision were created, including an emphasis on writing as a way to develop reading ability and self-empowerment, a commitment to equality between students and teachers (or tutors),<sup>3</sup> and informal approaches to working with adults in small groups and community settings.

The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 made ABE part of the system of further education in England and Wales, the primary purpose of which had been vocational training for school leavers<sup>4</sup> in the age group sixteen to nineteen. As a result of these developments, ABE has become more firmly established and also increasingly formalized.

In this chapter our primary aim is to describe the general workings of the system of adult literacy and learning as it exists in the United Kingdom today. To better illuminate that system, we take a little time delving into its past—that is, showing how it arrived at its current state of operation. A secondary aim is to compare and contrast aspects of the U.K. system with that in the United States, which has experienced shifts in practice, similar to those just described, from a patchwork of community programs relying on volunteers, diverse institutions, and varied funding streams to

ever-greater moves toward national accountability, documented performance, and systematic standards. In conducting this analysis, we hope to broaden the reader's understanding of the two systems as well as our own.<sup>5</sup>

## **THE ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL CLIMATE SHAPING ABE**

Adult basic education is inevitably influenced by the broader economic, political, and cultural climate that shapes policy options. Since the 1970s, the United Kingdom has undergone profound changes, both internally and in its sense of nationhood and place in the world. It has been placed firmly within a new world order, experiencing a reorientation from empire to equal partner in the European Union. Its population is increasingly multiethnic. The gap between rich and poor has widened as global economic changes have affected the economy, employment, and social divisions, and as a radical Conservative agenda called for cutting the social safety net and weakening collective action through trade unions. Although policy changes designed to affect these areas have not, on the whole, been directed at ABE, they have had consequences for ABE and shape the space within which it operates (Fullan, 1991; Derrick, 1996).

### **The Economy: Widening Inequality**

While successive U.K. governments have argued that the United Kingdom is, in contrast to some of its European neighbors, an economic success story, that story is also characterized by increasing poverty, social inequality, and unemployment. Nearly a quarter of all households with children are living in poverty (Oppenheim & Harker, 1996). Chancellor Gordon Brown says that the United Kingdom is "more unequal [now] than in 100 years" (Brown, 1997). The richest 1 percent of the population owns 19 percent of the United Kingdom's wealth, while the poorest 50 percent owns just 7 percent (Office for National Statistics, 1998).

A split has opened up between "working rich" and "working poor" households (Howarth, Kenqay, Palmer, & Street, 1998, p. 38). Almost one working-age family in five-19 percent-has no wage earner (Brown, 1997). This contrasts with 11.5 percent in the United States, 15 percent in Germany, and 16 percent in France. In some urban areas, about one-third of working-age families have no wage earner. Unsurprisingly, in the context of such poverty and inequality, the prison population has risen sharply. Another sign of trouble, which is of direct concern to future adult literacy, is the sharp rise in the number of children permanently expelled from English secondary schools: in 1996ñ1997 the number amounted to more than 12,500, a fourfold increase since the beginning of

the decade (Howarth, Kenqay, Palmer, & Street, 1998, p. 55).

Education and training is the primary policy tool with which the Labor government can address the effects of these economic and social changes. It has implemented new welfare reform programs, which, emulating earlier U.S. policies, aim to use training and job placement to move people off welfare and into work. National education targets have been established for the general population, designed to raise competence in key skills (including reading and math). The central focus of literacy policy, too, whether for adults or schoolchildren, is on upgrading skills for international competitiveness.

### **Governance: Devolution and Centralization**

The U.K. central government has always had much greater control than its U.S. counterpart over public services such as education, training, and welfare. At the same time, regional governance variations in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland have resulted in somewhat different educational structures. New constitutional changes are rapidly affecting all of these. Wales has a bilingual educational system and has recently gained its own regional assembly (though with limited powers). Northern Ireland has retained a system of selective secondary schooling and has just regained its regional assembly. Scotland has recently gained its regional parliament, with powers to raise taxes, and has always had educational qualifications and administrative and funding structures distinct from those of England and Wales.

A decade ago it could be said that the educational system of England and Wales was a "national system, locally administered" (Cantor & Roberts, 1995, p. 11), but since then the powers of local governments and their local education authorities (LEAs) have been radically reduced by a Conservative central government distrustful of their influence. (LEAs are comparable to local school systems in the United States and are made up of elected representatives and paid staff.)<sup>6</sup> Individual schools and colleges now have boards of governors who control their budgets, similar to the site-based management systems in some areas of the United States. This system may appear to be more democratic, but it actually increases the control of the central government. Because there are no mechanisms through which individual schools and small local authorities can coordinate their activities, it is difficult to form powerful enough associations to challenge the central government or to develop local or regional strategies (Tuckett, 1991). It seems unlikely that the current government will reverse these trends, but it is looking for new ways of addressing the need for local and regional coordination. Collaboration and partnerships have become the new order.

### **Public Services: The Contract Culture**

During the 1980s the notion of public service was replaced by the metaphor of the marketplace, in which competition is promoted as a positive value (Ball, 1994). Users of public services are referred to as customers or consumers, and collective action and representation have been replaced by the idea of consumer power at the individual level. Even the term citizen has been appropriated: the citizens' charters developed by the Conservative government were essentially public service consumers' bills of rights.

All public services-transportation, health, education, social services, prisons-have been reorganized within the new contract culture. Internal markets have been developed, whereby different parts of a public service are encouraged to act like independent businesses and buy goods and services from one another or elsewhere in a system of competitive tendering. This pseudomarket has particularly affected further education, which now has primary responsibility for ABE in England and Wales.<sup>7</sup> Since 1992 further education colleges have been set up as quasi-businesses, expected to compete for students.

### **Vocational Education: Expansion and Unification of Qualifications**

Since the 1970s, there has been growing government concern about the changing structure of employment and the perceived need for new training strategies to promote global competitiveness. The decline of manufacturing in the United Kingdom has resulted in the collapse of the traditional apprenticeship system. The increasing call for flexible workers who can move easily from job to job in response to economic demand has brought the issue of vocational training, including basic skills for employment, to the center stage of government policy.

During the 1980s there was a massive expansion of vocational education and training, primarily directed toward school leavers in the age group sixteen to nineteen years and adults with a long history of unemployment. Local business-led consortia, called Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), were explicitly modeled after the Private Industry Councils (PICs) formed in the United States, as were a number of other social policy initiatives at this time (Finegold, McFarland, & Richardson, 1993). TECs decide on local priorities for vocational training within broad criteria and very tight financial constraints established by the central government. They are encouraged to make profits and reinvest these profits in their localities. They may provide training themselves or contract with a wide range of private and public sector providers.

Training for people already at work has received much less financial support from public funds. "Flexible working" has led to a huge increase in temporary and part-time jobs, which do not offer access to training

(Frank & Hamilton, 1993; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Hull, 1997). No legislation compels employers to contribute to the training of their employees, although they are encouraged to do so through the Investors in People program, founded in 1990. This government-led partnership with business, employee, and training organizations aims to establish national standards for effective staff development. It rewards employers who provide training with publicity and a special "quality mark" logo.

As in Australia (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997), the central government has put a great deal of effort into developing a unified system of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) that are tied to a set of national training targets and quality assurances. This system is designed to provide a means of determining equivalence amid the maze of different vocational qualifications and bridge the divide between academic and vocational qualifications. In England, ABE learner and teacher credentials have both been linked with the NVQ system.

### **Higher Education: More Flexible Pathways and Expansion**

Alongside these reforms of education and training have been major developments in degree-level higher education, with more adult and part-time students entering the system and a doubling of the quota of students. (The number of student places allowed at various institutions is tightly controlled through public funding, with penalties for universities that overstep the quota.) The traditional route from secondary school to higher education is through the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams (taken at age sixteen) and A-levels (exams taken at age eighteen). These examinations are also available to older students in further education colleges, but many adults prefer the more flexible routes that have been developed for them. These include alternative entry programs through one-year linked access courses and the creation of alternative pathways through the Open College Networks system (Davie & Parry, 1993).<sup>8</sup>

### **Lifelong Learning: The New Mantra**

Although both the U.K. government and the European Union now give strong rhetorical support to the concept of lifelong learning, they still appear reluctant to invest public money to promote it effectively (Tuckett, 1997). The Labor government has created a ministry responsible for lifelong learning and has consulted widely with interested organizations and individuals about how to promote it (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). However, it is unclear whether strong new policy initiatives will result from these efforts, and there still appears to be little support for a broad program of adult education that could serve purposes other than employment, such as education for citizenship. The government's lifelong learning flagship, the University for Industry, is intended to promote opportunities to learn basic skills and

to become one of the primary vehicles for increasing access to lifelong learning (Department for Education and Employment, 1998).<sup>9</sup>

### **Information Technology and Broadcast Media**

In contrast with the media in the United States, British broadcast media, and in particular the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), have a well-established educational mission (Robinson, 1983; Sargent & Tuckett, 1997). The BBC played an important role in the literacy campaign of the 1970s and has been involved in the development of the Open University, a distance-learning institution (distinct from the Open College Networks), and other innovative forms of programming (Sargent & Tuckett, 1997).

Television broadcasting has also been used as a means of raising awareness of social issues, from incest to literacy. In the most recent of these efforts, linked to the National Year of Reading 1998ñ1999, story lines relating to adult literacy have been written into popular soap operas and a national help line set up and advertised to provide callers with information about ABE programs in their area.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF ADULT BASIC EDUCATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

Until the early 1970s, adult literacy was not an issue for educational and social policy in the United Kingdom. Since the advent of compulsory schooling at the end of the nineteenth century, policymakers had been preoccupied with children's education. Ad hoc provision of adult literacy education by community groups and local education authorities had been rising unremarked during the late 1960s. By 1972, the eve of the campaign, more than 230 literacy schemes in England and Wales served about five thousand learners (Haviland, 1974).

### **Right to Read Campaign**

In 1973 the national literacy campaign for the Right to Read was launched under pressure from the British Association of Settlements (BAS), a coalition of longstanding voluntary associations working in local communities to alleviate the social problems of the poor (British Association of Settlements, 1974). This was the first adult literacy campaign to take place in a Western European country. The BAS led the political side of the campaign, while the BBC organized a public awareness campaign and referral service (Hargreaves, 1980). The campaign grew out of a political climate that was still committed to expanding welfare and equal educational opportunities.

In 1974, the central government released £1 million (then about \$2 million) to the campaign. This, combined with an enormous volunteer

effort, quickly established adult literacy services throughout England and Wales. Local governments provided the greater part of funding for these services, with limited money coming from the central government. LEAs recruited both volunteer and paid teachers and organized part-time literacy classes to respond to the demand created by the campaign. Most were set up within existing adult and community education centers (for details see Hamilton, 1996; Withnall, 1994; Street, 1997; Jones & Charnley, 1978).

Now as then, the majority of those working in ABE continue to do so in part-time or voluntary posts. There is, however, a general trend toward decline in the number of volunteers and growth in number of paid staff, reflecting an increasing emphasis on professionalism in the field of ABE. In 1995-1996, approximately 10 percent of adult literacy/numeracy staff in England were full-time-1,290 out of a total of 12,893 (Basic Skills Agency, 1997a). The rest were part-time, many spending only a few hours per week on basic skills work as temporary, hourly paid teachers. In the same year, there were 13,374 volunteers.

