

NHS Learning Accounts and Widening Participation



A guidance and resource pack based on a pilot project completed in partnership with NHSU



NHSU

learning for health
and social care

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Introduction

Background

The NHS Learning Account Scheme was introduced in April 2001, as part of a firm commitment in *The NHS Plan* to widen learning and development opportunities for staff who do not have a professional qualification. The Department of Health is responsible for overseeing the national framework within which the scheme operates, with local administration and management being devolved to strategic health authorities (SHAs). In April 2003, the scheme was extended to include staff who work within the NHS but are employed by a private contractor, and staff working in social care who are employed by a partner organisation. The scheme is currently funded until the end of March 2006.

Although the take-up and use of NHS Learning Accounts has been very successful overall, information collected by the Department of Health indicated that some staff groups were benefiting more than others from the scheme. SHAs also reported variability in Learning Accounts activity among trusts, with some being more effective than others in using their full allocation of Learning Accounts. There were also indications that some trusts were using Learning Accounts to provide blocks of learning to relatively large numbers of people, rather than focusing on meeting the developmental needs of individual learners.

Given this evidence of variability of take-up, NHSU set up a pilot scheme with the aim of seeking practical ways of involving a wider range of staff in taking up their entitlement to an NHS Learning Account.

The NHSU pilot

Five pilot schemes were set up, in partnership with the local SHA, and involving local NHS employers and staff sides. Each pilot comprises:

- targeted promotion of Learning Accounts to individuals and groups who have not taken up their entitlement
- an 'offer' of attractive learning programmes likely to interest the target group, give confidence in learning, and encourage further progression
- advice and information through a dedicated post jointly funded by NHSU and the SHA
- direction to the NHSU *u-i* helpline for help and support on learning options
- building local capacity by equipping managers and union learning representatives (ULRs) to appreciate staff needs and how they can be met.

A key aim of the pilot is to open up progression routes to 'non-traditional' learners, leading to a better-trained workforce for the NHS as a whole, and an increased supply into professional training.

In line with local circumstances, each of the five areas has adopted different objectives and, to some extent, different approaches, within the overall framework of the pilot.

The NHSU offer

Three national learning providers have worked with NHSU to offer a range of courses to meet individual needs. These are summarised below; more detail can be found in the next main section.

- The Open University (OU) offers five courses of general interest, some of which can act as a stepping-stone to OU degree courses – 'Understanding Society', 'Breakthrough to Mathematics, Science and Technology', 'Open to Change', 'Understanding Children' and 'Understanding Health'.

- The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and UNISON offer three courses of particular relevance to people who are returning to learning and progressing along a pathway towards professional qualifications – 'Improve Your Study Skills', 'Learning for You' and 'Pathways to the Future'.
- The National Extension College (NEC) offers two courses focusing on improving skills and confidence at work – 'Introducing Counselling Skills' and 'Assertiveness at Work'.

This guidance and resource pack

This pack is one of the outputs from the evaluation of the pilot, carried out on behalf of NHSU by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Institute for Employment Studies (IES). It aims to impart the main learning points from the pilot, by describing the activity and giving examples to show how to approach it. There is no one 'right way' of approaching widening participation via NHS Learning Accounts, as the pilot has shown; this pack offers suggestions, and different ways of tackling barriers and difficulties, rather than prescriptions.

This pack contains descriptions of activities and techniques, advice, resources and information, based on the experiences of the pilot. At the end of every section you will be referred to resource materials available on the compact disc.

Resources

1.1 NHSU 'offer' – learning programmes

The resources listed are to be found on the CD which forms part of this pack.

The role of the Learning Account Adviser

Allocating responsibility

Under the framework of the NHSU pilot, each of the five pilot areas appointed a Learning Account Adviser; these were one-year posts, jointly funded by NHSU and the SHA. Although this approach has worked well in all five areas, it is not the only workable model; for example, an SHA outside the NHSU pilot has chosen to fund 10 lifelong learning facilitators, on a three-year, fixed-term contract (basically one per trust, although smaller trusts share a facilitator). These trust-based facilitators are the central point of contact for Learning Accounts and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), for both staff and managers. Whichever model is chosen, and wherever advisers are based, the essential requirement is to have clearly defined responsibilities – so that people know who to approach for information, advice and help in relation to Learning Accounts.

The broker role

There is a body of emerging work around the concept of 'brokerage'. The evaluation of the national employer training pilots refers to a broker as:

'someone who can link training to business needs, help the employer understand what is on offer, identify an appropriate provider, and (more rarely) provide ongoing support'. (*Platform for progression*, Employer Training Pilots Year Two Evaluation Report, March 2005, Department for Education and Skills (DfES))

The Skills White Paper adopts a similar position with regard to brokerage (*Skills: Getting on in Business, Getting on at Work*, 2005, (DfES)). The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) research project (see box below) builds on this concept and places a greater emphasis on the relationship between the broker and the potential learner.

What is learning brokerage?

