L&W LEARNING AND WORK INSTITUTE

Functional Skills Reform Consultation

Findings of the learner focus groups

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In January 2016, NIACE and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion merged to form Learning and Work Institute

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Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is a new independent policy and research organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. We bring together over 90 years of combined history and heritage from the 'National Institute of Adult Continuing Education' and the 'Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion'.

In December 2015, Pye Tait Consulting and L&W were appointed to deliver a consultation on the reform of Functional Skills English and maths qualifications under Phase 1 of the Education and Training Foundation's Functional Skills Reform programme. Building on the outcomes of Pye Tait Consulting's report Making Maths and English Work for All (2015), the consultation explored the extent to which Functional Skills meets the needs of employers, practitioners, stakeholders and learners and how the Criteria and Subject Content could be further developed in order to increase the effectiveness of the qualifications.

In the first stage of the consultation, L&W carried out five focus groups with Functional Skills learners in a range of contexts. The information gained from this stage of the consultation was used to re-draft the Standards and Subject Content according to stakeholders' needs. The second stage of the consultation asked for feedback on the new draft Standards and Subject Content, and L&W conducted a further six focus groups with Functional Skills learners. This report presents the findings of the focus groups with Functional Skills learners.

Key findings

The key findings of the learner focus groups were as follows:

Previous experience and awareness

- Many learners arrived at Functional Skills lessons having had negative experiences of learning maths or English previously.

- Learners were aware and generally pleased with the content of their course and their progression pathways.

- Functional Skills was viewed as an alternative qualification for learners who had not achieved a C grade at GCSE in school, and perceived as a progression pathway towards GCSE qualifications.

- Learners were generally pleased with their experience of Functional Skills maths and English.

Skills and abilities

- Learners were able to identify the skills required for Functional Skills qualifications.

- Functional English skills were seen as integral to all parts of learners' lives and learners were able to identify ways in which they could use Functional Maths in their wider lives and work.

- Skills related to work were particularly important for Functional Skills learners in prison.

- ESOL learners particularly emphasised the importance of speaking and listening skills as these enabled them to communicate with people in their community.

- Learners did not identify any missing skills in their maths but would like more focus on the practical application of skills in their Functional English classes.

- Learners felt that Entry Level 3 maths and English skills were sufficient for a lower-level or first-time job in a non-specialist industry.

- In general, learners agreed that the skills included in the draft Functional Maths Standards were important and could identify the ways in which they would apply to their wider lives and work.

- The skills included in the draft Functional English Standards were also viewed as important, but learners in all of the focus groups particularly highlighted skills which were needed to complete a range of forms.

- Learners suggested that some of the skills included in the draft Functional English Standards could be tailored to employment and explicitly mention completing job application forms and writing CVs.

Delivery

- Learners found the activities undertaken in Functional Skills classes useful as they enabled them to apply their skills to their wider lives. In particular, learners valued activities which related their learning to the world of work.

- Opportunities to develop peer support relationships in the classroom was particularly important for Functional Skills learners in prisons.

- Learners strongly felt that if technology were to be embedded within their Functional maths and English courses then it needed to be reliable. Digital activities also needed to be meaningful to their wider lives and support the development of their computer skills.

- In general, learners felt that the amount of time they spent in their Functional English and maths lessons was about right. Some learners said they would like to have more hours a week on their English or maths but acknowledged it may be difficult for others to fit these in with their work or family commitments.

- Learners had mixed views about modular approaches to Functional maths and English. Some felt that this would help them to gain their qualifications more quickly as they could focus on one topic at a time and not get confused in assessments. Others enjoyed working on a variety of topics at once or wanted to get a whole qualification in one go, without having to take multiple assessments. In particular, a modular approach may be impractical for learners in prisons if they move institution.

- In general, learners said they would make very few changes to Functional Skills Maths. However, learners had a number of suggestions to improve Functional English delivery, including more time to practise their English, smaller class sizes, more support for learners with learning difficulties, and teachers and Standards using consistent terminology across different levels.

Assessment

- Learners' attitudes towards Functional Skills exams were mixed. Maths learners were often worried about assessments while English learners felt more confident about their exams. However, all learners felt that there should be an element of coursework or portfolio work in the assessment of Functional Skills to take the pressure of off the final exam.

- The majority of maths learners felt that scenario-based questions made their assessments more challenging. All of the focus group participants expressed a preference for a combination of questions with and without scenarios in their Functional Maths exam.

- In comparison, English learners found scenarios more helpful in their exams as they help to contextualise questions. However, they emphasised the need for scenarios to be written in language which suits the level of the qualification and to be concise, as reading questions takes up valuable exam time.

- Learners across all of the maths and English focus groups agreed that scenarios needed to be more focussed on the kinds of activities that they undertake in their own lives, such as writing a job application or CV, planning journeys or decorating a room.

- Learners in all of the focus groups felt that Entry Level qualifications were important, particularly for those who are less confident with their maths or English. In addition, learners in all of the groups understood the difference between Entry Levels and Levels 1 and 2 and few saw any value in renaming the qualifications as Entry Stages.

Comparison to GCSEs

- Learners across all of the focus groups felt that Functional Skills was different in both content and delivery to GCSEs.

- On the whole, maths and English learners alike felt that the ways in which Functional Skills was taught made its content more relevant and useful in their wider lives than GCSEs.

- Learners also felt that the teaching methods and classroom environment of their Functional Skills courses were more supportive than those they had experienced at school.

Benefits and changes

- Functional Skills increase learners' confidence and self-worth.

- Functional Skills have a positive impact on employability.

- Functional English impacts on learners' wellbeing and engagement with the family and community.

- English qualifications are often a route into further study or employment.

Introduction

Learning and Work Institute is a new independent policy and research organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy. We bring together over 90 years of combined history and heritage from the 'National Institute of Adult Continuing Education' and the 'Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion'.

In December 2015, Pye Tait Consulting and L&W were appointed to deliver a consultation on the reform of Functional Skills English and maths qualifications under Phase 1 of the Education and Training Foundation's Functional Skills Reform programme. Building on the outcomes of Making Maths and English Work for All (2015), the consultation explored the extent to which Functional Skills meets the needs of employers, practitioners, stakeholders and learners and how the Criteria and Subject Content could be further developed in order to increase the effectiveness of the qualifications.

Initially, the partnership consulted with providers, awarding organisations, employers and learners to review the existing Functional Skills Standards and Subject Content. As part of this stage of the consultation, L&W carried out five focus groups with Functional Skills learners in a range of contexts. The information gained from this stage of the consultation was used to re-draft the Standards and Subject Content according to stakeholders' needs.

The second stage of the consultation asked for feedback on the new draft Standards and Subject Content. Again, the views of providers, Awarding Organisations and employers were sought. To ensure that learners' views were represented in the second stage of the consultation, L&W conducted seven focus groups with Functional Skills learners. Two of these were carried out with learners who participated in stage 1 of the consultation, and five were carried out with different groups of learners. The focus groups tested elements of the new draft Standards and Subject Content to ensure that they were relevant and meaningful to learners and a true representation of the courses they were currently pursuing.

This report presents the findings of the focus groups with Functional Skills learners.

Methodology

In the first stage of the consultation, five focus groups were carried out with Functional Skills English and maths learners in a range of settings, including General FE, Adult and Community Learning, work-based training and a Specialist Designated Institution. The second stage of the consultation conducted seven focus groups with Functional Skills English and maths learners. Two of these were carried out in providers which hosted a stage one focus group in order to get feedback from learners who contributed to the initial consultation on the Standards and Subject Content. Four focus groups were conducted with learners who had not been involved in stage one of the consultation.

The stage 2 focus groups were carried out in a range of settings: two were conducted with learners in Adult and Community Learning; two were conducted in independent training providers; one was carried out with learners in a Specialist Designated Institution; and two were conducted with learners in a Category B prison, one with Functional English and one with Functional Maths learners. This ensured that views from a diverse range of learners were included in the consultation.