The U.K. mass media, such as radio and television, have since the beginning of the campaign been used mainly to raise awareness about literacy issues and refer people to opportunities for learning, not as a means of directly teaching ABE. Program developers have had to be careful to work with local ABE providers to make sure that sufficient resources exist to respond to the interest generated by publicity on television and radio. The BBC was the first to develop a series of programs, *On the Move*, intended to publicize learning opportunities and help recruit learners. Both the BBC and commercial television channels have periodically produced programs on literacy, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), numeracy, and computer skills. The creators of these programs have made efforts to overcome the stereotype of the illiterate as a stigmatized "other" and to present literacy as an issue that affects everyone.

A central resource agency for adult literacy was set up by the central government in 1975-1976 to fund special development projects (for example, innovative programs for special groups of learners), publish resource material, and develop staff training programs. Originally called the Adult Literacy Resource Agency (ALRA), in 1980 it was renamed the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU).<sup>10</sup>

In the late 1980s, the ALBSU and the BBC played a key role in establishing a new accreditation framework for ABE: *Wordpower* and *Numberpower*. This is related to the NVQ system and establishes a framework of basic skills standards and an assessment system.

The rhetoric of the Right to Read campaign-with its call to eradicate illiteracy-and the use of contemporary definitions of functional literacy,<sup>11</sup> derived from UNESCO, along with the campaign's style of mobilizing public interest and volunteers, were typical of mass campaigns in countries such as Cuba and the Soviet Union (Limage, 1986, 1990).

The priorities of ABE are very much determined by the nature of its affiliation-whether with employment, social services, or citizenship and immigration. Comparisons with other countries, such as France and Canada, show that this arrangement can lead to a number of different situations (Hamilton, 1989). Indeed, in England and Wales, ESOL was developed under the Home Office (Department of Internal Affairs) as a response to immigration and took a path separate from literacy.

In the United Kingdom, ABE was linked with the central government Department for Education (now the Department for Education and Employment), but only indirectly. The effect of this arrangement (whether deliberate or not) was to separate the campaign from debates about the quality of schooling and differences in educational achievement among different social, cultural, and linguistic groups, which are in fact highly relevant to an understanding of the need for an ABE service. The ABE that developed has never fully engaged with issues concerning gender, class, or cultural diversity in relation to literacy. Policy documents and practices have operated with an undifferentiated view of the typical ABE learner.

ABE initially became part of the existing adult education service, funded and led by LEAs. It took on the ethos of that service: a broad liberal curriculum aligned with personal self-development rather than social goals. Along with that sense of purpose it adopted its basic characteristics: informal, student-centered teaching and assessment, part-time staff, and mainly evening classes without dedicated space or facilities (often housed in schools) (Keddie, 1980; Fieldhouse, 1996).

There are several interwoven and contradictory philosophical strands within ABE's development in England. Among those drawn into teaching ABE were people with a more political commitment to the emancipatory potential of adult literacy. Their focus was not just personal development but social change. They were influenced by community development, working-class and community publishing, and the ideas of Paulo Freire and deschooling society (Freire, 1972, 1985; Illich, 1973; Lister, 1974).<sup>12</sup> Some of the most innovative work initially came from these directions, especially from those working with voluntary organizations who saw literacy primarily as a social rather than an educational issue (Mace, 1979; Street, 1997).

Two other major philosophical strands were from the start intertwined in U.K. literacy work: the functional view of literacy associated with social control of an undereducated population (always important in vocational, army, and prison settings and later to become the most prominent view in mainstream ABE) and a deficit view of literacy, inherited from special education in schools and focused on what adults cannot do—that is, read, write, or speak in ways deemed appropriate by mainstream institutions.

### **Consolidation and Formalization**

In 1973, when the Right to Read campaign began, the consensus was that the issue of adult literacy was a temporary problem, requiring only short-term funding for its solution. By 1979 adult educators were arguing that ABE should be funded as a permanent part of adult continuing education (Advisory Council on Adult and Continuing Education, 1979). More than a decade later, with the passage of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, ABE was made a permanent part of further education in England and Wales.

By this time, a policy rationale very different from that of Right to Read was in ascendance: that of economic efficiency (Hamilton, 1996). Central government funds for adult education were clearly targeted toward helping adults "improve their qualifications, update their skills, and seek advancement in their present career or in a new career" (Department for Education, 1991, p. 8). Courses for the "leisure interests" of adults were to be provided elsewhere and financed through fees charged to individuals, not paid for by the government.

Although ABE thus became a statutory program, required by law, with stable funding and a clear mandate, it was placed within an institutional sector whose primary business is vocational training for sixteen to nineteen year olds. LEAs may choose to continue their ABE provision, but there is no longer any overarching institution charged with local or regional strategic planning for adult basic education.

The context of further education has continued to change throughout the 1990s. In the wake of a series of influential reports on further and higher education (Kennedy, 1997; Dearing, 1997; Tomlinson, 1996), the focus in further education has shifted from simply growing to targeting learners, particularly those from areas of social and economic deprivation. To attain targets, further education colleges are increasingly forming partnerships (sometimes with community groups and voluntary organizations) and joining in local and even regional planning efforts.

Services in Scotland developed in a similar way to those in England and Wales in the early years, but the Scottish Adult Basic Education Unit was integrated into the Scottish Community Education Council in 1991, and

ABE has always been part of Scotland's strong community education service rather than the (vocational) further education system (European Bureau of Adult Education, 1983; McConnell, 1996). Its ethos has been characterized by a firmer commitment to social and political change than in England and Wales. At the same time, it has had a less distinct presence.<sup>13</sup>

### **Literacy Provision for Speakers of Languages Other Than English**

ESOL was not included in the Right to Read campaign. Concern for the language needs of linguistic minority groups, whether immigrant or indigenous, has always been quite limited at the policy level in the United Kingdom. Alan Wells, director of the Basic Skills Agency (BSA), the central resource agency for adult education in England and Wales, acknowledges that no real policy has ever emerged and that there are no universal opportunities for new citizens to learn English (Wells, 1996). Although England has always had a population whose mother tongue is not English, it was not until the 1960s, when large numbers of East African Asians began to arrive, forced out of their homes by the Ugandan government under Idi Amin, that the need for English-language provision for adults was officially recognized and ESOL schemes came into existence.

Official recognition came in the shape of funding from the Home Office to LEAs to set up ESOL courses in areas where demand was greatest. The fact that funding was entirely separate from ABE and was never offered in terms of a public awareness campaign meant that what should have been overlapping provision developed quite separately. Only gradually were connections made.

Until the early 1990s, funding for ESOL was restricted to immigrant groups from the New Commonwealth<sup>14</sup> and therefore did not cover many ESOL groups that arguably had equal or greater language needs (such as those from Eastern Europe or Vietnam). Unlike ABE, which was addressed as an educational problem, ESOL was treated as a social problem resulting from immigration. Within mainstream services, the only aim was for adults to learn the English language. Bilingual adults and their children have been pathologized and treated as deficient rather than as a resource. There is little recognition of the diversity of bilingual learners, who range from those who have had no access to education to those who are already highly literate in their native tongue and other languages.

Native tongue and bilingual literacy programs have never been officially sanctioned and funded (Hartley, 1992). The literacy needs of speakers of minority dialects, such as African Caribbean adults, were addressed by neither national ESOL funding nor mainstream literacy programs. The

most notable work was done without central government funding. Such was the case with the Sheffield Black Literacy campaign (Gurnah, 1992), the Kweyol project (Morris & Nwemely, 1994; RaPAL Bulletin, 1994), and other local projects developed with African Caribbean speakers in London and Manchester (Schwab & Stone, 1987; Craven & Jackson, 1986).

### **Approaches to Teaching and Learning**

Teaching and learning methods in the days of Right to Read were eclectic. Student writing and publishing were characteristic of these early programs. Teachers and students took part in residential writing weekends and reading evenings (Gardener, 1985). They established links with community bookstores, and undertook publishing projects, such as Gatehouse Books (see Gatehouse Books 1985, 1992) and Write First Time, a collectively produced newspaper that closed after ten years amid political controversy (see Mace, 1979, and the appendix at the end of this chapter, under "Useful Contacts"). The use of student writing not only provides a creative solution to the problem of what adult learners should read, it also supports the value placed on student participation and the validation of their experience.

The principles of flexible, negotiated, student-centered teaching favored by participants in the original literacy campaign were supported by high-quality materials published by the central resource agency, the ALBSU. To its credit, the ALBSU never produced primers or a fixed ABE syllabus. Instead it published resource packs that teachers could draw from according to individual student need. Nevertheless, the ALBSU's accreditation system, Wordpower and Numberpower, in practice amounted to a curriculum, as inexperienced teachers looked to it to structure their teaching.

Later the ALBSU led a move toward drop-in workshops (known as open learning centers) offering supported self-study (ALBSU, 1992; Bergin & Hamilton, 1994). This move toward open learning in ABE fits with more general trends in further education colleges, where open learning centers, equipped with computers and self-access worksheets, are now pervasive. These are seen as forward looking in their use of new learning technologies and cost-effective in that they reduce the need for teacher contact time. After 1992 student writing and publishing still existed, but there was little staff training to support it and few opportunities for weekend workshops or national circulation of the work (O'Rourke & Mace, 1992).

### **THE NEED FOR ABE IN ENGLAND**

It is notoriously difficult to estimate the extent of the need for adult basic

education. Statistics from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) indicate that the proportion of the population with basic skills difficulties is smaller in the United Kingdom than in the United States, but it is still a major issue in terms of public perception (OECD, 1997). The IALS measures literacy along three dimensions of literacy—prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy—at five levels. About 22 percent of the U.K. population scored at the lowest level on all three dimensions. There are, however, methodological reasons for treating these results with caution (see Hamilton & Barton, forthcoming).

The United Kingdom is fortunate in having some major longitudinal cohort studies, which have been used to collect data on adult literacy and numeracy. Recently these studies have included interviews and formal tests as well as self-reports of difficulties with reading, writing, and numeracy. Bynner and Parsons (1997) report some research using the National Child Development Study (NCDS), which has followed more than 17,000 people born in the United Kingdom in one week in 1958. This research took a representative sample of 2,144 cohort members at the age of thirty-seven. Just over 1,700 cohort members completed interviews and undertook eight literacy and numeracy tasks designed to test everyday literacy and numeracy skills of increasing difficulty (four levels). The results revealed that 19 percent of those tested scored at the lowest literacy levels, 1 or 2, and 48 percent scored at the lowest two levels on the numeracy tasks.

In contrast, a much lower percentage, only about 15 percent of the cohort, reported that they had problems with reading, writing, spelling, or numeracy. Most of these problems were concerned with writing or spelling, for example, when completing a job application form. If we take even this very conservative estimate, of 15 percent of the adult population reporting basic skills difficulties, it suggests that around 6 million people in the adult population believe that their basic skills are not adequate to meet the demands of everyday life.

