

Proof Positive

Learners' views on approaches to identifying
achievement in non-accredited learning

Briefing on the aims, key outcomes and
implications of recent NIACE research

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Introduction

Between March and August 2001, NIACE undertook an enquiry into learners' perspectives on a range of current systems for identifying, recording and validating achievement in non-accredited learning.

The aims of the research were:

- to explore learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of different approaches to identifying gain from non-accredited learning
- to identify what learners require from such approaches and in particular, the value they place on those they have experienced
- to make an evidence-based contribution to policy development and quality assurance in the area of non-accredited learning.

The rationale was that learners' requirements of such approaches might well be different to those of other stakeholders, for example those who deliver adult learning, those who manage it and those who fund it. In the current policy context this is more than academic curiosity. The key documents outlining the priorities, funding methodology and quality assurance arrangements for the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) all emphasise the centrality of learners. For example, the guidelines on *Self-Assessment and Development Plans* maintain that:

'The new arrangements have been designed to ensure that the interests of the learner come first and are of paramount importance.'¹

It is essential that the design of these developing processes, indicators and standards should recognise those aspects of learning that learners identify as being both in their interests and of interest to them. Without this, any system to fund, inspect or manage achievement will be significantly poorer and at risk of failure. The commissioning of this research by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) was a welcome recognition of this principle and also of the paucity of evidence to support a proper understanding of learners' perspectives on emergent systems.

The context for this research includes a significant body of material addressing the principles and practicalities of identifying achievement in non-accredited learning.² In particular, it complements a recent case study based examination of various current systems by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA).³

Research

Qualitative methods were used. Learners were interviewed, individually and in small groups, using a semi-structured schedule. Most conversations were one-to-one and groups were rarely larger than six people. Tutors were present in only a few of the interviews: those with learners recovering from mental health difficulties; and those with learners who needed support communicating verbally.

The timing, location and duration of the interviews were unpredictable and affected by the immediate circumstances of the learners. Whilst this was occasionally problematic, it reflects in microcosm the issues – of tolerance, understanding, language, time, resources and distractions – that will also affect the implementation of any system for identifying learning gain.

Sample

The sample included 169 learners. These were as diverse as possible in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, level of learning support needs and the curriculum. Subjects being studied ranged from bobbin lace to sound engineering, computer literacy to sculpture, yoga to creative writing. Some courses were designed with the needs of particular learners in mind, for example those recovering from mental illness, with basic skills needs or with learning difficulties or disabilities. The sample encompassed 'widening participation' courses that were specifically intended to lead to accredited provision, and many programmes that were not. All learners had current or recent experience of some kind of system for identifying their achievement from non-accredited learning.

Ten education providers were involved. These included designated institutions,⁴ further education colleges working in partnership with local authorities and voluntary and community organisations, and local authority community colleges. All were using a learning outcomes-based approach to identifying achievement in non-accredited programmes. In other words, learners were asked at an early stage, either individually or collectively, to agree a range of outcomes which were later used to help assess learning gain. The methods and timings for initial identification and subsequent review

varied between providers, as did the extent to which these processes were recorded.

Members of staff were interviewed, using a semi-structured schedule, to identify any links between learning outcomes systems and wider quality assurance processes, teaching/learning approaches and staff development.

Key findings

Value of learning

The learners' stories combine to create an eloquent narrative about the value of adult and community learning, celebrating the energising, life-enhancing, health-giving and career-building consequences of non-accredited programmes.

'One woman, for whom English was not her first language, described how to others she was only a house-cleaner but to herself she was now a thinker, a reader and potentially a writer. A creative writing student who had spent many years locked in a psychiatric hospital ward described how when he set off from home to attend his class he was proud to see himself as a student – he was no longer 'just a dosser'. Parents on a deaf awareness course at their local primary school spoke of their realisation that 'You don't have to be intelligent to come to learning. People who thought they were too old or too thick, who wouldn't normally learn, are learning.'

Others spoke of being unexpectedly and irrevocably 'hooked' by their experience into becoming committed learners. This was underpinned by an appreciation of the intrinsic value of learning as well as the contingent economic, social and intellectual benefits. In some cases this extended to a sense of entitlement: 'You should be allowed to learn just for the hell of it'. In many ways, their enthusiasm echoes the eclectic vision offered by David Blunkett in the Foreword to *The Learning Age* – of learning as a nutrient for civic, social, economic, artistic and spiritual activity.