All focus group participants were current Functional Skills English and/or maths learners and were able to reflect on their experiences of taking these qualifications post-16. Participants were given two activities to complete: one asked them to rank the skills and abilities included in the new draft Standards in order of importance and the other asked them to identify which skills they would expect to learn at Entry Level 3 and Level 2. The focus group schedules can be found in the Appendix. Focus group participants were given a £10 voucher for taking part in the consultation (with the exception of the learners in prison).

Data from the focus groups were analysed thematically by L&W researchers. In particular, the analysis drew out any differences and similarities between the responses of English and maths learners and between learners involved in stage 1 and stage 2 of the consultation.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the focus groups under four main headings: previous experience and awareness; skills and abilities; delivery; assessment; comparison to GCSEs; and benefits and changes.

Previous experience and awareness

Key findings

- Many learners arrived at Functional Skills lessons having had negative experiences of learning maths or English previously.

- Learners were aware and generally pleased with the content of their course and their progression pathways.

- Functional Skills was viewed as an alternative qualification for learners who had not achieved a C grade at GCSE in school, and acted as a progression pathway towards GCSE qualifications.

- Learners were generally pleased with their experience of Functional Skills maths and English.

Learners in the stage 1 focus groups were asked about their previous experiences of studying maths and English and their awareness of the content of Functional Skills qualifications.

The majority of learners in the stage 1 maths focus groups had previous experience of GCSE Maths and many had already studied Functional Skills Maths at lower levels. In both focus groups, around half of the learners had progressed through Functional Skills qualifications with the organisation they currently attended, or another post-16 organisation. In comparison, some of the learners who participated in the stage 1 English focus groups had no experience of the schooling system in the UK as they had arrived in the country as adults. Many of these learners had come to Functional Skills with little or no English language skills, or with prior experience of learning ESOL. Some learners also had very little experience of education in their home countries.

> *"Most of us come from a country that, education wise, it is not accessible, but when we came to this country, you know, we got education then reading and writing is very very important, not only for us but also for our children at home."*

> (English learner in stage 1 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

For other learners, their previous experiences of English were from studying GCSEs, IGCSE Certificates or Functional Skills at school or previous post-16 education institutions. Previous experiences were mixed, with some learners enjoying English lessons and others being dissatisfied with the support they received in school.

> *"…back in school when I was there... I think the teachers would just give you work and just make you get on with it, they wouldn't sit there and help you... I struggled a bit with that."*

(English learner in stage 1 focus group, General FE College)

Learners in the stage 1 maths groups said that their experience of GCSE Maths was generally negative and they struggled to identify any positive aspects of learning maths at school. However, participants could easily identify a range of challenges they had experienced with GCSE Maths, from personal confidence to situation-specific experiences. For example, one learner remarked that they disliked *"the struggle. Honestly, it petrified me, it's my pet hate… that's why I've come to learn it"*. This learner said that because of the fear they felt in school they were not always willing to engage and that this negatively affected their schooling. Another learner identified a particular situation that had a negative impact on their propensity to engage with Maths.

> *"Up until age 12 I had a very good teacher and because I was doing well I got put in this class with this gentleman [teacher], who kept going on about the war and got angry with the boys in the class and I just switched off. So I've got positive going into negative and then positive again."*

(Maths learner in stage 1 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

Maths learners also identified specific topics, including algebra and formulae, as particularly challenging. This was often attributed to being unable to understand the concepts that informed the processes, as one learner remarked that balancing formulae was *"like a morse code"*.

When asked, all maths and English learners were able to describe the course that they were following and the level at which they were studying. Learners were also able to explain the difference between qualification levels, how they were assigned to a particular level and how they had progressed through the levels. There was some confusion between Entry Level 3 and Level 3 in one of the English groups, but this seemed to be confined to the terminology rather than the level or complexity of the skills involved. These findings demonstrate a high degree of awareness concerning the structure of Functional Skills qualifications, and it also suggests that learners had a good understanding of the relationship between the five levels and the progression route through those levels.

Learners in the stage 1 focus groups felt that there were two purposes for Functional Skills qualifications. The first was that Functional Skills was an alternative qualification for learners who have not achieved a C grade at GCSE. The second was that Functional Skills was a progression pathway towards GCSE qualifications for those learners who have not been in education for some time. Both notions distinctly connect Functional Skills to GCSEs and this is reflected in the comments of one learner who said that Functional Skills has *"still [got to] be geared towards going towards GCSE because a lot of people still want that"*. Similarly, another learner noted that *"you're getting the same as [a GCSE] just [in] a different qualification"*.

All learners were pleased with the progress they had made on their Functional Skills course. One learner said that they had made *"A lot [of progress] from school anyway. I failed my maths in school but now I've passed it here so it's a lot better... I think it's because it's smaller groups as well so you get more help if you need it"*. For a number of learners, their success in Functional Skills was attributed to maths being made more applicable to their personal and professional lives.

> *"Before at school it was just 'this is what you've got to learn' and you think 'that ain't going to help' you know, I mean 'when am I ever going to use that'? Because that's what you get taught by your peers as well, when someone shouts out 'when are we going to use this'? You're not really, are you? With it being adult learning it's made more applicable."*

> (Maths learner in stage 1 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

English learners were also very satisfied with their progress so far, with many noting that they had exceeded their own expectations. In particular, learners felt able and confident to complete a wider range of tasks independently.

> *"I used to ask for my husband to help me to write letters or send an email or fill in a form, he would help me. But now I can do all that by myself without his help."*

> (English learner in stage 1 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

> *"I've been here one year; four months ago I passed my driving test, they helped me break the words down and it did help a lot."*

> (English learner in stage 1 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

Success in Functional Skills English was attributed to a combination of a change in attitude towards learning and different teaching and learning methods. One learner noted that *"at school… you don't realise how much you will need those grades in later life".* The same learner also noted that their own success in college was due to the way in which the skills were taught.

> *"I think it's broken down… to a level where you can understand it and grasp it easier... you get to understand it all. You're doing a whole three hours on one subject."*

> (English learner in stage 1 focus group, General FE College)

Another learner highlighted the importance of English and maths provision in adult education.

> *"College is like a second chance, though isn't it, to get your stuff back together, get your brains back together... it's like recovery, isn't it? It's like if you didn't do well in school you can come to college and you can learn more... because school is very limited."*

> (English learner in stage 1 focus group, General FE College)

Skills and abilities

Key findings

- Learners were able to identify the skills required for Functional Skills qualifications.

- Functional English skills were seen as integral to all parts of learners' lives and learners were able to identify ways in which they could use Functional Maths in their wider lives.

- Skills related to work were particularly important for Functional Skills learners in prison.

- ESOL learners particularly emphasised the importance of speaking and listening skills as these enabled them to communicate with people in their community.

- Learners did not identify any missing skills in their maths but would like more focus on the practical application of skills in their Functional English classes.

- Learners felt that Entry Level 3 maths and English skills were sufficient for an entry-level or first-time job in a non-specialist industry.

- In general, learners agreed that the skills included in the draft Functional Maths Standards were important and could identify the ways in which they would apply to their wider lives and work.

- The skills included in the draft Functional English Standards were also viewed as important, but learners in all of the focus groups particularly highlighted skills which were needed to complete forms.

- Learners suggested that some of the skills included in the draft Functional English Standards could be tailored to employment and explicitly mention completing job application forms and writing CVs.

In general, learners in the stage 1 focus groups were able to identify the skills and abilities included in Functional Skills Maths. They were able to identify skills under the four principal headings of 'number', 'shape and space', 'time and measure' and 'handling data'. As may be expected, those learners who had left school more recently were able to identify the technical terminology such as squared and cubed numbers, perimeters, scales, ratio and shape nets.

Learners in the stage 1 English focus groups were also able to identify the skills and abilities in each of the key areas of Functional Skills English. For the majority of these learners, the speaking and listening, reading and writing skills were equally all important as they applied to different tasks and aspects of life. Some learners identified writing as slightly more important to them because they felt that was their weakest area. Critically, learners also linked English skills and abilities to wider impacts ranging from confidence, memory, and social relationships to hand-eye coordination, concentration, and employment.