The International Numeracy Survey, comparing the basic numeracy skills of adults ages sixteen to sixty in seven countries (the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Japan, Australia, and Denmark) found that U.K. respondents performed the least well; only 20 percent accurately completed all twelve tasks. Overall, the U.K. respondents achieved an average of 7.9 correctly completed tasks, while all other nations in the survey achieved an average of 9 or more (BSA, 1997b). "Comparisons between the skill and educational capacity of our workforce with those of our principal competitors quickly established that, broadly speaking, our workforce was worse educated and worse trained than our competitors" (Atkinson & Spilsbury, 1993, p. 9).

An ALBSU survey in 1989 estimated that about 500,000 people in England and Wales who did not speak English as their native tongue needed help to speak, understand, and read or write English (this is less than 1 percent of the total population). Forty percent of the nonnative English-speaking population said they could read and write English only a little or not at all. Almost 30 percent said they had real difficulty understanding or speaking English.

One clear trend in the numbers is the increase in program enrollment. In 1973 only 5,000 people were receiving help with reading and writing in England and Wales. By 1985 the total had risen to 110,000 (see ALBSU, 1985), and by 1995–1996, 319,402 people were receiving help with literacy and numeracy in England (BSA, 1997a). The assistance they received can be broken down as follows:15

Literacy only: 108,813  
Numeracy only: 43,035  
Literacy and numeracy: 79,437  
ESOL: 88,117

These figures compare with an estimated 6 million people in need of help.

The Basic Skills Agency does not collect statistics on gender participation in ABE. However, a gender breakdown is available for the two-thirds of ABE learners who study in the further education colleges. These figures show somewhat more women than men in the middle and older age groups. Table 7.1 shows the breakdown by gender of the basic education student population studying in further education colleges (205,200 students) in 1995–1996 (FEFC, 1998).

Another measure by which the system's ability to meet adult learners' educational needs can be judged is progression and dropout rates. The notion of dropping out is a complex one requiring flexibility in program definitions, since many part-time students attend irregularly and drop back in to courses at a later date, depending on the other demands in their lives. The most comprehensive figures about progression and dropout rates from the 1998 FEFC report cover only ABE students enrolled in further education colleges in England. This report estimates that 81 percent of ABE students stay to the end of the course, and of these, 60 percent achieve the qualifications or learning goals they were aiming for (FEFC, 1998).

A small-scale ALBSU 1992–1993 survey based on seven LEAs gives a more pessimistic picture and points out the dearth of information on outcomes (Kambouri & Francis, 1994). This study found that more than

half of the students enrolled in literacy and numeracy programs leave during the year-most of them during the first two or three weeks because they feel the course is unsuitable. One-third of learners progressed to further courses or into employment. Information about why students leave class is incomplete, and the survey also found a significant discrepancy between teacher and student reports on reasons for leaving. For example, teachers said that 10 percent of their students left for employment-related reasons, while more than 16 percent of their students said they left for such reasons.

A later study of ESOL learners found similar dropout rates (Kambouri, Toutounji, & Francis, 1996), although the rate was cut in half for intensive classes (seventeen to twenty-one hours per week) compared with part-time classes (two to six hours per week).

### **TOTAL FUNDING**

Total funding of ABE programs is hard to estimate. There is the dedicated government budget for basic skills, but further funding is hidden within other programs (for example, those offering more general training for unemployed groups and those partly funded by the European Union or other national and local government funds). The BSA budget (just over £5 million, or \$7.5 million), which used to be a good guide to spending on ABE, now covers basic skills in secondary schools as well. Estimates of the full costs of provision would be much higher than this.

The main source of funding for ABE is now the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), which in turn is funded by the Department for Education and Employment. The FEFC funds further education colleges through a complex formula based on the number of students who are enrolled, attending class, and gaining credentials. Other organizations may apply for FEFC funds to provide ABE services, but they must do so through a further education college, which then becomes a gateway to these funds.

Funding for prison education and ESOL for immigrants is distributed from the Home Office to LEAs, which offer services directly and further distribute funds to public, private, and voluntary organizations to provide the services. Some LEAs still support ABE services along with other adult education programs, but the scale of LEA basic skills programs is much diminished.

The BSA is nominally independent but is funded almost entirely by the central government for its monitoring and control functions, special projects, and research.

Special project funding is also available from other national and international sources. One source is single regeneration budget funds, provided by the central government to local partnerships in areas with a high level of economic and social problems. Within an area, different agencies compete with one another to bid for funds, and agencies offering educational services, such as literacy, must compete with social welfare and housing projects. The short-term nature of such project-based funding (contracts are often reviewed and renewed on a yearly basis) creates insecurity among staff and discourages long-term planning.

European Union funds are particularly important for innovative community-based projects. The European Union focuses on particular target groups, such as women, migrant groups, and unemployed youth. Women's organizations and communities with high unemployment have particularly benefited. Special funding is available to Northern Ireland through the European Union's Peace and Reconciliation program. Exchanges and visits between students and teachers in different European Union countries are often part of such programs, reflecting the effort to create a new European identity. Massive paperwork demands and requirements for matching funds create problems for small community groups.

Since 1992, many ABE programs, including nonvocational community initiatives, have relied increasingly on funding that combines the above sources with others, such as the national lottery, philanthropic foundations, and corporations.

### **THE SYSTEM AT WORK TODAY**

The many faceted system for the provision of adult education is the product of all the forces that came before it: from the earliest literacy campaigns to shifts in the overall economy to the diminished power of local governments and education authorities to fluctuations in the amount and nature of funding. This section represents our attempt—given the limitations on space in this one chapter—to portray ABE as it is today. For a start, Exhibit 7.1 lists the types of organizations providing ABE programs and provides a breakdown of the overall number of ABE programs and the percentage of ABE learners in each.

#### **National Organizations**

Over the years, the government has exerted strong pressures on literacy programs for accountability, quality control, and accreditation. It exerts these pressures by means of the BSA, whose primary mission is development: "We provide a wide range of organizations with advice and support to develop high quality programs to help children, young people and adults to improve their basic skills" (BSA, n.d.). Closely associated

with this mission is its role in quality assurance: as mentioned earlier, it has established a quality mark for basic skills programs for adults. The BSA has developed in-service qualifications for basic skills teachers but does not itself provide staff development. It also supports research into the level of need and effectiveness of basic skills programs.

The BSA's mission currently overlaps somewhat with that of the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), which provides further education colleges in England and Wales with services to promote quality, guide curriculum design and development, and enhance effective governance and management. It offers resources, research, technical assistance, and staff development across the whole range of further education (including basic skills). The FEDA, for example, is developing its own good practice guidelines for basic skills work in colleges and organizes seminars for staff working in ABE.

The National Literacy Trust (NLT) was launched in 1993 with the twofold aims of encouraging more reading and writing for pleasure and improving literacy standards across the United Kingdom. It is supported by corporate and foundation sponsors and has established a central information service with a large database. The trust also publishes a newsletter highlighting the full range of cradle-to-grave literacy-related activities. The NLT works with the media and encourages partnerships with other cultural organizations (libraries, publishers, newspapers, the British Film Institute, arts councils) and with charities and businesses to find ways in which all of these groups can put their resources to work for literacy in local communities. One of its main strengths is its freedom to work across the boundaries imposed by funding streams and mission statements.

The National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is the national organization for adult learning. It has a broad mandate to advance the interests of adult learners generally and to work with government, education providers, Training and Enterprise Councils, employers, and voluntary associations to promote equal opportunity access to lifelong learning. In its original form, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit was a subsidiary of the NIACE but later became independent. As a result, the NIACE has had only minor involvement in basic skills education, except as it relates to lifelong learning.

Professional associations, such as the National Association of Teachers of English, the National Association of Teachers of English and Community Languages to Adults, and the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education all have some interest in working with staff involved with adult basic skills education.

The RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy) Network is the only membership organization devoted to adult literacy that operates across the whole of the United Kingdom. It is quite small (with around three hundred members) and is run almost entirely by volunteers. The Workplace Basic Skills Network, made up of practitioners and others involved in workplace basic skills training, aims to pool information, ideas, and best practices. It runs regular seminars throughout the United Kingdom and publishes a newsletter. There is currently no national association for ABE students.

### **Research**

Although the research base on adult literacy in the United Kingdom has grown since the early 1980s, it has had a limited impact on practice. The BSA limits itself to "research into the scale and characteristics of basic skills need and the effectiveness of basic skills programs" (BSA, 1995). It has tended to fund quantitative, policy-driven research that assumes, rather than explores, the needs and interests of learners and communities. Researchers in universities, often in partnership with practitioners, have been developing alternative notions of literacy as social practice, an approach that has become known as the new literacy studies (Mace, 1993; Barton, 1994; Street, 1995; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). These ideas form the underpinnings of much community-responsive literacy work, especially among nongovernmental voluntary organizations in the United Kingdom and internationally.

This cultural approach to literacy emphasizes the significance of local contexts and purposes to literacy students, but it has not found a sympathetic climate in government policy circles. The entrenched views of the media reporting on literacy and the traditionally distant and mistrustful relationship between higher education and ABE practice in the United Kingdom have made it difficult for this new research to reach and influence mainstream practice.

### **Service Delivery**

ABE services are delivered in a variety of ways. The examples presented here are not necessarily meant to be typical of the kinds of programs available but rather to indicate the broad range of activities and services in which adult students can participate.

**FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES.** About two-thirds of the approximately 320,000 ABE students in England and Wales are in further education colleges, with less than a quarter in LEA programs—a reversal of the proportions at the start of the 1990s (BSA, 1997a). At the same time that colleges have assumed greater responsibility for the provision of specific basic skills courses, they have also developed their basic skills support of students engaged in other courses. An FE/DA staff

person suggested that about 80 percent of students in further education colleges in London need basic skills support (Ursula Howard, personal communication). These are often sixteen to nineteen year olds enrolled in vocational courses. Given the huge need for basic skills education for younger students, it is tempting for colleges to redirect their basic skills effort toward these students rather than focus on the adults in the wider community (FEFC, 1998).

The diversity of further education colleges makes it difficult to illustrate the situation with a single example. Some remain focused on their traditional role of providing vocational education for school leavers in the age group sixteen to nineteen. Others, like Knowsley College, are much more actively involved in their communities, offering innovative programming for students of all ages.

Knowsley College, located near Liverpool, has traditionally focused on students sixteen to nineteen years old, but now concerns itself with a wider range of students. It manages the Learning in Neighborhood Centers (LINC) program, originally funded by a bequest from a company that had been a major local employer but later pulled out of the area. The program is now run jointly by the college and the LEA, with support from the European Union.

The aim of the LINC program is to make adult education and training accessible in the heart of local communities. Part-time courses are run in a range of centers, including primary and secondary schools, churches and community centers, and college campuses. The basic education program includes courses on English improvement, math, computer skills, local history, creative writing, ESOL, and parenting. LINC also includes a range of nonvocational courses on subjects such as textile crafts, health and beauty, assertiveness, music, and computers. There is a full-time Return to Learn program for women as well as other courses designed to prepare all students for progression within further and higher education. LINC employs a team of outreach workers who talk to people in their communities and work with other organizations in Knowsley to develop new courses. Courses are free and offer accreditation through the Merseyside Open College Federation and other national accreditation systems (Hamilton, Machell, & McHugh, 1997).

**LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES.** LEAs have been influential in ABE in the past, and some have continued to be significant providers as well as funders of services. The range of activities available is enormous, and some are quite traditional in their approaches. A variety of local government-funded agencies whose primary function is not education are involved in basic education, such as homeless organizations, foyers (housing and job placement services for young unemployed people),

housing associations, and health centers. After the period following the 1992 ABE legislation, during which ABE was forced to move out of such venues, these partnerships are again becoming more popular. A BSA spokesperson told us, "There is the idea that basic skills should be in a lot of other agencies, maybe with the support of basic skills people—you have to be there 'at the right moment' for people, when literacy becomes of importance to them."

One example of an innovative partnership is Read On Write Away! (ROWA!), a literacy campaign initiated by an LEA in Derbyshire that aims to develop a more literate community by coordinating initiatives in different institutions and groups. ROWA! is a partnership between two LEAs, two Training and Enterprise Councils, and two national literacy agencies (the BSA and the National Literacy Trust), which together bid for funding from the single regeneration budget. In its first year, 1997, ROWA! sponsored a series of consultative forums to bring together representatives from all local agencies involved in literacy efforts with different groups in the community. As a result of these consultations, ROWA! has developed five initiatives: books for babies, family literacy, reading interventions in primary and secondary schools, vocationally related basic skills work with unemployed adults, and basic skills courses in workplaces. Each of the five initiatives works toward a well-defined set of objectives and has built-in staff development, research, and evaluation components. ROWA! aims to reach across the age range from birth to ninety and to offer the best possible opportunities for all members of the community who have literacy needs.

LEAs also have responsibility for basic skills services in prisons. Prisoners account for about 12 percent of basic skills students (BSA, 1997a). Educational programs in prison have been contracted out to a variety of training providers, including some U.S. organizations (BSA, 1994). All incoming prisoners are given the BSA screening test to determine their level of literacy and are then offered Wordpower or Numberpower or an Open College alternative accreditation.

Literacy programs organized by community-based voluntary organizations have been hit hard by the shift in funding away from LEAs to further education colleges. Although they survive and continue to make innovative contributions, these groups have become increasingly marginalized as the state-funded sector has grown stronger. BSA statistics suggest that these kinds of services currently reach a tiny proportion of basic skills students in England and Wales (around 2 percent). However, it is difficult to document the full extent of such services because they are not part of statutory services and may not even use the term basic skills to describe what they do. Many of these organizations work with ethnic and cultural minority groups, adults with

special learning needs, addicts, the mentally ill, ex-offenders, rural and inner-city populations, older adults, and young people who are alienated from mainstream services. Two very different examples of innovative, community-based programs are the one at Pecket Well College and an ESOL program working in an untraditional venue.

Pecket Well residential college for adults opened in 1992 in a rural area near Halifax in the north of England. Courses are run for and by students, and the college welcomes adults with physical or learning disabilities. The college was created by a small group of people committed to principles of democratic learning that show themselves at all levels of college operations: learning methods, course design, relationships between workshop leaders and participants (who at different points in time may be the same people), management, and community outreach.

One of Pecket Well's strengths is its emphasis on developing a public voice for students through collectively documenting and publishing the writing they do in courses (Pecket Well, 1994, 1995). In this, the college is supported by a national network, the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, which hosts both national events and exchanges contacts and ideas with other groups and organizations that promote student writing.

The college raises money for its activities from a range of sources, including trusts and the European Community. So far it has been able to operate independently, but even so it cannot escape the effects of bigger changes in policy. Increasingly, it is under pressure from funders to fit learners into particular target categories and to measure learning outcomes in terms that funders will recognize.

The ESOL project, based in London, is funded by short-term grants from multiple sources (currently two LEAs, a TEC, and single regeneration budget funding). The project has two part-time, temporary, basic skills teachers and one vocational guidance worker who is shared with another project. It is based in a community center, on the ground floor of one of the housing blocks in a public housing complex where there is a high crime rate, a large number of refugees, and many incidents of racial abuse. Other projects share the facilities, including a dance project for disabled people, a day care center, a play group, and a vocational guidance service. ESOL students make up 80 percent of those in the literacy project and originate from twelve countries. The literacy project responds to the needs of these students, who want advice on civil rights, welfare, and immigration issues. Also, because many of the students have mental health problems, it has been important to establish an atmosphere of trust and emotional safety before any learning takes place.

Teachers feel isolated and ill prepared by their training to address the problems their students bring to them and to do the outreach work necessary to make the project successful. The teachers have no support network and have access to few of the resources enjoyed by college-based programs. Yet they believe they are doing essential work with a group of people who are hard to reach by any other means (Deigan & McArthur, 1997).

**WORKPLACE PROGRAMS.** A number of ABE programs have been developed at large and medium-sized companies-some initiated by the employers themselves, some by outside training providers, and some by trade unions. It is hard to put a precise figure on the number of such programs, but according to the BSA (1997a), they constitute less than 1 percent of all basic skills provision. Frank and Hamilton (1993) describe a range of case studies of workplace programs in both the private and public sectors. Broad-based employee development schemes, similar to those instituted by Ford, have been set up in some major companies. These schemes encourage employees to get involved in a wide variety of learning activities-vocational, academic, and recreational-and provide access to basic skills courses (Beattie, 1997).

Trade unions have been involved with promoting basic skills in the workplace since the beginning of the literacy campaign in the early 1970s, although their contribution has always made up a small part of basic skills work (Mace & Yarnit, 1987). UNISON (this is not an acronym), the public employees union, has developed its own Open College accreditation framework, which includes a program of basic skills courses in partnership with WORKBASE (UNISON, 1994). WORKBASE is an organization of consultants set up by a trade union in the 1980s to carry out training needs analyses in the workplace and to custom-design courses for business. It has a range of other educational partners and has developed a widely used collaborative methodology for setting up workplace programs (Bonnerjea, 1987; Bonnerjea & Freud, 1988).

Training and Enterprise Councils are local business-led consortia that receive funding from the central Department for Education and Employment (and other sources) to provide courses for unemployed people. Usually they subcontract these services to private training organizations. Two major programs exist: one for unemployed sixteen to seventeen year olds and another for unemployed adults.

**FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS.** The BSA family literacy initiative established in 1993 included five demonstration projects that have been extensively evaluated (Brooks, Gorman, Harman, Hutchison, & Wilkin, 1996). The aims of the family literacy programs, which are

mainly located in or near primary schools, are to improve the literacy of both children and parents and to increase parents' capacity to help their children with reading and writing. They typically involve some joint learning sessions for parents and children and some separate ones. The evaluation of the demonstration projects found that 96 percent of the parents participating were mothers, most between the ages of twenty and thirty-four. The parental dropout rate was low, at 9 percent, and 95 percent of parents who completed the course gained a qualification. Children also progressed on a variety of literacy measures.

Although they currently constitute only 2 percent of ABE programs, family literacy programs have been a high-profile development. One report recommends that these programs be expanded to the point where every infant (preprimary) and primary school in disadvantaged areas has one by the year 2002 (Moser, 1999).

**COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS.** Recently an assortment of collaborative partnerships has been developed between adult education and other statutory agencies (documented in the National Literacy Trust database). One such is a literacy project for sixteen to twenty-five year olds in partnership with the government-funded Youth Service, which organizes leisure and vocationally related activities for people in this age group. The practitioners working on these pilot projects, supported by corporate funding and operating in ten different locations around England, have developed innovative ways of encouraging young people who are unemployed, alienated, and disenfranchised to develop literacy skills, using such stepping-off points as pop music, car maintenance, and video production.

### **FLASHPOINTS AND EVALUATIONS FROM THE FIELD**

A flashpoint is created when there are strongly held but conflicting points of view on an issue of importance. Different parties may disagree on the true nature of the issue or on how to change it. Often people with different roles have different perspectives. We identified such flashpoints in our interviews in 1996-1997 with thirty-five professionals in the field: teachers, local program managers, and staff with national organizations. A discussion with practitioners at the 1997 RaPAL conference clarified and refined the flashpoints. Here we focus on accreditation of learners, professionalization of teachers, the efforts among stakeholders to form partnerships while at the same time having to compete for funds, and the changing culture of ABE.

#### **Accreditation of Learners**

Learner accreditation (the award of a credential for work completed) has become a flashpoint for many practitioners because they accept its purpose but are uncomfortable with its dominant forms and its impact on

students and teachers.

**BACKGROUND.** In the late 1980s the ALBSU developed national accreditation for adult basic education learners: Wordpower (for literacy) and Numberpower (for numeracy). These schemes were consistent with the framework of NVQs, which had been developed to harmonize both academic and vocational qualifications and to simplify the mazelike world of postcompulsory education and training. Like NVQs, Wordpower and Numberpower are based on a national set of standards that identifies competencies. The competencies are organized by level—for example (ALBSU and Institute of Manpower Studies, 1993):

#### Foundation Level

- Use and act on a simple text (up to six sentences or one paragraph)
- Write a short simple note or letter conveying up to two separate ideas
- Use a simple list

#### Level 1

- Understand and act on a graphical source up to one page long (for example, a town map)
- Write reports, letters, or notes conveying up to four separate ideas
- Consult a reference source to obtain simple information (for example, the Yellow Pages)

#### Level 2

- Choose and use appropriate materials from more than one written source
- Complete an open-ended form (for example, an accident report form)
- Use a reference system to obtain specific information (for example, find a book in a library)

#### Level 3

- Select and evaluate material from several graphical sources for a specific need
- Write material in a variety of appropriate styles and formats according to need
- Select and use appropriate reference systems for a purpose (for example, research an issue)

Wordpower is a framework of performance indicators based on these standards, which assess reading and writing, speaking and listening. Wordpower is organized in stages that match the levels of the standards, from Foundation through Stage 3. Each stage has a set of fifteen to sixteen elements to be demonstrated, divided into sections on addressing reading, writing, and oral language (and in Stage 3 also study skills). Following are examples of the elements to be demonstrated at Stages 1 and 2 in Wordpower:

#### Stage 1

- Provide information to one person (Unit 308 E1)
- Convey information and opinions in writing (Unit 305 E2)
- Extract information and meaning from a variety of written sources (Unit 304 E1)

#### Stage 2

- Provide introductions and farewells (Unit 309 E1)
- Convey information in writing-report writing (Unit 308 E2)
- Evaluate an argument in a piece of writing (Unit 307 E2)

Students build up a portfolio to demonstrate mastery of each element in a stage. There is choice of content in the sense that elements such as "make a phone call" and "write a short note" can be demonstrated in any context: work, home, or community. The portfolios are then examined by an independent "assessor" who is paid by the accrediting agency, the City and Guilds.<sup>16</sup>

Performance indicators provide a snapshot of the knowledge and skills a learner has at a particular moment in time. The Basic Skills Accreditation Initiative, which designed the Wordpower/Numberpower scheme, intended it to be applied flexibly:

[There is] no prescribed teaching course or time limit. There are no set tasks to perform so the learner-centered approach can be readily accommodated. Students or trainees work at their own pace and activities may be chosen which relate to individual needs and interests. Most important of all, the student can be fully involved, at all stages, in deciding what needs to be done and how to go about it. [Hulin, n.d., p. 6]

An alternative to Wordpower and Numberpower, which dominate learner accreditation, especially in the further education sector, is the Open College Network, a system of regional accrediting networks designed as a pathway to higher education. Institutions can apply to have a specific

course accredited, declaring how they will verify student competence in certain skills and knowledge. The Open College Network also has a set of standards that allow it to place skills and knowledge within a consistent framework.