The opportunity to study without qualifications was widely appreciated. The benefits were seen as wider than the achievement of agreed learning outcomes, including the recognition of unanticipated

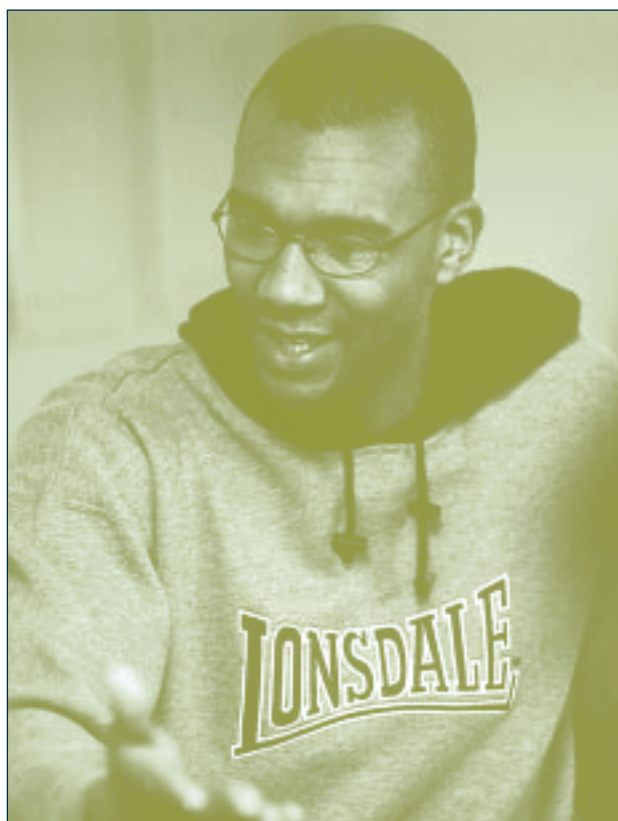
(or unspecified) but valued gains such as greater confidence and self-awareness. Reference was made both to the lack of pressure and competition associated with qualifications, and to the dignity of having greater choice about what was learned. This was described as an 'adult' approach and something that distinguished their experience from school. 'At school you are told what you will learn. It's an adult way of learning, to make your own choices.'

Concern was expressed, particularly by older learners, about the possibility of reduced public subsidy for non-qualification-based learning and the prospect of higher fees. This was seen by some as a profound threat to their continued well-being. One student of creative writing put the case very cogently, 'learning doesn't stop when you leave school or leave work – you learn for wider purposes – use your brain or lose it!'

Purposes of learning

One of the key policy challenges for the future will be how to increase demand for learning, particularly amongst those who are least inclined or able to engage. Recent NIACE participation research⁵ shows that whilst for the first time in 20 years overall levels are rising, the 'learning divide' is still very much in evidence. Opportunities to learn remain heavily weighted in favour of the

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educationally privileged, the young and those in employment. Significantly, retired people have scarcely been affected by the welcome increase in adult participation. Of those that reported no learning since school, 86 per cent said they were unlikely to take up learning in the future. The evidence suggests 'that for the hardest-to-reach the case for a learning society still has to be made'.⁶ Understanding what motivates people to learn will help us to meet that challenge.

The learners in the sample revealed a rich mix of purposes, and of both long- and short-term goals, which defy categorisation as either 'vocational' or 'non-vocational'. For example, a nurse who retired early due to ill health was considering a new career as a writer after attending creative writing classes out of interest.

Most learners identified some form of skill acquisition as their overall motivation, around a quarter of which were linked to employment. For some this was moving into new areas, for others it was revisiting or refreshing existing skills. For example, a parent was hoping that massage would help her to calm her son who has a disability; a grandmother was learning word processing to write autobiographical stories; a graphic artist was studying calligraphy for a day a week to rediscover the skills that underpinned his technological expertise. Very few had consciously chosen non-accredited programmes as a precursor to accredited learning. In terms of the role of learning outcomes in the selection process, most learners had a general aim rather than specific objectives or outcomes in mind when making their choice.

Approaches to assessment

Assessment was not a term used by learners. It appeared to connote judgmental, unsympathetic attitudes and provoked strong antipathy amongst some. Instead, they spoke of feedback from tutors, which was valued highly. This discrepancy is not just a matter of vocabulary. It reflects the ways in which assessment processes are implemented by tutors, how they are assimilated into learning, and the extent to which they are explained and communicated to learners.