> *"I work with elderly people and of course everything that you did with them you need to document it and write it down... so before I couldn't do that, when I finished I would come to one chart and I would be stuck… now I can write it very well."*

<div align="right">(English learner in stage 1 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)</div>

Another learner explained how the skills developed in their English class helped them with the weekly shop.

> *"Writing is very important, like for instance when you're going to the supermarket, we as the parent... I used to just go put [things] in the trolley... things I had in the house I would still buy them but I don't even need them. If I know how to write I would put them in a list."*

<div align="right">(English learner in stage 1 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)</div>

All learners in the stage 1 maths focus groups were also able to see the application of Functional Skills Maths in the workplace and in their personal lives. For these learners, number and time and measure were the skills identified as essential to everyday life and work, and they could identify examples when they had used these, such as a parent who fitted carpets needing to understand area and perimeter. One learner also noted that they used shape and space skills *'all the time… because I have to work out how many boards I have to put on the scaffolding'*.

Missing skills

Maths
Learners in the stage 1 focus groups did not identify any skills that they used or needed that were not already included in their Functional Skills Maths course. However, participants in one of the stage 2 maths focus groups felt that compound shapes were missing from their course. They found this skill useful when they wanted to make a pattern. However, none of the learners in the other maths focus groups could identify skills that were missing from their Functional Maths courses.

English
Similarly to maths learners, participants in the stage 1 focus groups did not feel there were any skills missing from Functional English lessons, but one group of learners did express an interest in varying the content or delivery of sessions. They suggested that *'you could make English a bit more physical... you could read out to the whole class'*, or run events that learners could get involved with. One learner in this group also suggested incorporating literature; but another learner stated that they did not want to write long essays on books.

This was echoed by learners in one of the stage 2 English focus groups, who felt they needed to do more in their course on how to write job applications, CVs and personal statements. They also requested more support with using correct punctuation.

"For me we do a skill but I think we need a bit more in job application letters, CV writing, more academic writing skill, how to use punctuation, personal statement – for me those things are missing."

(English learner in stage 2 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

Competence Levels

As part of the focus groups, learners were asked to identify the level of maths and English competence required to perform an entry-level or first-time job in a non-specialist industry. Learners were given a list of skills appropriate to Entry Level 3 and a second list appropriate to Level 2 (the lists can be found at the Appendix). They then selected the list they felt best described the level of competence required for employment.

Eighteen of the 22 maths learners selected the Entry Level 3 skills as being most appropriate for entry-level employment, while four selected the Level 2 skills. The feedback from maths learners indicated that the Level 2 skills were too complex for entry-level employment. Similarly, nineteen of the 27 English learners selected the Entry Level 3 skills as being the most appropriate for entry-level employment, while eight learners selected the Level 2 skills. However, feedback from English learners highlighted that at Level 2 there is a distinct change in the complexity of vocabulary used to describe skills, abilities or actions. Many learners selected the Entry Level 3 skills because they found it easier to understand the terminology and the skills seemed less specific, thus making them more appropriate for a non-specialist job role.

Feedback on maths skills in new draft Standards

In the stage 2 focus groups, learners were asked to review some of the skills included in the draft Functional Skills Maths Standards under the three new main headings: 'numbers', 'common measures', and 'shape and space'. The skills included in the activity can be found at the Appendix. Learners were asked to rank the skills in order of importance and consider how they could be used in their wider lives. This section provides their feedback on the maths skills.

Numbers

In general, focus group participants felt that all of the skills in this category were important at one time or another and could identify ways they used them in their everyday lives.

"Maths is all around you and you use it all the time."

(Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Independent Training Provider)

"...numbers comes into near enough everything."

(Learner in stage 2 focus group, Offender Learning Provider)

However, learners tended to pick out addition, subtraction, multiplication and division as the most useful skills as these were seen as the basis for working out higher level maths problems and were most applicable to daily life, for example working out income tax returns and personal budgeting.

> *"You start getting your wages, you're going to budget out of your wages for your bills and your shopping and all that sort of stuff."*

<div align="right">(Learner in stage 2 focus group, Offender Learning Provider)</div>

Participants in one focus group felt that bar charts and graphs were useful when working with computers. For example, one learner who was a parent governor found these skills useful when reading school progress reports but others did not see this skill as particularly relevant to their wider lives. In general, calculating probabilities was seen as the least useful skill by participants and learners across all of the maths focus groups struggled to think of ways they would use this in their everyday activities.

Common measures

Learners at all of the maths focus groups agreed that being able to calculate and round sums of money were the most important skills in this category. This was because they enabled learners to budget, see how much money they needed and how much money they would have left afterwards. They could also think of lots of different ways in which they could apply these skills to their own lives, such as buying items in shops, teaching their children and working out their wages.

> *"Calculating sums of money and rounding money because we use that in day-to-day life: going to the shop, teaching the kids."*

<div align="right">(Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)</div>

Learners in all of the maths focus groups also identified reading and measuring time as a particularly useful skill. While acknowledging that technology means digital time is more common, focus group participants felt that both formats were as important as each other.

Participants also emphasised the importance of being able to measure and compare weights, lengths and temperatures. They could easily see how these skills would be useful in different job roles, e.g. as a shop assistant in a supermarket or as a nurse or midwife in the NHS, and in the home, for example for cooking, DIY and gardening.

Shape and space

Participants in each of the maths focus groups could see how perimeter and area were useful when gardening or decorating, for example by helping to ensure that furniture fits in a room. However, the majority found it more difficult to identify a use for symmetry – except for doing activities with their children and in personal beauty routines such as eyebrow shaping.

Individual learners identified other skills to do with shape, space and measure as important to them dependent on their relevance to their specific job role; for example, understanding of 2D and 3D shapes, fractions and decimals were seen as important skills for a photography teacher.

A number of learners gave examples of how they had applied these skills in the workplace; a teaching assistant in one maths focus group talked about how the skills they had gained had positively impacted on their confidence in the workplace.

"It's been really helpful for me working in school because before that I really struggled with maths. I failed maths in school to be blunt and being able to work in a school which teaches children maths I needed to be able to do it as well. So starting this has really helped me because it means I know how to teach the kids and they're getting it right."

(Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

One learner in one of the prison focus groups, who had experience of bricklaying, also talked about the use of perimeter and area in construction work.

"I've had construction work and things like that. You have to know your perimeter and your area of shape… I've done experience in bricklaying. Brick layers actually measuring in all kinds of measurements, they measure millimetres."

(Learner in stage 2 focus group, Offender Learning Provider)

Another learner in one of the prison focus groups said that improving his shape and space skills whilst in custody had helped him to secure an apprenticeship on his release.

Feedback on English skills in new draft Standards

In the stage 2 focus groups, learners were asked to review some of the skills included in the draft Functional Skills English Standards under the three main headings: 'speaking and listening', 'reading', and 'writing'. The skills included in the activity can be found at the Appendix. Learners were asked to rank the skills in order of importance and consider how they could be used in their wider lives. This section provides their feedback on the English skills.

Speaking and listening

Learners across all the English focus groups identified listening for the main points of explanations and following spoken instructions as the most important skills under this heading. Taking part in conversations was also selected by all but one of the groups, in which learners felt they already had this skill, as most useful. They felt that being able to listen and understand what is being said was particularly important at college and work.

Being able to speak clearly was also seen as important for work, making appointments over the phone and giving instructions or information. These skills gave learners confidence to speak to people out in their communities and in groups. In the focus group with ESOL learners, participants felt that speaking and listening was the most important overall topic as this immediately helps them to communicate with people in their community. All of the speaking and listening skills were important for ESOL learners, but they particularly emphasised the importance of being able to ask a question to find out information; to follow the main points of a conversation; and to follow spoken instructions. These participants felt they would use these skills all the time, but particularly at work, at the doctors and when going to the shop.