Although accreditation is not specifically required by legislation, most classes do involve learners who are working toward a certificate of some kind, especially in the further education sector. Further education colleges benefit financially from accreditation, because part of the complex government funding formula for further education is based on the number of students gaining a credential. The BSA's quality standards for programs also require that learners have access to accreditation (but not that all learners must be working toward accreditation).

**PERSPECTIVES.** Accreditation addresses policymakers' concerns about accountability and control of program outcomes. Most practitioners accept that many students want credentials, both to boost their self-confidence and to gain access to further training and education. The tensions lie in the way the system actually works and in the impact it has on teachers and students.

Part of the rationale for the framework of performance indicators is that it serves as a clear conceptual map for both teachers and learners as to what is expected to be taught and learned in basic skills programs. As one staff member at a national organization told us, "People should know where they are going and how long to expect it to take." The U.K. road map for learners focuses on everyday literacy activities, such as writing letters and reading for information. It differs radically from the academic roots of the General Education Development (GED) credential, which is derived from what U.S. high school students are taught. The portfolio approach enables students to choose real-life literacy activities to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. One teacher told us about a man who used the work he did in planning his daughter's wedding in his Wordpower portfolio.

With Wordpower and Numberpower being such powerful drivers of the field, it seems odd that their definitions of competency should be rooted in obscurity. Most practitioners we talked with did not know the process by which competencies were identified and validated, whether they are based on theory and research, or how they might be modified to keep them up-to-date.

Some practitioners were concerned about the conception of literacy embedded in Wordpower as a set of skills, with learning then becoming the accumulation of discrete competencies. Newer literacy research emphasizes practices rather than skills and sees these as embedded in

broader social and cultural settings (Mace, 1993; Barton, 1994; Street, 1995; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Literacy practices are intrinsically shaped by power relationships. Some practitioners argue that literacy education should support learners in critically examining their own and society's literacy practices. The Wordpower approach to literacy in terms of skills inhibits critical reflection. One national organization leader told us, "At its best, it's just another tool, not an inhibitor of learning-but at its worst, it narrows the world into a mean place."

Many practitioners expressed concerns about the practice of learner accreditation. Rather than a clearly understood road map for learners, competency frameworks seem to some practitioners to be so complex that they foster learner dependency on teachers. Some practitioners noted particular issues for certain students. The foundation stage, designed for people with learning difficulties or disabilities, is seen as insulting to other adults. Several practitioners said that because Wordpower assumes native English speaking, cultural knowledge, and familiarity with grammar, ESOL students are always kept at the bottom levels.

Time issues were of concern for both learners and teachers. Although the idea that the time individual learners take to advance through levels should be open-ended would seem inherent to the portfolio approach, in practice there is a strong push to move students on quickly because of funding formulas. Practitioners repeatedly voiced their frustrations about the heavy demands that the paperwork of accreditation places on their time. Tracking learners' progress is time-consuming. Not only are different learners within a class at different levels, but individuals may be at different levels in different skill areas. The framework tends to assume that each learner has oral, written, and reading skills at the same level, but in practice this is not so.

Student accreditation issues are linked with another flashpoint: teacher accreditation. Inexperienced and inadequately trained teachers look for a curriculum to guide their teaching, and although the accreditation framework was not intended to serve as a curriculum, that is what it often becomes. Teaching then consists of "checking off the boxes" of the accreditation tool rather than helping students identify and master what they want to learn. We were often told that highly skilled, experienced, and creative teachers could create a good curriculum that also provides learners with accreditation. But the problems with provision of teacher training in Britain mean that many teachers are not highly capable. One practitioner told us, "Wordpower is not the worst thing that has happened, but you have to think hard to find creative ways of teaching with Wordpower."

The role of assessors and verifiers can also be problematic for teachers.

They provide external validity, but they are seen as interpreting their role in different and inconsistent ways. Some assessors, perhaps inadequately trained, are seen by teachers as less flexible than others in their interpretation of when a competency has been demonstrated.

For learners, a vital issue is that Wordpower credentials appear to have no currency in the labor market. Indeed, some teachers told us they advise students not to put their Wordpower certificates on their r sum  because it would label them as a literacy student and thus put them at a disadvantage. We heard a story about one literacy program manager who was unwilling even to interview a candidate for a secretarial job in the program because she had a Wordpower certificate.

**LESSONS FOR THE UNITED STATES.** The NVQ approach that underlies Wordpower and Numberpower has strengths from which U.S. adult basic education could draw. It is tied to everyday use of literacy and numeracy rather than an academic framework of what children are expected to learn in school. It lays out a clear set of expectations for teaching and learning that spread from foundation levels of literacy to more advanced levels. It enables students to demonstrate what they know and can do from the beginning and to build up tangible evidence of their accomplishments in their portfolio. This is unlike the U.S. system, in which the GED can be a distant goal, with no intermediate credentials except in states that have adopted basic skills certificates. The portfolio approach combines flexibility and individual choice with national standards and reporting.

The United States can also learn from the problems associated with this approach to accreditation. Teacher training in particular is a crucial aspect of the system that has been neglected. When working in an open framework, teachers need solid training that will allow them to develop the confidence, knowledge, and skills needed to create good teaching practices. They need the theoretical understanding of literacy to help students reflect critically on literacy practices.

### **Professionalization of Teachers**

There is increasing demand from government for a more professional (that is, trained and accountable) workforce, and practitioners often support this. But many practitioners are concerned about the amount and form of teacher training provision, the lack of a professional organization to give them voice in national policy matters, and an apparent contradiction between the demand for trained and credentialed teachers and the actual working conditions offered.

**BACKGROUND.** According to the BSA's quality standards, all teachers in a program should be trained "to nationally recognized standards." The

dominant teacher accreditation framework parallels that for literacy learners (via Wordpower and Numberpower). Both draw on the NVQ model of a competency framework, demonstration portfolio, and external verification. Both are based on ALBSU-developed standards and mesh with NVQ levels. Both provide opportunities to document experience and learning. Both are administered by the City and Guilds organization.

Yet despite the BSA recommendations for certified teachers, there is no standard provision or funding set-aside for teacher training, and in-service training is left to the discretion of each institution. Initial teacher training is at a minimal level; one national organization staff person said it "stops you from being dangerous." Advancing in skills and understanding is left up to individual teachers on their own time or, haphazardly, to their employers.

Perhaps related to the lack of consistency in teacher training is the lack of teacher organization and representation. Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom has no national membership organization devoted to the representation of ABE staff. The NIACE is a membership organization, but it is more broadly concerned with the general interests of adult educators than with those of basic skills teachers in particular, and it has no remittance on literacy and language concerns. The major voice in basic skills policy outside the government, the BSA, is not a membership organization and receives the bulk of its funding from the government. Deputy director Annabel Hemstedt says that although she sees the BSA's role as being "in partnership with the field, sometimes we have to do things that are not popular with the field, because that is our job as national leader" (personal communication).

Other organizations with visibility at the national level are not membership organizations and are not accountable to the field of ABE. An example is the National Literacy Trust, which is accountable to its board of trustees. RaPAL is the only national membership organization specifically for literacy practitioners, and because it has no external funding, it remains small. Practitioners have had little systematic input into ABE policy changes and have few opportunities to meet. The local and regional networks developed in the 1970s and 1980s, which brought together practitioners (and often students) for training, exchange of ideas and approaches, and discussion of policy, were virtually destroyed when the LEAs were dismantled as the main providers of ABE.

ABE has always had a marginalized status within education. Its mostly female workforce helps explain the poor conditions of service and the part-time nature of most teaching jobs. The institutionalization of ABE within the further education sector might have been expected to lead to better working conditions, greater job security, and more full-time jobs.

But the statistics still suggest that only one in ten adult literacy or numeracy staff in England and Wales is full time (BSA, 1997c). Further education colleges are more likely to have full-time staff, though often as managers, with teachers still working part-time.

Pressure to cut costs, now that further education colleges are expected to behave as businesses, means that local negotiations have replaced national bargaining for wages and working conditions. Increasingly, staff are provided by private agencies who hire teachers on a temporary basis. One practitioner commented that when the European Union decided part-timers should get the same conditions of service as full-timers, "Some colleges didn't want to pay them holiday and sick leave, so they sacked all their part-timers, and then hired them back through an agency. They're all now self-employed. Instead of getting £15 an hour [about \$24], they're getting £10 an hour [about \$16]. Everyone is so beaten up they will accept anything."

Funding cuts associated with the shift of ABE to the further education sector have particularly affected staff in voluntary organizations. Many now depend on project-based funding, which is often short term and insecure, while also providing few resources for staff development. The use of volunteers in the field has long been a source of tension, and although their numbers are declining, volunteers continue to provide substantial support.

There are a few new models of volunteer involvement. In the Sheffield Black Literacy campaign, for example, young people of color are trained and accredited so that they can get on a track to higher education and serve as volunteer outreach workers in their own communities (Gurnah, 1997).

**PERSPECTIVES.** As with learner accreditation, there seems to be widespread agreement on the theory of teacher professionalism but disagreements over its practice. National policy organizations and teachers have different perspectives. While the BSA sees teacher certification as an essential element of high-quality programs, a number of practitioners have concerns that have not been addressed by the BSA—about the theoretical underpinnings of certification and the gap between the high level of sophistication needed to teach in an open learner accreditation framework and the minimal level of the actual qualifications.

One experienced teacher suggested that the process of certification should have a more philosophical and theoretical underpinning: "Whilst 'how to' training is vital, it needs to be balanced with 'why?' and 'in what context?' but also 'for what purpose?' and 'to whose advantage?'"

To many practitioners, the competency framework of the teaching certificates, like that for learners, is a mechanistic, incremental approach to skills and knowledge. Another teacher said that dividing teaching into tiny bits without an overarching theoretical context is a mistake. "You can end up with structured assignments in order to tick the boxes. In the end, something designed to assess your practice actually assesses your literacy and study skills." One teacher-trainer said of the City and Guilds certificates: "You could be a lousy teacher and still pass." They certify minimal qualifications rather than full professional growth and development.

A strong approach to teacher training is particularly important for managing the very sophisticated learner accreditation approach introduced with Wordpower and Numberpower. Again and again practitioners told us that creative teachers can do a good job with Wordpower but that the kind of training and support now provided cannot be relied on to produce good, creative teachers. "The more creative people can see how to fit what we're doing around it," a practitioner explained. "For others, Wordpower is very atomized-how does it all fit together? There is an advantage for inexperienced tutors: it gave them an agenda, told them what needs to be addressed. But the agenda is too narrow. There's a desperate need for training for people to use the accreditation system to meet student needs."