It might also reflect the relative value placed on assessment by the different stakeholders. For those who fund, manage and deliver adult learning, assessment is an essential quality assurance tool. By comparison, the learners interviewed were

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interested in speaking of why they were learning, their feelings about that learning and the difference it was making to their lives. In this context tutor 'feedback' was seen as enriching rather than judging learning gain.

Form filling to record learning outcomes was generally accepted as a necessary inconvenience but was perceived as having greatest value if it contributed to a dialogue with the tutor about individual achievement. The most important dimension of assessment for learners was the satisfaction of knowing their own progress; proving this to others was understandably secondary.

Ways of knowing

Learners identified three sources of knowledge about their achievements: self-assessment; tutors; and peer assessment.

Self-assessment

Most learners appeared confident that they knew if they were making progress: 'You know yourself how you are doing'. They saw the value of on-going or formative self-assessment but this was often unguided by tutors and rarely involved comparisons with the agreed learning outcomes. The exception was summative self-assessment at the end of the course when reference was usually made to the original documentation. This was seen as helpful,

'you can be surprised at what you have learned – then you set new goals'. However, the extent to which learners felt able to 'claim' achievement of particular outcomes varied in response to a number of factors including self-confidence, experience of adult learning and the nature of the outcomes themselves. Like the learners in the sample, many of us might prefer to describe ourselves as 'working towards' or 'partially able' to recognise and critically analyse philosophical ideas but would state confidently that we 'can do' a specific technical task.

Learner self-assessment has become a central element of most approaches to identifying achievement through learning outcomes. It is also a key skill for learning and has a crucial role to play in the development of lifelong learning.

Greater attention needs to be paid to the ways in which learners are supported in the process of self-assessment so that they are able to engage constructively and autonomously. There is also a need to review current practice in the area of designing, recording and agreeing learning outcomes.

Tutors

The role of tutors was critical, particularly their skills in observation, communication and informal assessment. Learners saw them as the key source of external information about progress and although a range of assessment methods was mentioned, the main approaches were informal observation and interaction. Feedback to learners was largely verbal. Importantly to learners, this was generally seen as supportive and part of the learning process.

As one Sign Language student made clear, the most useful feedback was constructively critical, 'she won't let you go on if you need to do something differently or better. Correction is necessary; you learn from your mistakes'. Another learner added, 'if critical comments are made they are very positive and constructive, and the tutor will suggest alternatives'. However the language of critical feedback and support can carry nuances not always perceptible to those who deliver it. This salutary observation was offered by a sculpture and pottery student: 'when they tell you it's "interesting" you know it's crap! When they say it's "fine", it's not that good. When they say it's "good" then you know it's okay'.

Learners expressed a desire for more careful and constructive criticism from tutors ('a critical approach helps the learning') but were also aware of the potentially negative impact of this on others. From a systemic perspective, this interim feedback was apparently without reference to any agreed learning outcomes, the criteria were not shared, and it was largely unrecorded.

Peer assessment

Learners conveyed a strong sense of the importance of learning with others. There were many comments on the support, honesty, feedback and stimulation they received from their peers: 'it's good to have the chance to learn from others, to give and take' and 'the group is like a mirror – we learn from each other's mistakes and responses'. Others spoke of the importance of a sense of belonging, of community, and how this was 'an essential contribution to learning'. This has implications for the Common Inspection Framework and the extent to which its individualistic focus can be stretched by the Inspectorate to take account of the shared experiences of learning that learners clearly value highly.

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Role of learning outcomes

Learning outcomes were generally welcomed in terms of their contribution to learning. They were seen as creating a useful, flexible framework (rather than a fixed syllabus), which helped people to understand what they had signed up to. As one arts student put it, 'learning outcomes offer structure not a straight-jacket'. Further responsiveness to learners' interests and needs was linked to delivery, not renegotiation of the outcomes. On the whole, they were not seen as an assessment tool.

Most learners recognised the value of considering outcomes at the start and end of their programme. This was seen as obtaining informed consent and then facilitating more detailed reflection. Not all learners were invited to identify individual goals to supplement those designed by the tutor and agreed by the group, or to consider unexpected or unspecified gains. Some reference was made to the difficulties of discussing outcomes meaningfully at the start of a course where new knowledge and very mixed ability classes were involved. Again the role of tutors was critical – their understanding of the process, their disposition towards it and their skills in negotiation.