> *"…everywhere you must be able to talk English, you want to be right. Speaking especially is… if you enter inside the shop and you didn't know how to speak English you couldn't get what you need, what you went in for."*

> (ESOL learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

Reading

Learners in all of the English focus groups emphasised the importance of being able to read and understand pieces of writing. This was particularly useful when they received important information from their college, bank, doctors or other services. Participants also agreed that understanding the language used in forms was particularly important for example, in the Jobcentre, at the doctors and when making complaints, and that it was important to be able to use a dictionary to look up words they did not understand. ESOL learners in particular felt that understanding the words and phrases used on forms was important for their wider lives, as it was crucial that they knew what information they were being asked to provide. Learners in another English group said that they were able to read sections of writing but sometimes had difficulty understanding the exact meaning, for example the English terminology used in maths questions.

Writing

Focus group participants identified being able to plan and draft pieces of text, write in complete sentences and use paragraphs as the most important writing skills. Learners in all the groups felt that writing skills were particularly useful when completing forms, writing formal letters and writing reports at work.

> *"I work with children… and then you have reports to do. Things that you do it has to be in clear English otherwise… the other person he might not understand my English so I have to do it correct… Saying it is easy but when you do it in writing is quite difficult."*

> (English learner in stage 2 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

Another learner needed to write reports in their work as a carer.

> *"…before you left you need to write everything clearly so that your colleague will understand what you write… in case anything happens… so that they can follow the instruction."*

> (English learner in stage 2 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

All of the writing skills were important for ESOL learners, but they particularly emphasised the importance of being able to write in complete sentences and to spell words correctly as did the prison learner group; ESOL learners also highlighted that it was important to use correct grammar.

Delivery

Key findings

- Learners found the activities undertaken in Functional Skills classes useful as they enabled them to apply their skills to their wider lives. In particular, learners valued activities which related their learning to the world of work.

- Opportunities to develop peer support relationships in the classroom was particularly important for Functional Skills learners in prisons.

- Learners strongly felt that if technology were to be embedded within their Functional maths and English courses then it needed to be reliable and not crash and lose their work. Digital activities also needed to be meaningful to their wider lives and support the development of their computer skills.

- In general, learners felt that the amount of time they spent in their Functional English and maths lessons was about right. Some learners said they would like to have more hours a week on their English or maths but acknowledged it may be difficult for others to fit these in with their work or family commitments.

- Learners had mixed views about modular approaches to Functional maths and English. Some felt that this would help them to gain their qualifications more quickly as they could focus on one topic at a time and not get confused in assessments. Others enjoyed working on a variety of topics at once or wanted to get a whole qualification in one go, without having to take multiple assessments. In particular, a modular approach may be impractical for learners in prisons if they move institution.

- In general, learners said they would make very few changes to Functional Skills Maths. However, learners had a number of suggestions to improve Functional English delivery, including more time to practice their English, smaller class sizes, more support for learners with learning difficulties, and having consistent terminology across different levels.

Activities undertaken in class

Learners in both the stage 1 and stage 2 focus groups gave a range of examples of the types of activities they did in their Functional Maths classes. Learners in the stage 1 groups identified a mixture of teaching and learning methods including: worksheets, workshops, debating, practice tests, and practical activities.

> *"…last week we were given some cards with angles [and numbers] on it... like dominoes but it wouldn't have worked like, you could get the really simple ones and you had to match the number to the angle on the opposite picture and you'd think you got it right but you'd look at it and revise it again... when you're doing something more physical and its laid out in front of you rather than sitting and reading, you know, you're learning it quicker."*

> (Maths learner in stage 1 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

One group did activities on decorating and gardening; they had to make a mood board and design a dining or living room using different types of furniture and colours. They then had to work out the amount and cost of the paint, wallpaper and other items they wanted to use. Other groups had used dominoes for decimal and fraction work; played darts for addition and subtraction work; had worked out measurements of everyday objects; and compared prices in a shop. Learners found this useful as it enabled them to apply their maths skills to their wider lives.

> *"…for instance, if you're going into a shop you're more likely to compare your prices more after you've been to this class. You think yes, I will have a look at that actually. I will see if it's cheaper to get something loose."*

> (Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

Participants in the stage 2 maths focus group in prison discussed how their tutors used games to explain different concepts to them. They enjoyed the competitive nature of these activities, but also found that it opened up opportunities to support each other and recognise that they each had different strengths and weaknesses. This had led to a supportive classroom environment for these learners and they enjoyed helping each other to progress in their learning.

> *"We've all got a disability of something in life. Yeah, we've got positives and disabilities. Nobody's perfect… Helping people out [who are] struggling, you feel good about doing that… You start feeling good about yourself, where you could help somebody else."*

> (Learner in stage 2 focus group, Offender Learning Provider)

Stage 2 focus group participants also discussed how their tutors related the skills they were learning in their Functional Maths class to their wider lives. One group said that their tutor helped them think about how skills can be used in different jobs, for example how you would use maths in retail to work out costs, stock, clothes sizes and so on. Another said their tutor took topics from the news and did maths activities based on these, for example the proportion of people voting in referendums.

> *"I thought it was really good because it means you're more interested."*

> (Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

The learners found these activities and discussions useful but some in one focus group felt that it slowed down their learning. This was a little frustrating if they were covering topics that they had learned in previous courses and that they wanted to quickly move through.

The activities highlighted by English learners as being particularly effective integrated English into everyday activities. These included reading newspaper articles, helping children with homework, reading emails at work, writing stories, writing letters, participating in role plays and completing forms and job applications. Participants in the ESOL focus group also did activities on how accents varied across Britain and life in the UK. Learners in the stage 1 focus groups particularly liked the fact that each lesson concentrated on a particular topic or skill, and that there was time to work through problems until they fully understood them.

Learners in the prison focus groups had a different experience to those in other settings as they undertook their Functional Skills in classes with a mix of English and maths learners.

Use of technology

Learners in both the stage 1 and 2 focus groups noted that they did not use a great deal of technology in their Functional Maths and English classes. Initial and diagnostic assessments were done online, learners at Level 1 and Level 2 had online exams and learners did use calculators when they were permitted, but the use of technology was otherwise limited.

Some learners were positive about the potential to use technology in Functional Skills courses. One of the stage 1 English groups was particularly enthusiastic as these learners recognised the importance of technology to individuals in today's society. This group felt that voice activated searching on mobile devices and computers, along with online dictionaries and encyclopedias could supplement English lessons. These tools would be particularly helpful when researching or working on producing reports on given topics.

> *"These days with how much technology is so fast, you can just have [a] phone in your hand and you have the world at your fingertips."*

> (English learner in stage 1 focus group, General FE College)

One participant in a stage 2 English focus group also discussed how technology helped her to learn as she had a physical disability which made it difficult for her to write, and a small number said they would welcome using computers in class as they were not very confident in using technology and they felt this would help them to improve their digital skills alongside their maths or English skills.

> *"I am rubbish at computers and spreadsheets are something that would scare me, but if it was incorporated into a maths class a little bit, obviously relevant to what you were doing, it might - if there was something that could bring up my computer skills as well and incorporate it into both it might actually be quite useful."*

> (Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

However, other groups felt that, although technology was important, the focus of their Functional Skills courses should still be on English and maths, as improving these skills was their primary reason for enrolling on the course. Many learners expressed reservations about the ways in which technology had been used in their experience of learning on Functional Skills courses. Learners in the stage 1 and 2 English groups said they did not want to use computers as they felt that they needed to practise their spelling and writing by hand. One learner felt that the use of computers and 'text speak' had lowered peoples' ability to spell and made it more difficult to spell correctly. Learners in the maths groups also felt that, because many adults are likely to be 'scared' of maths, adding an extra layer of computer and digital learning might put them off learning even more.

> *"I think that you've got to realise that people have been terrified of maths before and to have too many things thrown into the mix would just make people back off or get scared unnecessarily."*

Learners in each of the stage 1 and 2 focus groups discussed the online nature of the Functional Skills exams. Some learners said that they would prefer to do assessments on paper rather than online, having experienced problems due to unreliable technology, such as computers crashing during exams, or their lack of computer skills.