Problems with training are exacerbated by the lack of ongoing opportunities to learn from other teachers. Now that regional networks have almost disappeared, in-service training happens within institutions (if at all). We heard practitioners say, "There is no meeting with others, no discussing, sharing ideas." The important thing lost is the staff networking. Another said, "People feel very cut off. People are reinventing the wheel-a whole body of knowledge is being lost because it isn't being passed on."

The BSA has a different perspective on the regional networks, which it once funded. A BSA staff person argued that the networks did not work well: "We found that access and effectiveness were poor-the same people went to everything, and not all providers took part." The BSA now focuses instead on its quality standards as a way to ensure that each program meets minimum standards of teacher certification.

The national emphasis on professionalism is at odds with another part of the picture: a marginalized workforce. Some practitioners told us their job is increasingly fragmented and consumed with "busyness." As paperwork has increased, teachers have less time to plan and teach well. But there are few complaints, because many fear losing their jobs, given the restructuring of colleges and other institutions to meet funding

constraints. "There's a lot of passivity," someone told us. "Everyone is scared about losing their job, everyone is doing three people's jobs, and they can't, so they feel guilty about it." The BSA sees the credentials as a way of increasing the value of these marginalized workers, emphasizing the skills and training required to teach ABE. That payoff is not yet apparent, though it may still come. Without a strong professional organization, however, teachers will not acquire a national voice, and they will have no formal place at the table during policy consultation.

**LESSONS FOR THE UNITED STATES.** The approach to teacher training in the United Kingdom, based on a portfolio of demonstrated competencies, should be of interest in the United States. Rather than depending on experienced teachers enrolling in college courses (which are themselves subject to little quality control and may have only indirect application to ABE practice), the model allows teachers to demonstrate what they know. However, it also suffers from the same potential problems as the student accreditation approach: the dangers of dividing a holistic ability-teaching-into so many little skills and bits of knowledge that the whole gets lost. But the consistency of approach with learner accreditation is a strength, and the national scope of the accreditation system allows teacher movement and flexibility. It may also increase the value and status of ABE teachers in the long run, although that is not yet clear.

The British system does not appear to be as strong as the U.S. system in its provision for ongoing professional development. Staff development depends on each institution, and there are few opportunities for British teachers to meet and learn from one another across institutions.

The absence of a strong voice in the field at a national level in England should lead U.S. practitioners to value their tradition of advocacy and recognize it as an essential part of a high-quality system of ABE. Perhaps the United States will be able to avoid the contradictions the United Kingdom faces as its emphasis on professionalism increases while the working conditions for many staff continue to deteriorate. However, many ABE and ESOL teachers in the United States already feel like migrant workers, moving from class to class with little institutional attachment. Like many of their students, they are part of the growing global trend toward contingent workforces that offer temporary jobs with low pay.

### **Partnerships and Competition**

In our discussions with practitioners and policymakers alike, ideas about partnership were on everyone's lips. However, at the same time that partnerships are encouraged for the purpose of coordinating local services, funding and governance structures for ABE actively promote

competition between providers, the very antithesis of partnership. The resulting tensions have been problematic for responsive and democratic service provision.

**BACKGROUND.** Partnerships have been encouraged by central government policy over the 1990s. Adult literacy educators have forged links between the voluntary and statutory sectors, between different education and training sectors (such as schools and ABE through family literacy programs), between further and higher education (for example, through concerns for students who find academic writing difficult), and between education and training providers and the workplace. There are also links with vocational training and other further education courses.

However, the legal and financial governance of ABE, established by the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, encourages competition between providers, replacing a more cooperative culture in which expertise and other resources were shared with an expectation that learning institutions will behave like businesses. Further education colleges have been designated the primary receiver of government funding for ABE, and local coordination by LEAs has been dismantled. Colleges compete with each other for students and so are unable to share information or develop referral systems that would put the interests of students first. One practitioner describes the situation in her college in this way: "We are a small college in a competitive area. There is no LEA, community-based adult education left, and there are many colleges competing for students. This makes cooperative referrals more difficult."

As one observer pointed out, "Against a background of thinly spread educational resources, widespread social deprivation, and educational underachievement, the idea of encouraging competition between educational institutions makes little sense" (Reeves et al., 1993, p. 10).

**PERSPECTIVES.** Although everyone seems to agree on the desirability of genuine partnerships, the difficulty of achieving them lies in the breakdown of earlier networks and the competition between educational providers. Even the BSA acknowledges that "the effects of the [Further and Higher Education] Act have been fragmentation," but the agency also sees a good side, claiming that more agencies are now involved in organizing a wider range of learning opportunities for more students than ever before. The claim is not verifiable, for although student numbers have grown over the 1990s, there are few data on the range of agencies involved in provision of services.

At the time the act was passed, the Conservative government saw competition as a way of livening up moribund educational institutions and freeing them to develop enough independence to innovate. There is

some acknowledgment that this has happened for at least some institutions: "Good further education colleges are operating with a new spirit of freedom and being entrepreneurial," said one staff member at the National Literacy Trust. But there have been costs for other institutions, particularly in terms of local coordination. A number of practitioners vividly described the unintended consequences of this strategy: difficulty in referrals between institutions that are competing for student numbers to boost their own funding, difficulty in joint community-wide planning and coordination, and the decimation of the fragile community-based program sector.

Another practitioner describes the effects of reorganization on her program, which is located in a multiethnic area: "Our service has been reorganized as a business unit, and inevitably this has changed the relationship of the service to the community as a whole. The days when we could develop provision-whether community based or in formal institutions-in equal partnership with community workers are well and truly over."

The voluntary sector has been particularly hard hit by the reorganization of funding in 1992 and the new base for ABE in the further education sector. Voluntary organizations have found their funding base to be increasingly fragile. Neil McLelland, director of the National Literacy Trust, says, "The voluntary sector was decimated. They were able to offer flexible response to local needs, but they were never properly funded from that point onward." It is not surprising that these fragile groups have found it most difficult to establish effective and equal partnerships.

The local and regional networks that used to be an important part of informal cooperation have been dismantled in the face of competition for students and funding. People affiliated with different projects may keep in touch by informal means, but they often feel isolated or invisible. As one practitioner said, "We don't have connections with each other-no networks, no time. I used to feel in the center; now I feel marginalized."

When they speak of partnerships, policymakers usually mean learning institutions, not the learners and communities of which they are a part. There is no national organization that represents the views of ABE students, although some local programs have student councils and management committees on which ABE students are represented. Students may not be aware of the ways in which the courses they arrive at are funded and organized, although there are some examples of student groups' mobilizing to save programs threatened with closure.

Practitioners and learners usually find themselves to be the least powerful

players in unequal partnerships. Dominant partners are typically colleges and schools, and as a result, formal, school-oriented agendas are more powerful than community development agendas. As an organization brokering these partnerships, the National Literacy Trust is well aware of these inequalities. Its director told us, "The school sector dominates all. The bits of adult education remaining in LEAs are low status, powerless in decisions and in budgeting. They are the first to get hit to protect the school sector." Such problems highlight the need for adult learners and practitioners to have an effective voice to lobby for their interests.

**LESSONS FOR THE UNITED STATES.** Partnership, like community, is a positive term that implies some level of consensus and equality between parties. However, some partners are patently less equal than others. There are significant power differentials between the school and business lobbies on the one hand and community-based ABE programs on the other. The agendas of some partners are more visible and influential than others and come to dominate the provision of services. This is as true in the United States as it is in England, although there has been less emphasis in the United States on either partnership or competition in the ABE structure.

The lack of strategic local planning that has resulted from British government policy is starting to be remedied. An increasing number of initiatives are starting up with the goal of finding ways to bring people together. An FEDA staff person told us that "the colleges' initial euphoria at being set free from LEAs wore off, and they saw there had been a useful role of regional planning. And the colleges want to be recognized as major players in regional development."

To be effective, partnerships must be supported by stable networks at many levels, which can address inequalities of power and capacity. In particular, there is a need to sustain voluntary organizations in the community as a vital link between top and bottom. England had to learn the hard way a lesson about the vital role of community-based provision and the need to support and promote egalitarian partnerships that include learners and practitioners. As the provisions of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 begin to take hold in the United States and the demands of performance accountability begin to affect its voluntary sector, the United States should take note of England's hard-earned lesson.

### **The Changing Culture of ABE**

People who have been involved with literacy work since the early campaign have seen a major shift in the culture of the field. Changes in accreditation, professional status, and the institutional location of ABE have inevitably led to changes in the discourse of literacy, what is defined as good or bad practice, and what counts as goals for literacy

work.

**BACKGROUND.** Literacy work in the United Kingdom has been shaped by several ideologies, which are often contradictory. Literacy education has been seen sometimes as emancipatory (literacy as empowerment of individuals and groups) and sometimes as a form of social control (literacy to develop a competitive workforce and families that support children's success in school). Sometimes literacy education has been seen as cultural missionary work (bringing the light of reading to the darkness of the illiterate) and sometimes as remediating deficits (derived from special education's ideas about filling developmental gaps). These contradictory ideologies continue to be reflected in institutions, policy, and practice, and they often coexist within a single program. As Street notes (1997), these ideologies reveal the contested nature of literacy by different interest groups. The balance of power between the different ideologies shifts as political climates change.

When the literacy campaign began, an ideology of emancipation (or empowerment) dominated. The approach was practical rather than theoretical or research driven, emphasizing student definitions of literacy needs and informal, democratic relationships between teachers and learners. There was little specialist training and few teaching materials, so practice was exploratory and improvised. "In the beginning it was well-meaning, do-gooding people volunteering," one practitioner explained. "We had a climate in the 1960s and 1970s with big literacy movements—a lot of emphasis not on literacy for vocational preparation but for self-fulfillment, empowerment, being somebody."

This early work emphasized the diversity of learner needs and valued institutional responsiveness. There was a conscious philosophy that ABE should not replicate the experience of traditional schooling. Central to this approach was support for student-centered learning, enabling students to make active and informed decisions for themselves. The ALBSU endorsed this view: "A participatory approach has been the 'bedrock' of adult literacy tuition . . . students not as passive receivers but as active participants in their own learning" (ALBSU, 1985, p. 9). Entry to ABE was open, and there were no screening tests or eligibility criteria. Literacy for empowerment was reflected in the nature of teacher-student relationships, which were built on "a sense of equality" and mutual exchange and were characterized by a blurring of the roles of teacher and learner, with the implied possibility of movement between them.

Through the 1980s an ideology of social control became more dominant. Public discussions about literacy increasingly invoked the vocational discourse of human resource investment. In areas such as prison and

army education, the functional-instrumental aspects of literacy had always been stressed, but during the 1980s and 1990s these came to dominate mainstream ABE. Literacy came to be linked with unemployment and social problems. No longer a service open to any who chose it for their own purposes, ABE has redefined itself by targeting specific vocational purposes and particular groups of learners.

PERSPECTIVES. There is a shared perception among all stakeholders that the field of ABE has changed dramatically and a broad agreement on the nature of these changes. Disagreement centers on the impact of the changes.

Some people emphasize the benefits of change—the importance of structure and progression, the positive effects of quality standards and statutory status for ABE, which encourage better resourcing and create pathways for people to continue their education and training rather than ghettoizing them within basic education. Jim Pateman of the BSA says:

The predominant mode in 1987 when I came to the agency was part-time, group work, mostly evening but some daytime. There has been a growth in the kinds of opportunities available. More short courses, or full-time courses. Open Learning Centers allow different kinds of [independent work]. Workplace provision, family literacy. From our perspective these kinds of developments have opened up opportunities for people.