Current practice

The interviews suggest that recording learning outcomes (in some cases on individual records of learning), going through them at the start of the course and revisiting them at the end are common elements of practice in this area. They also suggest that learning outcomes associated with the subject are most commonly proposed by tutors and agreed, largely unchanged, by learners. This is often supplemented by the opportunity to identify additional personal goals.

Other aspects of assessment processes emerge as more variable and potentially mysterious to learners. Forms were completed by learners but they were not always told why, where they went, or to what effect. Criteria and norms were rarely shared. This means that tutors and learners may have used quite different bases for their judgements about progress. This militates against consistency and also equity, particularly if tutors' views are used to validate those of learners.

Most learners were not aware that formative assessment had taken place. This may reflect its informality and invisibility rather than complete

absence but in either case this highlights a need to develop practice. Recorded formative assessment, with reference to agreed learning outcomes, has considerable potential to enrich the learning experience, to support more self-reflective and critical learners, and to create a more equal exchange between learners and tutors. It might help tutors to understand and value the experience of learners and to sustain the more consultative, 'adult' approach noted earlier.

Few learners referred to initial assessment. Where they did this was largely in terms of informal conversations with their tutor to establish starting points. They were content that this was sufficient. The notable exception to this practice was basic skills' students who were accustomed to working with individual learning plans. These learners felt strongly that decisions about the purpose and content of the learning should lie with them, 'it's the learner's domain to decide'. There is scope for further research into recording and assessing achievement in relation to non-accredited basic skills provision and in English for Speakers of Other Languages' (ESOL) programmes.

Scope for development

Systems

The outcomes of the research suggest that there is potential to develop and strengthen systems for identifying achievement in non-accredited learning by building on the learners' desire for more individualised commentary on progress and appropriate next steps, and on the basis of the systems' potential contribution to learning.

However, proper account needs to be taken of learners' unease about 'assessment' and the possibility that this might reinforce deficit models. This could be addressed in part through the development of appropriate and sensitive methods and clearer communication with learners about the purposes, criteria and value of such approaches.

Clarity is needed within the emerging funding and quality assurance methodologies to distinguish between what is valuable and what is measurable – these are not synonymous terms. Learners reveal a mixed picture of what is important to them including life-enhancing personal and social benefits as well as more instrumental, specific skills and knowledge. There is a danger that systems,

shaped by funding and audit requirements, will eventually privilege those outcomes that lend themselves to measurement. A mixed economy is needed, and one that affords parity of esteem to both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

The developing funding methodology also needs to acknowledge the costs of implementing a thorough assessment system including learner time (to contribute to assessment), tutor time (to undertake and record assessment, and to support and validate learner self-assessment), and capacity building and data management.

Professional development

Variations in practice indicate a significant need for more training and appropriate resource materials. In particular tutors, who are often geographically dispersed, and part-time staff, need support in developing their practice in a range of areas, including:

- initial assessment
- identifying, expressing and negotiating/agreeing learning outcomes
- supporting learners in identifying individual goals
- identifying assessment norms and criteria and sharing these with learners
- supporting learner self-assessment
- formative assessment, including embedding this into programme and session design, recording the outcomes, and assimilating these into planning and delivery
- commenting upon or validating learner self-assessment
- integrating the outcomes of these processes into summative assessment.

Research

There is considerable potential for further research. We need to know more about the ways in which progression is interpreted in different learning contexts, from the most formal and instrumental qualification-based programmes through to non-formal, community-based activities. This should include a similarly detailed consultation with learners about how they interpret their progress (as identified by themselves, their tutors or their peers) in order to determine appropriate progression. NIACE is developing further work in this area.

The identification of achievement in non-

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accredited learning is a dynamic field – different approaches are emerging all the time. It would be helpful to gain a coherent picture of the various systems and to correlate them against emerging core elements of good practice, for example those posed by Lavender, Vorhaus and Turner.⁷ This could form the basis of a wider dissemination of appropriate models that are practical, valued and effective for learners and tutors alike.

If the LSC and the Adult Learning Inspectorate are to achieve the 'objective of placing the learner at the heart of the system'⁸ then further research into appropriate ways of consulting with learners would be helpful. This study has highlighted various issues that would benefit from closer scrutiny. These include: the timing, location and duration of any contact; the language and concepts used in questions and discussion; the framework or schedule for interviews; and the learners disposition towards their learning and the impact of this on their responses. A review of current research and practice in this area would be a useful starting point.

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NIACE, the national organisation for adult learning, has a broad remit to promote lifelong opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

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