> *"I get stressed out with computers. I'm the kind of person that if I just decide I'm a bit stressed out with the computer I will just skip all the questions and just leave it."*

(Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Independent Training Provider)

Learners in one of the stage 2 maths focus groups felt that they did not have the computer skills to take exams online, but also could not see the relevance of the ICT element of Functional Skills to their everyday lives. They were frustrated that their ICT lessons involved repeatedly undertaking practice papers rather than helping them to improve their confidence in using technology.

Guided Learning Hours

Participants in the stage 2 focus groups were asked how they felt about the amount of time they spent in their Functional Skills classes each week. Learners in two of the maths focus groups felt that the amount of time they spent on Functional Maths was about right as it enabled them to work it around their other commitments, with additional time spent on homework that they could do at their own pace. However, one group felt that they spent too long on one subject. Learners in this group did either three or six hour blocks of maths or English and they found it difficult to concentrate for this amount of time. They said they would prefer to spread their learning out over the week, although they acknowledged that this would make it difficult to fit around work placements and other commitments.

Some learners in the stage 2 English focus groups said they would like to do more hours a week on their English, as classroom learning enabled them to focus on the work without other distractions.

> *"Some of us when you go home husband is calling, your children are calling you, friends are calling you, work is calling you, together all those things. You can't get time to do extra but when you are in here nobody calls you so therefore you learn, it's perfect."*

(English learner in stage 2 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

ESOL learners in particular were frustrated that their English lessons did not continue through the summer and that there was along break between the end of the summer term and the beginning of the Autumn term. However, other learners felt it would be difficult to fit more hours learning English around their work and family commitments.

Functional Skills learners in prison attended classes daily, although some said they would like to do more. These learners also had the opportunity to engage in Functional ICT lessons in the afternoon, but this was not compulsory. The prison required a minimum Level 1 in

English and maths for prisoners to work, which was a strong motivator for learners to engage. However, one learner indicated that this meant few people in prison then went on to do Level 2 Functional Skills maths and English as it was not viewed as necessary.

Views on modular approaches

One of the suggestions which arose during the consultation was to take a modular approach to Functional Skills qualifications. Stage 2 focus group participants were asked for their views on this suggestion. Learners had mixed views about a modular approach to Functional Maths. Some liked the idea as they felt it would help them focus on one topic at a time and get better marks in each exam. Another learner said that she often got confused about what questions were asking for, but if it was modular then she would have a better idea what she was being tested on. Some learners also felt that passing modular exams would give them a boost in confidence.

> *"Then you're just concentrating on that one aspect of maths. So if you are struggling with it you haven't got to worry about any other aspect. You've already done that and of course then you'd get your results so you'd know if you've done well which is a confidence booster in itself isn't it?"*

> (Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

Others did not like the idea as they felt it was better to "get it over with" in one go. One participant also thought that learners would forget what they had done in the first module by the end of the year and so felt it was better to continue learning about the whole subject. Some learners in the prison focus group commented that they enjoyed having a variety of topics to work on and felt this helped to maintain their interest in their lessons.

> *"…sometimes it's very good to multi-task… so you don't get bored of that same thing, it's nice to jump on to something else… I've a different variety of things to do."*

> (Learner in stage 2 focus group, Offender Learning Provider)

Learners also had mixed views about a modular approach to Functional English, with some saying that this would help them to focus on a particular skill and not get tired in exams, and others wanting to get a full qualification straight away. A course tutor in one of the prison focus groups felt that having to complete more than one examination may deter reluctant learners and was impractical for people who having completed one module may be moved on to another prison where they are unable to continue with their exams.

Areas for improvement

In general, learners said they would make very few changes to Functional Skills Maths. One suggestion for change was to *"swap [maths] about a little bit, make adults learn GCSEs and teach kids Functional Skills at school"*. The justification for this suggestion was that Functional Skills concerns the practical application of number and this is something that is essential for all learners. GCSEs on the other hand include a higher degree of abstraction and more preparation for studying maths at higher levels. In this respect, learners felt that perhaps a diagnostic assessment prior to being entered for GCSE Maths would be beneficial so that learners could be entered for the most appropriate qualification. Overall, however,

maths learners echoed the sentiments of one learner who said that "*I like functional skills... I don't think it needs to change".*

In comparison, there were a number of areas for development highlighted by Functional Skills English learners:

▪ Some learners would like more time to practise their English skills. These learners reported having lessons of two hours in duration and suggested increasing those to three hours in duration. Other learners, however, stated that longer lessons would not be appropriate as they had other commitments.

▪ Learners noted that smaller class sizes were more beneficial to them as they allowed tutors more time to work with each individual. They suggested limiting class sizes to around 10 learners

▪ More support should be made available to learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, particularly when it comes to exams. This support included additional time in exams that was matched to the type or level of challenge the learner faced. One learner noted that they would like *'a teacher to be there if [they] asked for a teacher, to explain what [something] means in an easier way'.*

▪ Learners noted that there was a distinctive change in vocabulary from Level 1 to Level 2 and that this change was particularly evident in the way exam questions are worded. One learner noted that *'[for] me personally, in class I'm fine with the work but then when it's exam based, it's written differently, you've got to really think [...] before you write, just in case if you got it wrong and then you get no marks for it'.* Learners suggested that this change be lessened somehow, either by technical terminology being brought in to lower levels or by excluding the technical terminology from Level 2.

Assessment

Key findings

- Learners' attitudes towards Functional Skills exams were mixed. Maths learners were often worried about assessments while English learners felt more confident about their exams. However, all learners felt that there should be an element of coursework or portfolio work in the assessment of Functional Skills to take the pressure of off the final exam.

- The majority of maths learners felt that scenario-based questions made their assessments more challenging. All of the focus group participants expressed a preference for a combination of questions with and without scenarios in their Functional Maths exam.

- In comparison, English learners found scenarios more helpful in their exams as they help to contextualise questions. However, they emphasised the need for scenarios to be written in language which suits the level of the qualification and to not be excessively long, as reading questions takes up valuable exam time.

- Learners across all of the maths and English focus groups agreed that scenarios needed to be more focussed on the kinds of activities that they undertake in their own lives, such as writing a job application or CV, planning journeys or decorating a room.

- Learners in all of the focus groups felt that Entry Level qualifications were important, particularly for those who are less confident with their maths or English. In addition, learners in all of the groups understood the difference between Entry Levels and Levels 1 and 2 and few saw any value in renaming the qualifications as Entry Stages.

Attitudes towards Functional Skills exams

Learners in the stage 1 focus groups were asked about their views of the Functional Skills exams. In general, participants' attitudes towards these assessments were mixed. A number of learners said that they were *'terrified'* of the exam and that they *'don't like it'*. One learner, for example, noted that they *'still have a mass panic when I go into an exam room'*. However, this feeling of apprehension was often attributed to emotions stemming from previous experiences of examinations. One learner identified that *'it's just the test itself that, you think 'oh god this is pass or fail''*.

When asked to objectively consider whether the Functional Skills Maths exams tested maths skills fairly, all learners agreed that they did. Some noted, however, that it was useful to have a lot of practice in reading and interpreting exam questions, as it was often challenging to work out what maths was required to answer the question. Other learners noted that the online assessments at Level 1 and Level 2 were inconsistent and often malfunctioned due to connectivity or technology problems. These learners also said they would prefer paper-based exams.

In comparison, learners expressed mixed feelings towards the Functional Skills English exam. They were all knowledgeable about the exam structure and format, and they all

recognised the importance of the exam as a method of assessment. Many learners felt confident in approaching their exams and felt that the course so far had prepared them for exam. Some learners, however, felt that having the qualification entirely dependent on the exam was not a fair method of assessment.

