

**LITERACIES MATTER! SCOTTISH AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES: 10 SEPTEMBER 2010, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW**

**MICHAEL CROSS**

Thank you Kay. I am delighted to be speaking here today on behalf of Scottish Government Ministers who were unable to attend, but send their best wishes for a successful conference. I congratulate UNESCO , Learning and Teaching Scotland, Glasgow and Stirling Universities for organising this Conference to look at Scottish and Global Perspectives of Literacies.

First of all, let me begin by saying that the Scottish Government recognises the importance of literacies to both the people of Scotland and the Scottish economy. We know solid literacy and numeracy skills can transform people's lives.

So, last year, we commissioned a national survey of the literacies levels of the adult population. The subsequent report

was published on 13 August. It is significant: it gives us up-to-date, robust information which will be of great use as we develop the next stages of our *Adult Literacy and Numeracy* policy.

I know Ralf will shortly be speaking to you about the Survey and I certainly don't want to steal his thunder. But I hope he will forgive me if I refer to three of the key findings to provide some context to what I am about to say:

- first, we know just over **73.3%** of adults in Scotland have a level of skills recognised internationally as appropriate for a contemporary society;
- however, the remaining **one quarter** of the population (26.7%) may face occasional challenges or barriers as a result of their low skills. But generally they'll cope with their day-to-day lives.

- however, among this cohort, 3.6% of Scotland's adults (that's **one person in 28**) face serious challenges in their literacies practice. This could range from being unable to count their change accurately, or having difficulties in writing their own name and address, or recognising the destination on the front of a bus.
- Meanwhile, the Government's national indicator (included in our National Performance Framework, and a sign of the importance we accord this agenda) shows a very slight improvement in the number of adults with low or no qualifications.
- Together, these figures show there is both cause for satisfaction. But room also for improvement. If we are to realise the Government's ambition of a wealthier, fairer and smarter Scotland we need to find more ways of supporting adults to reach their full potential. For us, that means thinking across the breadth of our portfolios about

So we recognise the huge potential that learning has to empower individuals and society.

Our vision is of a learning nation where everyone has access to lifelong learning opportunities to improve their skills so they can progress in their lives as individuals, family members, workers and citizens.

## **Challenges**

But we can't discuss this future vision without putting this into context. We face a desperately challenging economic climate.

The economic recovery in Scotland remains fragile and we're cautious about employment as Scotland starts to return to growth. To accelerate our recovery, we need to make sure our skills and training support are substantial, sustainable and flexible.

### **SG investment in adult learning/Skills Strategy**

Against this background, we shall shortly publish a refreshed skills strategy with a renewed focus on the skills needed for economic recovery and long-term success.

The Strategy will be based around four key themes:

- **empowering Scotland's people;**
- **supporting Scotland's employers;**
- **simplifying Scotland's skills system; and,**
- **strengthening partnerships** (both locally and nationally).

I'll take each theme in turn. **Empowering Scotland's people** means we need to ensure they can access the right advice and

support, as well as opportunities to acquire the skills they need to benefit from future economic success.

An important part of achieving this aim will be to improve levels of adult Literacy and numeracy. Improving employability capacity is crucial if we are to develop a competitive economy, promote education and lifelong learning, tackle ill health and improve wellbeing - as I said earlier, reaching across the range of Government interests. And a job is also an important spring board bringing much more than financial independence and productivity. It provides opportunities for networking, building friendships and strengthening confidence.

Second, the Strategy will focus on better **supporting Scotland's employers** by improving our understanding and assessment of the skills they need for future success - and matching that with a responsive supply of training and qualifications.

Third, the Strategy will **simplify Scotland's skills system**, ensuring it's more coherent and easy to understand for individuals and employers.

And finally, it will **strengthen partnerships**. We want to build collective responsibility between the public, private and third sectors across Scotland to help improve skills and the contribution they make towards achieving Scotland's social and economic aspirations. Self-evidently improved partnership working is a central means of responding to financial pressures.

The refreshed Skills Strategy will appear this Autumn.

## **Reducing stigma**

Let me now say something about something that struck me when I came to this job - a self-evident necessity: the need to reduce the stigma associated with poor levels of literacy and numeracy. An adult learner can find re- entering the world of learning a daunting prospect, especially if they have had a

negative experience in the past. For many adult learners it is their first contact with education for some years, even decades. Never more so than in the field of literacies. Individuals may need a great deal of courage, not only because of the fear of failure, but also because of the accompanying stigma which literacies learning often attracts.

That is why we continue to work with partners such as Skills Development Scotland and Learning and Teaching Scotland, to raise awareness of literacies and reduce stigma through our Big Plus campaign.

I have to say I'm particularly impressed by the range of methods used to encourage reluctant learners, such as the powerful TV commercials and also the popular SPL Reading Stars, which uses the motivational power of football to attract families into really engaging literacy sessions in libraries across the country. (For our international visitors, the SPL is Scottish football premier division.)

As you know better than me, literacies learning can have a positive impact at **social**, **economic** and **behavioural** levels.

At a **social** level it can give people the confidence and skills to interact with one another; to contribute to their local community and the means to broaden their interests and widen their horizons.