Some practitioners we interviewed also support the changes and point to the limitations and uneven access that were features of earlier provision. "There were large numbers of people not getting a fair crack at the education system; their needs were not targeted," explained a practitioner who was involved in the development of Wordpower and Numberpower. "There was no feeling of progression. Some people stayed in the same class with the same tutor for years. It was very cozy, which was both its strength and its weakness." The new frameworks, she thinks, offer a much broader range of contexts for literacy and consider it to be "a journey, not a staying place. A range of options have opened up—we have got much clearer."

Movement into the mainstream has clearly been supported by some. As one former practitioner, now working in the FEDA, put it, "There are dangers to being absorbed, but it was out of the margins into the mainstream. I am more on the side now of incorporating ABE into other provision, because you are not as likely to define people as 'basic skills students.'"

Other practitioners, and some policymakers, regret the loss of an approach to literacy as a right and a means of empowerment. They also regret the loss of the flexibility and openness of relationships that characterized the old approach, even if these ideals were not always realized in practice. Alan Tuckett of the NIACE observes, "There has been a disappearance in the faith in learning without an obvious next step. LEAs have found it harder and harder to fund that [faith in learning]"-what Tuckett also refers to as "seriously useless learning." For some of those whose experience stretches back to the early campaign years, ABE's aims have become less democratic and student centered. These educators see a significant shift toward more rigid and hierarchical relationships with students: "The changes have been about a changed concept of knowledge" says Tuckett. "In the 1970s adult literacy education was about dialogue, about including excluded voices. In the 1980s it was about incorporation of those voices. The power relations between tutors and learners is at the heart of it."

Rather than being negotiated, provision is now standardized. One teacher in an ESOL program said: "No effort was made to find out who the students were. It was assumed that what they needed was to learn English. Their languages, cultural values, previous experience, existing skills, knowledge, and qualifications were ignored." As a result, she believes, students have been referred to inappropriate courses. Certain strands of work that used to be considered good practice are now dismissed as "woolly" and "unaccountable," including the use of various community-based locations, group-based writing weekends, and other residential courses. (For examples see Mace, 1995.)

The closer alignment of ABE with a formal system of vocational education means that there is more targeting, screening, and classifying of adults in programs, and the result may be discrimination against particular groups of adults (such as retired people). There are problems in finding resources for adults with serious disabilities or learning difficulties. Targeted funding is now very widespread, whether for family literacy programs, "disaffected youth," unemployed adults, or workplace literacy. According to practitioners who responded to a questionnaire survey in 1991, one of the early effects of these practices was the exclusion of "students with very basic educational needs and those lacking in confidence who need long-term support rather than instant success" (Bergin and Hamilton, 1994). The services provided were increasingly catering to mainstream college students. There has been a real "pressure to move provision toward students likely to show satisfactory outcomes and accreditation."

**LESSONS FOR THE UNITED STATES.** Moving adult literacy into the mainstream of continuing education in England has imposed strong

statements of what literacy is and who it is for. ABE has become part of foundation studies leading to vocationally oriented further education. The only alternative, it was thought, was to leave it in a weakened and isolated literacy ghetto from which students cannot escape.

The division between vocational and nonvocational courses in the 1992 legislation was particularly important in changing the culture of ABE. It contradicts a long tradition of viewing education as having many simultaneous functions-as part of cultural and community development, of citizenship as well as employability (Tuckett, 1991; McConnell, 1996). The Further and Higher Education Act redefined nonvocational education as a less important "leisure" activity. One practitioner argued that while the vocational courses have been "highly resourced and monitored for quality," those defined as nonvocational have become fragmented, "more than ever marginalized and devalued and subject to the often conflicting agendas of individual tutors, managers, and community workers."

It has been difficult to sustain public debate about these changes in the definitions and purposes of ABE. Without a strong public voice, practitioners who have been in the field for a long time worry in private about how their role has been redefined and what the effects are on students and programs. Others, new to the field, have little sense that ABE could be anything other than what it is now and have little knowledge of the history of the original campaign. One practitioner who was among the old guard observes the following:

Teachers and organizers still draw on old learnings or have a sense that it must be possible to work from other discourses than the dominant ones without really knowing if they exist in anyone else's mind. What is surely the case is that the slow and dispersed work of building shared discourses with the participants in literacy programs has taken a huge setback.

Change is not necessarily a straight line of progress but a contested process, the outcomes of which depend on the relative power of the interest groups involved. The benefits identified here include improved structure and progression within the curriculum, quality standards and statutory status for ABE that secure better resourcing, and integration with further education and training. But the costs of mainstreaming in the United Kingdom have been identified by many in the field.

Some see an undermining of the long-standing philosophy of open access, which may unintentionally lead to the exclusion of certain groups

of adults. Some see the loss of certain kinds of flexibility in pursuit of others; provision has become more flexible in areas such as timing of courses and options for progression to other courses, while standardization has resulted in less flexibility—for example, in negotiating learner goals and curriculum. The notion of flexible provision is a complicated one with many dimensions that need to be balanced. Some see a conflict between the move toward standardization and the need to consult and negotiate with students and tutors in ABE. Some argue there has been a devaluing of aspects of good practice in ABE that is hard to quantify or does not demonstrate itself in immediate, short-term effects. Finding ways to value process as well as outcomes is a challenge to the current system. These dilemmas are surely recognizable to educators in the United States.

## **SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT**

The United States could learn much from the United Kingdom, for the changes that have produced the current British system have parallels in the United States. Our concerns about the underlying purpose of ABE, the discourse about literacy, and the ways in which these can be overtaken by other political and social policy agendas could as easily be expressed about adult literacy in the United States.

### **Strengths of the U.K. System**

Particular strengths in the U.K. system include much practice at the classroom level, innovative partnerships, aspects of the accreditation system, the alternative routes and progression for learners into further and higher education, and ABE's established place as a statutory requirement.

**TEACHING.** Despite recent changes, classroom practices in the United Kingdom at their best continue to provide outstanding examples of good practice. Many practitioners remain committed to participatory learning and have experience in nurturing it. Particularly notable are the use of learning contracts, group discussion and projects, the incorporation of student interests in teaching content, and the emphasis on student writing.

**PARTNERSHIPS.** After a period in which competition has been emphasized, many partnership possibilities are being explored. They have the potential to widen participation and increase community accountability.

**NATIONAL ACCREDITATION SYSTEMS.** These systems are independent of school-based learning and provide a degree of flexibility and learner choice. In comparison with U.S. practices, which are

dependent on standardized tests and school-based definitions of what adults need to learn, the British NVQ approach takes more account of everyday literacy practices, especially those related to the workplace.

#### ALTERNATIVE ROUTES FOR LEARNERS INTO OTHER SECTORS OF EDUCATION.

The Open College Network provides a pathway for accreditation that has the advantage of being tailored to local needs and interests, and it is linked all the way to higher education.

ABE'S STATUTORY STATUS. As a service mandated by legislation, ABE has a secure funding and institutional base that is still lacking in the United States.

#### **The Downside**

There are problems with the development of partnerships and the accreditation system, and the ABE's assured place in the further education system does not come without a cost. In addition, the continuing separation of ESOL from ABE in practice is an ongoing concern.

PARTNERSHIPS. Partnerships are valuable, but adult education does not always enter these from a position of strength or with a clear sense of the skills and knowledge it can contribute. The formation of partnerships across sectors brings with it the risk that the powerful lobbies of schools and businesses will overshadow community interests.

ACCREDITATION. Concerns about the accreditation system include the underlying theory of literacy as a bundle of separate skills, the lack of widespread understanding of the origin and purpose of the skill standards, and the lack of a strong staff development system, which is needed to implement the accreditation system effectively.

STATUTORY STATUS. The security that ABE derives from the statutory requirement has costs, especially in terms of the loss of a separate space for this education. In further education settings, ABE for adults is blurred by the learning support offered to younger, full-time college students. Community-based programs have been much weakened.

A PLACE FOR ESOL. ESOL is still in many ways seen as separate from ABE, and this separateness does not serve the needs of an increasingly diverse society. This is an area where international comparisons are sobering: many other countries have recognized and debated the relationship between literacy and language variety, the underlying social relationships of power and subordination, and the need to address these

relationships in a coordinated fashion. There is silence on this issue in the United Kingdom, accompanied by policies that emphasize "English First" or "English for All" rather than multilingual or bilingual literacy. In Canada and Australia (societies not devoid of racism), literacy and ABE policy have recognized the relationship between literacy and language variety, the underlying social relationships of power and subordination, and the need to address these relationships in a coordinated fashion.

**REPRESENTATION OF THE FIELD.** An important lesson for the United States can be derived from the question of how a national policy organization relates to the field. The BSA can be credited with keeping ABE on the policy agenda and securing its statutory basis. At the same time, it has become part of the monitoring and control function rather than a promoter of grass-roots innovation. Many practitioners accuse it of selling out. Whatever the history, it is clear that responsive policy requires representative organizations to encourage dialogue between practitioners and learners. In contrast with the BSA, the membership organization NIACE (though not involved specifically in ABE) has pursued a different path, keeping equality of opportunity for adult learners at the forefront and maintaining the importance of nonvocational adult learning along with vocational.

### **Underlying Issues**

Beneath much of the debate in the United Kingdom are deeply political questions about the purpose of ABE. Finch (1984), in looking at education and social policy in the United Kingdom since the 1940s, noted the tension that has existed between the aim to serve the interests of individual good on the one hand and society as a whole on the other. Finch claims that policy proposals that address individual needs and benefits—the right to read—are less likely to get implemented than those appealing to the social good—a productive workforce or a prosperous economy.

These questions are also at the heart of ABE in the United States. Is it the goal of ABE to make everyone middle class? To provide individuals with the skills and credentials they need to realize the American dream of a good job, nice house, and a flashy car? Or is the purpose of ABE to extend participatory democracy and promote social justice, to enable people to develop their own voice and create new visions of what is the good life? Can it do both?

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, the arguments used to justify the need for ABE have often been framed in terms of global economic competitiveness: creating a skilled workforce rather than an informed citizenry. European experience counters this with the concept

of social exclusion, arguing that society is threatened by a dispossessed minority who are systematically excluded not only from the good jobs but also from participation in their community. Using arguments that are recognizable today but that date from two hundred years ago in England, Martha More tried to convince farmers to allow their workers to attend reading classes: "We . . . said that we had a little plan which we hoped would secure their orchards from being robbed, their rabbits from being shot, their game from being stolen and which might lower the poor-rates" (Kelly, 1992, p. 77).

The concept of social exclusion widens the terms of reference for ABE from purely economic issues (putting people to work) to involvement in the whole of society. In England, long years of isolation and conflict with its European partners have prevented this concept from penetrating the consciousness of the citizenry as much as it might. But as central power shifts, concerns about the effects of social exclusion are increasing, as highlighted in a series of important reports (Tomlinson, 1996; Fryer, 1997). This increased concern is also reflected in the government's cross-departmental Social Exclusion Unit and new lifelong learning policy statement (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Approaching education for the purpose of social inclusion provides a path forward that is perhaps not entirely emancipatory-the debate is not about rights-but is much broader than approaching it for the sole purpose of being competitive in the global economy.