> *"…take for instance your exam day - your car hasn't started, it's peeing down and you have to take the kids to school. So before you've even got there it's stressful... and [the exam doesn't] really take into consideration all the hard work you've put in over the rest of the year."*

> (English learner in stage 1 focus group, General FE College)

Learners in one group were also concerned about the time allowed in the writing exam in particular. One learner explained that:

> *"…for me I'm a slow writer because I write and think about the spelling and grammar and how to put it into a proper sentence... if they can add more time, because forty minutes… at Entry Level 3 you have to do a plan, you have to do a draft, and they give forty minutes... by the time you do the draft, the plan and write a proper letter [for question one] the forty minutes are already finished."*

> (English learner in stage 1 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

This was also raised by participants in the stage 2 English focus groups, and many requested more time in exams to read questions, as they felt that 40 minutes was too short.

This concern extended to those learners who had learning difficulties or disabilities, as one learner explains *"in dyslexia there is a level of... people's disability. [Awarding organisations] kind of categorise the people with dyslexia as only a one"* and allocate a set amount of additional time. Due to the complex nature of dyslexia, however, one learner may require much longer than another. The group therefore felt that it was important to award additional support at a level that was appropriate for the individual learner.

Although learners noted that exams at the Entry Levels were straightforward and easy to understand, they felt that exams at Level 1 and Level 2 increased in difficulty. Further discussion in this group highlighted both the length of questions and the terminology used as critical barriers to success at the higher levels. As one learner explained:

> *"…with me being level 2 English now, the exams are way harder and you have to focus on very big questions and you can have up to 10 marks on one question... it's so difficult, I don't know how I'm going to pull through it. I so struggle with the exam… it's mind blowing how difficult it can be."*

> (English learner in stage 1 focus group, General FE College)

When asked what they would change about the exam, learners noted that it might be good to have the opportunity to practice working in exam conditions. One learner noted that *"I don't think it would be a bad idea if you could do your test in a room like this [classroom] as*

well, but in exam conditions". Learners also said that it would be beneficial if the exam were "*more based on what you learnt, so theory and practical".*

All learners felt that there should be an element of coursework or portfolio work in the assessment of Functional Skills. Learners in the maths focus groups suggested that examiners could "*just watch you"* to assess ability to solve mathematical problems. One learner noted that *"you still need an exam... I think it would be good to have practical parts to the exam"* in order to offset the written answers. Another learner felt that a quiz or group competition could form part of the assessment process to take the emphasis away from the pressurised exam. Learners in the English focus groups suggested the incorporation of a portfolio element to allow them to build up evidence throughout the course. This could then be marked and form part of the qualification alongside the final exam, which would again make this less pressurised. A small number of English learners also said they would prefer speaking and listening assessments if they were primarily in the format of discussions or debates, rather than presentations.

Use of scenarios

Learners across the stage 1 and stage 2 focus groups were asked for their views on the use of scenarios in Functional Skills exams. Some learners in the maths focus groups were able to recall scenarios they had come across in Functional Skills lessons or assessments. These included *"one with filing cabinets … there was two big ones and four little ones",* "*a flowerbed one"* and one which involved working out how many elephants could fit into a circus tent. However, learners were often not able to recall the maths they had to complete within those scenarios.

Some learners in the stage 2 maths focus groups said that they find scenarios helpful in exams as they can put questions into context. However, the majority felt that scenarios made questions more difficult to understand and exams more challenging. Learners in one maths focus group said that they normally had to read a question a few times and then actually block out words to identify numbers and the problem that needed to be solved. They also found that they had to keep going back to the question to check that they had read it correctly. These learners emphasised that scenarios need to be short and not a whole story, as reading questions takes up exam time and they can get distracted by the story in a question.

This was echoed by learners in the stage 1 maths focus groups. When asked how true-to-life exam scenarios were, learners noted that they often did not seem to bear any similarities to real life and it was sometimes difficult to pull the maths out of the questions. Learners in four of the stage 2 groups also said that scenarios need to be more relevant to real life, i.e. not asking how many elephants can fit in a shed, but planning journeys or exchanging currencies. Some learners in the stage 1 focus groups suggested that appropriate scenarios would be work-based and dependent upon the vocational area the learner worked in. Other learners noted that the scenarios should be relevant not only to work but to people's lives.

> *"Keep it relevant... say like, John gets a salary increase from £18,000 to £45,000, his tax bracket then is going to go up to 45%, what's his annual salary going to be?"*

Other topics learners suggested were: working out changes to salary, tax and bonuses; mobile phone contract comparison; overtime allowances and better-off calculations; benefit restrictions on working hours and better-off calculations; and, self-employment income and taxation. One learner suggested piloting scenarios with people who are at the level of the exam they will be included in first.

> *"…actually asking someone at the level of people that are going to be doing it. So rather than someone who is higher level saying, 'oh, that's okay' or not, having someone who is going to be at that level, actually trying the questions before you actually put them upon everybody."*

(Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

Functional Skills English learners across both the stage 1 and stage 2 were more readily able to identify contextualised scenarios they had worked with in lessons or exams. These included writing an article about social media; writing an application for a managerial job; writing a speech; and a reading exercise about helping children stay safe. Most of the memorable scenarios related to writing exercises, with learners recalling few reading exercises and no specific speaking and listening exercises. They were able, however, to recall that the speaking and listening exam included a familiar and unfamiliar topic, along with a presentation in some cases.

Learners in the stage 2 English focus groups had mixed views on the use of scenarios in exams. Some found that it helped them put it in context, especially as this was the way they had learned in their lessons. Others found that scenarios could make exams more difficult and confusing, particularly if the topic was one they were unfamiliar with or if the question was long and detailed.

When asked about the applicability of the scenarios in English exams to everyday life, learners acknowledged that although they were not always entirely relevant, learning to adapt their skills to these situations was important. One learner noted that *'it's basically one time in your life you might come across it... it's basically teaching you as well as you learning'*. Some learners, however, reported that some scenarios were difficult to follow because of *'the way that it's written'*.

Despite this, participants in all of the English focus groups suggested that scenarios in exams needed to be more focussed on the kinds of activities that they did in their own lives, such as writing a job application or CV. One learner described a piece of class work that would have made a good exam scenario.

> *"We done a bit of homework... about cars, kind of your car's broken down and you had to write a formal and informal letter. The formal letter was to the garage where you purchased the car. The informal one was to a friend saying what happened... that was quite good."*

(English learner in stage 1 focus group, General FE College)

Work related scenarios were also considered to be appropriate, but only if they were not closely linked to a specific job role. Learners felt that full contextualisation to vocational areas would be counter-productive as *'if you always have the same [topic] what you are interested in you never understand other issues'*.

In general, learners in the maths focus groups said they would prefer a combination of questions with and without scenarios in their Functional Maths exam. This was particularly the case for ESOL learners, many of whom had very good levels of maths and had had jobs in accountancy or similar sectors in their home countries. However, they found maths exams in England difficult to do well in because of the level of English included in the questions.

> *"I've got Level 1 maths in learning centre. Yes, the time is you know only one hour to complete the exam and it is online. I passed but not very well… because it's still English, yes."*

>> (ESOL learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

Similarly, participants in the English focus groups said that scenarios also need to be written in language which suits the level of the exam and not be excessively long.

Entry Level qualifications

One suggestion raised through the consultation was that 'Entry Level' qualifications be renamed as 'Entry Stage' qualifications. This idea was tested out with learners in the stage 2 focus groups.

Learners in all of the focus groups felt that Entry Level qualifications were important, particularly for those who are less confident with their maths or English. Participants who had taken Entry Level qualifications had found them helpful in filling some of the gaps in their knowledge and allowing them to work at their own pace. However, some learners from a maths focus group felt that the work had been too easy for them at this level and questioned the value of taking these qualifications. Learners in one English focus group had found the lack of adult appropriate functional skills resources for lower levels off-putting leading to tutors making their own resources.

Learners in all of the groups understood the difference between Entry Levels and Levels 1 and 2. With the exception of one of the maths focus groups, few participants saw any value in renaming Entry Levels as Entry Stages; in fact, some thought this may be more confusing for learners. Many of the participants in the ESOL group had moved from Scotland to England and actually found the difference between the Scottish and English levels more confusing than Entry Levels.

