

# **Executive Summary**

## **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 the 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.

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 principalities of identifying achievement in non-accredited learning. In particular, it complements a recent case study based examination of various current systems by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA).

## **Research**

Qualitative methods were used. Learners were reviewed, 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, 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 assurances 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.

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*

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.

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 learner – 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.

Learners expressed a desire for more careful and constructive criticism from tutors ('a critical approach help the learning') but were also aware of the potentially negative impact of this on others. From a systematic 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.

### **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'.