### **Potential and Opportunities**

This is a moment of potential for ABE in England, and a moment in which there is opportunity for the field to build on its history and carve out some new and exciting possibilities for the future. There are strong foundations on which to build: the history of participatory approaches to adult learning, the strength of the tradition of voluntary associations, and the flowering of research in the new literacy studies, which has enormous potential for shaping an entirely new approach to practice. The 1997 change of government from Conservative to Labor signaled a public readiness for change and a recognition of the social costs of Thatcherism.

To realize this potential, the field must become truly accountable-accountable, that is, to ABE students and their communities. What is needed is what Merrifield (1998) has called elsewhere a system of "mutual accountability." Practitioner and learner networks, enhanced teacher training, and a sense of professionalism and integration with the larger field of ABE theory and practice are crucial components. The field needs opportunities to reflect and connect. Reflection requires processes that enable experience to be analyzed and learned from in the context of theory. Connection requires networks within ABE and wider national and international links for basic education. We need pathways for a

diversity of voices and perspectives to shape social policy. Especially in times of radical change and realignment in social policy, a strong practitioner-oriented research tradition can be a powerful tool for maintaining the visibility and agenda of ABE. The aim should be to develop a learning democracy that incorporates ways of consulting, allowing diverse voices to interrupt the dominant discourse.

Mechanisms of reflection and connection would create the conditions for a more responsive policy, which could reposition ABE in the United Kingdom and regain some of the ground lost over recent years. They would also strengthen communications among countries, allowing us to learn more readily from one another about how to deal with the common issues we face.

### **Appendix:** Resources for More Information

A variety of resources in the United Kingdom can be contacted for further information on the programs and issues discussed in this chapter.

#### **Resource Centers**

Adult Basic Skills Resource Centre: c/o Young Help Trust, 23  
Waring Street, Belfast BT1 2DX. Phone: 01232 560120; fax:  
01232530016; e-mail: [adultbasic@unite.co.uk]

Basic Skills Agency Resource Centre: Institute of Education Library and Media Services, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, U.K.  
Access to all BSA publications and many other sources referred to in this chapter is provided by the agency's Web site:  
[<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/library/bsa.html>].

#### **Journals**

Adults Learning. Published by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education. Available from the NIACE, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE.

Basic Skills Agency Newsletter. Free from the Basic Skills Agency, ADMAIL 524, London WC1A 1BR, U.K.

Language Issues. National Association for Teaching English and Other Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA). Write for subscription rates to NATECLA National Center, South Birmingham College, 520  
Stratford Road, Birmingham B11 4AJ, U.K.

Literacy Today. £14 per year from National Literacy Trust, 59 Buckingham Gate, London SW1E 6AJ, U.K.

Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) Bulletin. Membership costs £20 per year, available from Margaret Herrington, Membership Secretary, The Old School, Main Street, Tilton-on-the-Hill, Leicester LE2 9LF, U.K.

Studies in the Education of Adults. Available from the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE, U.K.

### **Useful Contacts**

For information on England and Wales: Basic Skills Agency (BSA), Commonwealth House, 19 New Oxford Street, London WC1A 1NU, U.K. (Note the different address to order publications, listed under Basic Skills Agency Newsletter above.)

For information on Northern Ireland: Adult Literacy and Basic Education Committee (Northern Ireland). Contact Hilary Sloan, 344 Stranmills Road, Belfast BT9 5ED, Ireland. Phone: 0213 268 2379.

For information on Scotland: Scottish Community Education Association (SCEC), Rosebury House, 9 Haymarket Terrace, Edinburgh, Scotland EH12 5EZ. Phone: 0131 313 2488; fax: 0131 313 6800.

Department for Education and Employment. Web site: [<http://www.dfes.gov.uk>]. For access to policy information and downloadable publications.

Department for Education and Employment, Lifelong Learning Web site: [<http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk>].

Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, P.O. Box 540, Stoke on Trent ST6 6DR, England. Web site: [<http://www.fwwcp.mcmail.com>]. For links with writers' groups and community publishing projects around the country.

Further Education Development Agency, Dunbarton House, 68 Oxford Street, London W1N 0DA, U.K. Web site: [<http://www.feda.ac.uk>]. For access to policy information and downloadable publications.

Gatehouse Books, Hulme Adult Education Centre, Stretford Road, Manchester M15 5FQ, U.K. Phone: 0161 226 7152.

Lancaster Literacy Research Group, c/o Department of English and Modern Languages, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, U.K. Web site: [<http://www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk>].

London Language and Literacy Unit, Southwark College, Southampton Way, London SE5 7EW, U.K. For publications on ESOL and family literacy.

National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE, U.K. Web site: [<http://www.niace.org.uk>].

National Literacy Trust, 59 Buckingham Gate, London SW1E 6AJ, U.K. Web site database and information service: [<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk>]. E-mail: [[contact@literacytrust.org.uk](mailto:contact@literacytrust.org.uk)].

Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL), Old School, Main Street, Tilton-on-the-Hill, Leicester LE2 9LF, U.K. Web site: [<http://www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk.rapal/rapal/htm>].

UNISON Centre, 137 High Holborn, London WC1 IV6PL, U.K. For information on trades union education.

Workplace Basic Skills Network, c/o Fiona Frank, CSET, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL.

Write First Time. Archive 1975–1985. Student-published newspaper. Contact the Librarian, Ruskin College, Oxford University, Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HE, U.K. Web site: [<http://www.ruskin.ac.uk>].

## Notes

1. We have used the term United Kingdom as the generic name for the union of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Each of these countries is currently moving toward greater autonomy, and there are distinctive differences among them in the organization of educational provision. In many places in the chapter we refer only to England, or to the other countries by name where appropriate.
2. Because the system of ABE in the United Kingdom is complex, we can only sketch here the broad outlines of the scene. The lists of references and resources at the end of the chapter are designed to direct readers to more detailed information. Three recent publications are particularly useful for up-to-date statistics and information on policy and provision: the Moser report (Moser, 1999), a government policy review of ABE in England; the Further Education Funding Council's Basic Skills Curriculum Area Survey Report (FEFC, 1998); and the Basic Skills Agency Annual Report 1997–98.
3. In the United Kingdom the term most commonly used is tutor,

which includes both paid and volunteer staff. However, to avoid confusion for an American audience, which commonly uses tutor to mean volunteer, we use the term teacher throughout to include paid and volunteer staff.

4. School leavers are young adults who have finished their compulsory education, usually at age sixteen, but not gone on to any further education.
5. This chapter is based on a review of the literature; approximately thirty-five interviews carried out in 1996–1997 with a variety of people who work for U.K. national institutions and local literacy programs; a roundtable discussion with an additional fifteen practitioners at the 1997 Research and Practice in Adult Literacy conference; and discussions that took place in an international action research group on ABE in institutional environments, sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, which brought together more than forty representatives of countries from Eastern and Western Europe and North and Central America in 1995–1996 (Hamilton, 1997).

The chapter also represents the experience and knowledge that both authors bring to the subject. Mary Hamilton has been active in research and practice in adult literacy in England since the original adult literacy campaign in 1974. Juliet Merrifield, an educator and researcher who was born and now resides in England but lived in the United States from 1976 to 1996, is in a good position to identify the parallels of and differences in the systems of adult basic education in the two countries.

6. LEAs were set up through the 1902 Education Act. They are part of the local government structure, which raises its own taxes and administers funds allocated by the central government. England and Wales are divided into counties and boroughs administered by a local elected council. Each has an education committee made up of elected councilors and co-opted members. This committee controls the education budget and decision making over primary, secondary, and further education in the area.

Since the 1980s, some of this local control has been taken away; for example, the secretary of state for education took control of teachers' pay and conditions in 1987, and the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced local management of schools and centrally controlled, grant-maintained schools. The effect of taking power away from democratically elected local government and pushing it down to the level of individual schools was to weaken local control because there is no organization linking individual schools to provide a counterweight to the power of the central government.

This arrangement thus provides the illusion of local control while actually increasing the powers of central government, which holds all the purse strings. Further education colleges, which were originally under LEA control, became independent in 1992.

7. General further education colleges (229 in England and 20 in Wales) offer a broad range of vocational and academic courses for students of all ages from sixteen years upward. They do not offer higher-level or degree courses; these are provided by the university sector, except in a few cases where colleges provide both further and higher education, the latter in association with a university. Further education colleges provide annually for around 1.7 million students, 60 percent of whom are over the age of nineteen, the majority part time. After passage of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, further education colleges became state-supported corporations, financed largely through two funding councils, one for England and one for Wales, which are directly responsible to the secretaries of state for education in England and Wales (see Cantor & Roberts, 1995, p. 2).
8. Open College Networks are systems of regional accreditation, created to offer alternative routes for learners who wish to prepare for higher education but do not have the traditional qualifications. Institutions can apply to have a specific course accredited, declaring how they will verify competence of skills and knowledge within the OCN standards framework (see Cantor & Roberts, 1995, pp. 82-83; Martin, 1998; National Open College Network, 1996).
9. The University for Industry will be launched nationally in 2000. It aims to bring together the public and private sectors (educational institutions and employers) and will act as a broker to match learners with existing courses. It will have a significant marketing function through the Learning Direct hot line, will analyze needs and commission new content when there is a gap, and will be responsible for quality control. Individual learning accounts will be designed to encourage people to save to learn and will be linked to "smart cards" to help record their learning, with a £150 million investment in the first 1 million accounts. Among the aims of the program is to more than double the help available for basic literacy and numeracy skills among adults to involve more than 500,000 adults annually by 2002 (Department for Education and Employment, 1998).
10. In 1995, the Basic Skills Agency adopted its current name along with a broader mandate supporting basic skills in secondary schools as well as in further and adult education, so it no longer has a special focus on adult learners.
11. The controversial notion of functional literacy also served as the

underpinning of the U.S. Adult Education Act and has been very influential in the United States. While the original meaning of the term simply involved the linkage of literacy with the practical needs of adult life, it has come to be identified with a narrow, vocational view of literacy that serves the needs of business and employers, to the neglect of the personal and social development goals of individuals and local communities.

12. Briefly, they approached literacy education as a means of empowerment, viewed mainstream schooling as part of society's attempt to maintain social control and reproduce conformity with social norms, and saw their work as critical and participatory.
13. The absence of a central agency for ABE in both Scotland and Northern Ireland means that ABE statistics are not readily available there, as they are in England and Wales. Some figures and a recent context are given for Scotland in Macrae (1999).
14. The New Commonwealth countries are those that were once part of the British Empire but are now fully independent of the United Kingdom and members of a voluntary association based on (weakening) economic and cultural ties. The immigrant groups referred to here are mainly from African countries and the Indian subcontinent.
15. The figures on the kind of help people were receiving in 1995–1996 in England are from the BSA and FEFC. There are some minor discrepancies in the figures provided by the two agencies.
16. The City and Guilds is one of a number of agencies accrediting awards for which educational institutions then offer courses, in the same way that the GED is offered in the United States.

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