> *"I think it is easier to see this, call its name. Entry Level 2 and Entry Level 1 is easier."*

>> (ESOL learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

However, the majority of focus group participants liked the idea of being tested internally for Entry Level qualifications. These learners said that they tended to feel nervous in exams and therefore did not perform to their best, so felt that an internal assessment process, including

some element of coursework for example, would give a better reflection of their skills. However, some felt that internal assessments may result in biased results, especially if teachers like or do not like particular students.

> *"I think for somebody coming in at entry level if that's where they're definitely starting and they're scared and they're a bit - you know… they're not very confident. I think for them to be able to just do the test with the tutors, knowing that they're in a relaxed environment, the tutor is there, I think that would help build somebody's confidence to actually move on to the higher levels and do an exam."*

> (Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

One learner felt that an internal assessment would be better if it meant they received their results sooner. They found that the current delay between taking their exam and receiving their results meant they had to wait to find out whether they needed to continue with their learning or could progress onto the next level. In comparison, an internal assessment would potentially avoid gaps between learners being assessed, receiving their results and going back onto a Functional Skills programme if they needed to retake their exam.

> *"Yeah, because sometimes it takes too long for your results to come back. Whereas, if you've done it wrong then you can start again straight away rather than waiting for results to come back, so it takes less time to get it actually done."*

> (Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Independent Training Provider)

Comparison to GCSEs

Key findings

- Learners across all of the focus groups felt that Functional Skills was different in both content and delivery to GCSEs.

- On the whole, maths and English learners alike felt that the ways in which Functional Skills was taught made the content more relevant and useful in their wider lives than GCSEs.

- Learners also felt that the teaching methods and classroom environment of their Functional Skills courses were more supportive than those they had experienced at school.

Learners across all of the focus groups felt that Functional Skills are different to GCSEs in their approach to both teaching and learning. On the whole, learners in both the stage 1 and stage 2 maths and English focus groups felt that the ways in which content was taught in Functional Skills made it more relevant and useful in their wider lives than their GCSE or GCE O Level courses had been. This was because they could see how the content of Functional Skills could be directly applied to their work, education or home lives. Learners in one English group noted that since beginning Functional Skills, English is "*more useful*

now… what we're doing is what we use daily". Similarly, maths learners viewed their learning as valuable in their wider lives, for example by enabling them to help their children with their own maths.

> *"For me personally, because I did O level and it was trigonometry and algebra and I absolutely hated it. I couldn't see the point for myself personally, I didn't want to be an engineer or whatever… and so this for me is far more relevant."*

> (Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

> *"…I've got two young kids, they're growing up. My eldest is starting GCSEs…When I get out [of prison] I'm going to help him out, you know what I mean, because I never studied much in life myself."*

> (Learner in stage 2 focus group, Offender Learning Provider)

In terms of the differences between Functional Skills and GCSE delivery, learners noted that the structure of the qualifications made the course quite different to GCSE.

> *"I'd say it's easier because Functional Skills is equivalent to GCSE so... it's just a course that is broken down a lot more and there is probably less questions in the exam than in the GCSE exam. And there's only one paper..."*

> (Maths learner in stage 1 focus group, Independent Training Provider)

Some learners spoke about the supportive environment of Functional Skills teaching in contrast to their experiences of learning maths at school. Of GCSEs, learners said that *"[schools] didn't make it relevant"* and that "*if you needed support you got an extra teacher and they would sometimes take you out of class"*. Both of these factors contributed to learners' negative experiences at school. In comparison, learners in all groups noted that there was more flexibility in Functional Skills to provide individual support during lessons. They all found this to be useful and a particular benefit to Functional Skills. Participants in one stage 2 maths focus group in particular, some of whom had returned to education fearful of maths due to previous negative experiences, said that tutors took account of different skill levels and different learning styles and, above all, made learning maths enjoyable. One participant in the group also valued the support provided by other students on the course.

> *"When I came here I felt really nervous, thinking what if I've still got that awful feeling about doing maths… But I realised it's so much better coming in knowing everyone is there because they want to learn maths just like you. When we're all confused about it, everyone was confused, so you help each other."*

> (Maths learner in stage 2 focus group, Adult and Community Learning Provider)

However, there was a perception amongst learners in the stage 2 focus groups that GCSE was a "better" qualification to have than Functional Skills, as it provided them with a broader set of skills. This was partly due to the nature of the exam, as learners had found the format of the Functional Skills English exam, requiring detailed answers but to only two questions, less demanding than more comprehensive GCSE exam papers.

"…not that it was too easy. It still had its difficulties. It wasn't like a GSCE difficult, because that's what I'd say was difficult, but it wasn't something that you had to really use your brain for, but you had to do a lot for it, if you know what I mean. It just wasn't very balanced. I spent an hour and a half in a room on literally two questions, whereas, GSCE I'd have had a booklet to have done that on."

(English learner in stage 2 focus group, Independent Training Provider)

Benefits and changes

Key findings

- Functional Skills increase learners' confidence and self-worth.

- Functional Skills have a positive impact on employability.

- Functional English impacts on learners' wellbeing and engagement with the family and community.

- English qualifications are often a route into further study or employment.

- Learners would make few changes to Functional Skills Maths but suggested that the relationship between Functional Skills and GCSE needs reviewing.

- Learners would like to see the vocabulary used in assessments become standardised across the levels.

- Learners would like more time in exams.

- Learners would like additional support (i.e. for dyslexic learners) to be allocated on a sliding scale according to the level of difficulty or disability experienced.

Learners identified a range of benefits of gaining Functional Skills qualifications, many of which related to self-confidence and self-esteem. One learner noted that gaining qualifications enables learners to "*move forward… you feel like you've been stuck*". In addition, learners felt that success in Functional Skills increased their self-worth as well as confidence in their skills.

Learners also recognised that Functional Skills is an important qualification for work as "*Without Functional Skills you can't get a job [because] you have to have a certain grade*". In that respect, learners felt that Functional Skills was as valuable as GCSEs, as having a Functional Skills qualification *"shows that you've done it again even after school"* and, more importantly, "*that you've improved from school too*".

Learners in the English groups noted a range of benefits specifically related to gaining Functional Skills English qualifications. These were related to several areas of life and work. It was noted, for example, that reading, writing, and speaking and listening skills played an integral part of an individual's personal life, wellbeing and engagement with their community. Learners had also found that their improved skills in English helped them to support their children, engage in local community groups and keep themselves and their families safe.

"We help ourselves to help our children, because the only way the children can learn, they can learn through the mum... sometimes the children in the class, they're too many, they cannot learn that much."

(English learner in stage 1 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

"Reading and writing takes you out of trouble, you know because if you are, you don't know how to read and write you are very ignorant... you are a vulnerable person."

(English learner in stage 1 focus group, Specialist Designated Institution)

For other learners, Functional Skills English was a pathway to further learning and longer-term employment ambitions. One learner reported that Functional Skills was an integral part of their preferred progression pathway.

"Personally I want it to go and do a thing called Troops to Teachers and they… for some reason they have changed the criteria this year so… for me to be able to obtain that I would need to do GCSE… what I'm doing now may actually help me to [meet these requirements]."

(English learner in stage 1 focus group, General FE College)

Key messages

This section presents the key messages arising from the findings of the learner focus groups.

Previous experience and awareness

- Many learners arrived at Functional Skills lessons having had negative experiences of learning maths or English previously.

- Learners were aware and generally pleased with the content of their course and their progression pathways.

- Functional Skills was viewed as an alternative qualification for learners who had not achieved a C grade at GCSE in school, and acted as a progression pathway towards GCSE qualifications.

- Learners were generally pleased with their experience of Functional Skills maths and English.

Skills and abilities

- Learners were able to identify the skills required for Functional Skills qualifications.

- Functional English skills were seen as integral to all parts of learners' lives and learners were able to identify ways in which they could use Functional Maths in their wider lives.

