

Research Briefing N° 61

Armed Forces Longitudinal Study: Basic Skills and Operational Effectiveness in the British Armed Forces

This study investigates provision, infrastructure and support to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of servicemen and women during their early career in the Armed Forces, and the impact of skills levels on operational effectiveness.

Key words: basic skills; longitudinal; education and training; workplace learning; Armed Forces

Key findings

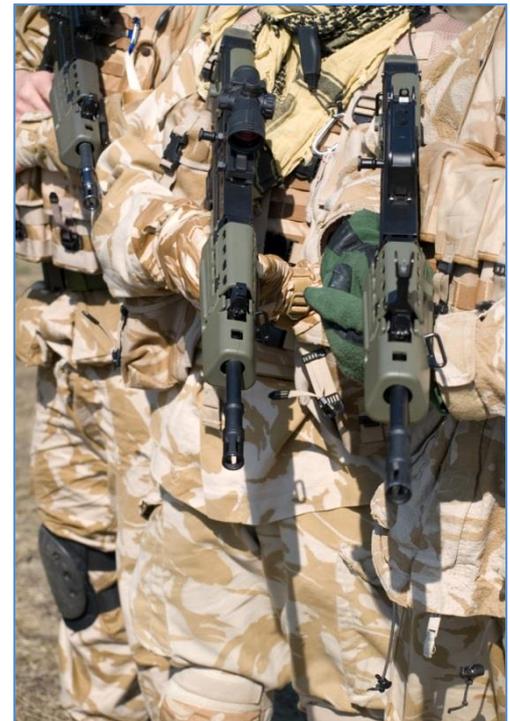
Basic skills policy in the Armed Forces represents a nationally significant model of intensive skills development. The findings of this study have an audience beyond the Armed Forces and policymakers with lessons for other large employers.

Conclusive evidence is found of the importance of basic skills for professional development and operational effectiveness in each branch of the Armed Forces (Royal Navy, Army and RAF):

- literacy and numeracy skills are essential to doing a job effectively and progressing within that job;
- speaking and listening skills are the most important; and
- offering day-to-day support to those with poor literacy and numeracy skills to carry out low-level tasks is likely to corrode operational efficiency in the workplace.

High levels of achievement in gaining basic skills qualifications are attributed to:

- an ethos generating high expectations of success;
- a strong training culture;
- intensive, flexible training, relevant to workplace needs and motivating for those with poor prior educational experiences; and
- a whole organisation approach, based on strong commitment to helping personnel with basic skills needs.



Other findings include:

- the importance of good skills and the impact of poor skills needs to be reinforced constantly across all ranks; and
- sensitivity to institutional ethos is needed to secure buy-in from managers.

What we did

The Armed Forces Longitudinal Study (AFLS) was carried out between 2008 and 2011 by researchers from the IOE's **National Development and Research Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC)** with assistance from the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE). It was funded jointly by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Ministry of Defence.

Each year, around 50% of recruits to the Army join the Service with literacy or numeracy skills below Level 1. This longitudinal investigation into literacy and numeracy learning in the Royal Navy, Army, and the Royal Air Force, aimed to:

- assess the impact of literacy and numeracy skills and literacy and numeracy interventions on the personal and professional development of Service personnel and on their operational effectiveness; and
- make recommendations for the most effective interventions and support for Service personnel in their first two years of service.

How we did it

The AFLS followed a mixed methods approach. In-depth qualitative data came from interviews with recruits in each of the three Services, supplemented by testimony from line managers, trainers and senior officers, education staff and literacy and numeracy practitioners. Quantitative research assessed the literacy and numeracy skills levels, and reviewed the literacy and numeracy needs and learning, of a representative sample of 1,622 Army recruits. Data were gathered three times during the recruits' first two and a half years of training and service.

Research questions focused on:

- the nature and characteristics of literacy and numeracy provision and support;
- the connections between basic skills levels, interventions and military training / operational effectiveness; and
- Armed Forces personnel's experience of basic skills provision.

The design was required to be flexible enough to respond to the Armed Forces context; for example, online surveys replaced face-to-face testing following the active deployment of recruits to Afghanistan.

Further information

Part 1 of the project report is available at: ['Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study: Part 1' \(2012\). BIS Research Paper Number 78](#)

Part 2 of the project report is available at: ['Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study: Part 2' \(2012\). BIS Research Paper Number 79](#)

Findings from this research continue to have an impact on high level policy discussions – see [NRDC news](#)

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