At an **economic** level, it can mean the difference between employment and unemployment; earning a living wage; getting promoted and generally having a better lifestyle. Imagine being unable to access and use the internet. And being shut out from online offers, further learning opportunities and the enormous variety of communication channels.

At a **behavioural** level there are many examples of people using learning to transform their lives. It can help break the pattern of criminal behaviour. It can provide a positive outlook, giving offenders, or those at risk of offending, more hope and

help them to realise the benefits of living within society, instead of working against it.

The Learning and Teaching Scotland Adult Literacies Report for 2009, which Kay mentioned earlier, provides terrific examples of what can be achieved by learners when they access the appropriate support for their needs. I do urge you to read this report. You can find it on the LTS website.

### **Future generations**

Enhancing literacy and numeracy skills also supports future generations. By improving literacy and numeracy capacity in families, we maximise children and young people's potential, and help to reduce the cycle of disadvantage and unemployment across generations.

### **Citizenship**

I know that throughout today, you'll get the chance to listen to experts in the field of adult literacies. You'll discuss the

empowering role they play in promoting participation, health and well being, citizenship and social development.

I want to take a moment to concentrate on the importance of literacy, numeracy and citizenship. Because herein is another perfect example of the cross-cutting benefits of improving these skills - the Census Learning Pack, developed in partnership between Scottish Government and General Registers of Scotland (GROS).

This pack is a resource for tutors and teachers to help both adult literacies learners, and adults whose first language is not English, better understand the purpose of the Census, and prepare them to complete the Census next year. It should help build learners' confidence and skills successfully to complete the form and to appreciate the importance of their participation in an exercise contributing directly to the future of Scotland. We're launching the pack today and it is available on the "adult literacies online" website – [www.aloscotland.com](http://www.aloscotland.com).

## **Scottish Government Action**

Let's spend a moment now on what the Scottish Government is doing further to improve performance against our National Indicator. At present, we're working on a Literacy Action Plan which will set out the priorities for **all** learners across the lifelong learning continuum, from early years to adulthood, to improve standards of literacy and numeracy.

This Action Plan will set out our vision for ensuring the people of Scotland have the skills and confidence they need to achieve their goals and to support a dynamic economy. It'll be published this autumn and sitting alongside it will be some specific, clear actions for adult literacies.

More generally, it is nearly 10 years since the then Scottish Executive published the *Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland* (ALNIS) report. Between 2001 and 2008, Government invested £65 million in the strategy, with funding

routed through local authority-led Adult Literacy and Numeracy Partnerships.

Nearly 200,000 adult learners were helped to improve their literacies during this time...and of course continue to be supported.

Scotland's strategy has been internationally celebrated for its social practice approach, and we can be proud of many of its achievements. In particular, the collaborative effort between different organisations has contributed to a diverse delivery landscape in which learners can achieve their personal goals and progress to new opportunities. A recent example of this is the Kickstart programme run by Moray Council's Essential Skills and Moray College teams. Over a 4 week course during the summer, students brush up on their skills in preparation for starting college.

However, nearly ten years on from ALNIS, we are living in a different world. Public services are adapting to reduced funding; the relationship between national and local government has been fundamentally changed; the world is technologically different; and we have new knowledge about levels of literacy and numeracy need among Scotland's adults.

So now is the right time to reassess the strategy, to re-affirm the core elements contributing to its success, and to challenge ourselves to achieve more, with less resource - for the benefit of all Scotland's citizens.

So often – and it was ever thus – the solutions, as I suggested earlier, lie in partnerships – sometimes a term rather loosely bandied about. But over the next decade there will need to be robust, powerful collaboration between referral agencies, delivery providers, employers, national and local stakeholders to make this happen.

Both the Literacy Action Plan, and the specific actions for adult literacy and numeracy, will demonstrate the Scottish Government's pledge to increasing the literacies capabilities of the population in order to meet the changing demands of modern society, workplace, family and communities.

These actions – and the work you do - sit at the heart of social inclusion. That means opportunities for participation and choice; building capacity within individuals and communities; and empowering people to identify and make the changes they need to progress in their lives.

Government, its national agencies and partner bodies, and decision makers at local level need to make the connections between literacy and numeracy and other policies. By now, you'll see I mean connecting literacy and numeracy development with the positive outcomes of health and wellbeing; with financial capability and with employability, to name only three.

As an example of this cross-agency model, the next stages for adult literacy and numeracy policy development is being informed by a Strategic Advisory Group representing the key sectors and organisations. There will also be an opportunity for stakeholders and the public to comment on a draft when we post it on the Scottish Government website late Autumn.

So please take the opportunity to provide your thoughts. These will help to inform the final version which we plan to launch in December.

## **Conclusion**

Let me wrap up. If I have to leave you with one thought today, it would be to urge you to continue to seek out new avenues for working in partnership. And it is important that these partnerships include businesses and employers. In the current, and future, economic climate it is crucial that we all plan and co-

ordinate provision, share resources and maximise opportunities for learners.

I know everyone here today is fully committed to adult learning in all its forms. Let me reassure you once again that I, my Scottish Government colleagues, and indeed Scottish Ministers, share that commitment.

So good luck with your conference and thank you for inviting me to be part of it!

I think we are in for a really interesting day!