- Skills related to work were particularly important for Functional Skills learners in prison.

- ESOL learners particularly emphasised the importance of speaking and listening skills as these enabled them to communicate with people in their community.

- Learners did not identify any missing skills in their maths but would like more focus on the practical application of skills in their Functional English classes.

- Learners felt that Entry Level 3 maths and English skills were sufficient for a lower-level or first-time job in a non-specialist industry.

- In general, learners agreed that the skills included in the draft Functional Maths Standards were important and could identify the ways in which they would apply to their wider lives and work.

- The skills included in the draft Functional English Standards were also viewed as important, but learners in all of the focus groups particularly highlighted skills which were needed to complete forms.

- Learners suggested that some of the skills included in the draft Functional English Standards could be tailored to employment and explicitly mention completing job application forms and writing CVs.

Delivery

- Learners found the activities undertaken in Functional Skills classes useful as they enabled them to apply their skills to their wider lives. In particular, learners valued activities which related their learning to the world of work.

- Opportunities to develop peer support relationships in the classroom was particularly important for Functional Skills learners in prisons.

- Learners strongly felt that if technology were to be embedded within their Functional maths and English courses then it needed to be reliable. Digital activities also needed to be meaningful to their wider lives and support the development of their computer skills.

- In general, learners felt that the amount of time they spent in their Functional English and maths lessons was about right. Some learners said they would like to have more hours a week on their English or maths but acknowledged it may be difficult for others to fit these in with their work or family commitments.

- Learners had mixed views about modular approaches to Functional maths and English. Some felt that this would help them to gain their qualifications more quickly as they could focus on one topic at a time and not get confused in assessments. Others enjoyed working on a variety of topics at once or wanted to get a whole qualification in one go, without having to take multiple assessments. In particular, a modular approach may be impractical for learners in prisons if they move institution.

- In general, learners said they would make very few changes to Functional Skills Maths. However, learners had a number of suggestions to improve Functional English delivery, including more time to practice their English, smaller class sizes, more support for learners with learning difficulties, and having consistent terminology across different levels.

Assessment

- Learners' attitudes towards Functional Skills exams were mixed. Maths learners were often worried about assessments while English learners felt more confident about their exams. However, all learners felt that there should be an element of coursework or portfolio work in the assessment of Functional Skills to take the pressure of off the final exam.

- The majority of maths learners felt that scenario-based questions made their assessments more challenging. All of the focus group participants expressed a preference for a combination of questions with and without scenarios in their Functional Maths exam.

- In comparison, English learners found scenarios more helpful in their exams as they help to contextualise questions. However, they emphasised the need for scenarios to be written in language which suits the level of the qualification and to not be excessively long, as reading questions takes up valuable exam time.

- Learners across all of the maths and English focus groups agreed that scenarios needed to be more focussed on the kinds of activities that they undertake in their own lives, such as writing a job application or CV, planning journeys or decorating a room.

- Learners in all of the focus groups felt that Entry Level qualifications were important, particularly for those who are less confident with their maths or English. In addition, learners in all of the groups understood the difference between Entry Levels and Levels 1 and 2 and few saw any value in renaming the qualifications as Entry Stages.

Comparison to GCSEs

- Learners across all of the focus groups felt that Functional Skills was different in both content and delivery to GCSEs.

- On the whole, maths and English learners alike felt that the content of Functional Skills was more relevant and useful in their wider lives than GCSEs.

- Learners also felt that the teaching methods and classroom environment of their Functional Skills courses were more supportive than those they had experienced at school.

Benefits and changes

- Functional Skills increase learners' confidence and self-worth.

- Functional Skills have a positive impact on employability.

- Functional English impacts on learners' wellbeing and engagement with the family and community.

- English qualifications are often a route into further study or employment.

Appendix: Focus group activities

Stage 1 focus groups: English skills required for an entry-level job

Learners were asked to identify which of the below lists of English skills would be needed for an entry-level or first-time job in a non-specialist industry. One list describes Entry Level 3 skills and one list describes Level 2 skills.

To get an entry-level job, people should be able to do things like –

- order goods or services by telephone
- understand key points in health and safety notices at work
- read job advertisements in the local paper or job centre
- write a cheque
- write a short memo or letter to colleagues
- provide a short description of main responsibilities for a job application
- use telephone helplines for information or advice
- ask for information in the local library
- read a local newspaper, newsletter or magazine
- write a letter to a local newspaper, magazine or newsletter
- explain a technical problem or fault to a service engineer
- find a telephone number for a local service from a directory
- follow cooking instructions on packaged food

To get an entry-level job, people should be able to do things like –

- handle a difficult situation at work
- find information in an instruction manual or a technical handbook
- read and comparing service contracts, e.g. for photocopiers or cleaning services
- summarise information from a document in preparation for a meeting
- reply to a business letter requesting specific information
- make positive contributions to a meeting at work expressing an opinion among strangers at a public meeting
- handle negotiations and expressing views about a controversial issue
- find information in the local library to clarify an issue or support a position
- write a formal letter of complaint or advice to an official or an organisation putting forward a proposal at a parents' meeting at school
- follow instructions for self-assembly furniture or other equipment
- follow written instructions and advice for post-operative care for self or others
- describe an event on an insurance claim

Stage 1 focus groups: Maths skills required for an entry level job

Learners were asked to identify which of the below lists of English skills would be needed for an entry-level or first-time job in a non-specialist industry. One list describes Entry Level 3 skills and one list describes Level 2 skills.

To get an entry-level job, people should be able to do things like –

- Understand price labels on prepacked items
- check the receipt and change when paying for goods
- compare the price of goods of equivalent weight or capacity
- select sizes and prices from a table in a manufacturer's catalogue
- use a simple map to find a location, e.g. for an interview or delivery
- weigh loose items that are sold by weight
- match the number on the front of a bus with the destination
- make and keeping appointments
- understand opening hours
- understand public safety information
- pay usual household bills
- follow cooking and storage instructions on packaged food

To get an entry-level job, people should be able to do things like –

- compare products and services and working out 'best buy'
- compare costs of different methods of payment for goods and services, e.g. cash, direct debit or monthly payments
- compare financial services offered by banks, building societies and brokers, e.g. loans, credit facilities
- understand and interpreting data used in advertising
- work out the real cost of items when prices are given excluding VAT
- understand the relevance of information about local council and government expenditure
- understand and interpreting data published by the local council and government
- carry out a survey and presenting information for a local campaign
- work out a personal or family budget
- understand and use nutritional information on food packages

Stage 2 focus groups: The importance of Functional English skills

Learners were asked to rank the skills under each of the headings in order of how useful they were to their everyday life and work. Learners were then asked to discuss how they could use these skills in their wider lives and work.

Speaking and listening

- Listen for the main points of explanations

- Follow spoken instructions

- Listen and respond to other points of view

- Take part in conversations

- Ask questions to find out information

Reading

- Read and understand pieces of writing

- Recognise the purpose of different texts

- Understand words and phrases used on forms

- Use a dictionary to find the meaning of new words

- Put words in alphabetical order

Writing

- Write in complete sentences

- Use basic grammar

- Correctly spell words

- Plan and draft pieces of text

- Use paragraphs

Stage 2 focus groups: The importance of Functional Maths skills

Learners were asked to rank the skills under each of the headings in order of how useful they were to their everyday life and work. Learners were then asked to discuss how they could use these skills in their wider lives and work.

Numbers

- Understand common fractions and decimals (e.g. ½ and 0.5)

- Solve multiplication (x) and division (÷) problems

- Solve addition (+) and subtraction (-) problems

- Understand tables and bar charts

- Calculate probabilities

Common measures

- Calculate sums of money

- Read and measure digital time

- Read and measure analogue time

- Measure and compare length, weight and temperature

- Round amounts of money to the nearest £1 or 10p

Shape and space

- Recognise 2D and 3D shapes

- Calculate perimeter and area of shapes

- Calculate volume of shapes

- Understand lines of symmetry