The essence of learning brokerage is effective mediation between learners or potential learners and learning providers. Learning brokerage seeks to negotiate and inform change – both in learners and in learning providers. It makes a distinctive contribution to widening adult participation by 'joining up' a range of activities – outreach; information, advice and guidance (IAG); new courses; learners' support; and pathways for progression to employment or further learning. It stimulates change by looking for better ways to meet learners' needs. Thus, learning brokerage is a valuable tool for strategies aimed at widening participation.

An ideal model for achieving effective learning brokerage is set out, covering a broad spectrum of activities. These are grouped into six stages:

- understanding the current situation
- gaining entry and building trust
- raising interest in learning, and making learning meaningful
- identifying the right learning opportunity
- promoting learning success
- addressing organisational issues.

The six stages offer a framework to help those whose role is to create, manage or improve mediation between learners and providers. Using it can also increase understanding within and between organisations about ways to work together to the benefit of learners.

Learning brokerage: Building bridges between learners and providers, Learning and Skills Research Centre, 2005.

The role of the Learning Account Adviser has been key to the success of the pilot in all five areas. A key requirement of Learning Account Advisers is that they should 'think outside the box' – both within their jobs, and in the organisations with which they work. In this pilot, the adviser has sought to link the needs

of employing organisations and those of learners and potential learners in seeking to ensure that learning providers are sensitive to this range of requirements. This has involved a range of activities, which includes:

- providing information about Learning Accounts to staff and managers
- signposting individuals to appropriate courses and learning providers
- smoothing the path to learning by helping staff through the application process and perhaps negotiating with their managers
- supporting learners through their courses by keeping in touch
- suggesting further learning to staff on completion of their courses, and in particular pointing out progression pathways
- actively seeking to promote learning opportunities, for example through staff-briefing sessions, marketing posters and leaflets, direct mailings
- reaching out to those not directly employed by the NHS, but still eligible for Learning Accounts: receptionists and administrators in GP surgeries, contract staff (for example, in catering services), people employed within the social care setting (for example, as care assistants in homes), healthcare staff in prisons
- keeping records and completing returns
- networking with Learning Account/NVQ leads and ULRs based in trusts, and Learning Account Advisers in other pilot areas.

A 'typical' day of a Learning Account Adviser could be very varied. It could involve travelling around the geographical area (if SHA-based) or within hospitals or community bases (if trust-based) to meet staff and managers; delivering briefings; helping potential learners, on an individual basis, to choose a course and fill in the necessary forms; contacting learning providers; devising marketing material; asking learners how their courses are going or, if they've completed, to provide a course evaluation – not forgetting, of course, all the administration and record-keeping!

For an example of a week in the life of one particular Learning Account Adviser, see under Resources below.

Personal skills

It is clearly very important to have someone with the right skills and attitude in this job. Discussions with advisers, their managers at SHAs and their contacts within trusts suggested that the following attributes are essential:

- a high level of self-motivation and persistence
- excellent interpersonal skills – to communicate with people at all levels
- the ability to organise self and others
- the ability to quickly acquire a good understanding of 'the system' at all levels
- good levels of literacy, numeracy, IT and communication skills
- empathy with learners and potential learners
- the ability and willingness to keep up to date with developments related to course provision, content, etc
- patience and flexibility
- accuracy
- reliability
- planning skills
- an understanding of the bigger picture, particularly in relation to progression pathways
- negotiating skills.

An understanding of the NHS was very helpful, but not essential – the willingness to learn quickly was more important.

Setting out requirements

The 'core' national offer programmes for the pilot were selected or developed following detailed discussions at national level between NHSU, Workforce Development Confederations (WDCs) and trusts. The programmes needed to be capable of delivery across all English SHA areas. Where existing programmes were selected, it was felt that there was evidence of good quality and that they had been attractive to staff without a professional qualification. In some cases, programmes were enhanced or developed to meet the requirements of the project. For example, the delivery arrangements for the NEC programmes were amended to improve the level of tutor support.

It was felt to be important that the 'offer' programmes incorporated the facility to progress to higher level study and that a balance was achieved between group learning and supported distance learning.

In addition to the 'core' set of programmes, Learning Account Advisers had the autonomy to assist learners in finding an alternative course of study suitable to their needs. Some trusts compiled their own course calendar, available to staff, which aided this process. Alternatively, local colleges and private training providers have been helpful in providing information, from which a suitable choice could be made. Organisations drawing on government funding through the LSCs are subject to LSC monitoring and Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) inspection. Courses leading to qualifications are subject to awarding body scrutiny. Commercial, independent training organisations with quality-assured courses can also provide valuable learning opportunities for non-professionally qualified staff. Examples from the pilots included programmes dealing with deaf awareness, sign language, report writing, personal development, medical terminology and minute taking.

Infrastructure

For the work of a Learning Account Adviser to be fully effective, a number of key issues need to be dealt with before their work commences:

- A review of the local operation of the Learning Account Scheme must take place to examine:
 - the profile of who is benefiting from the scheme and, as importantly, who is not
 - the learning supported by the scheme and its contribution to individual staff needs and organisation of workforce development priorities.
- A consideration is needed of the priority groups of staff to be engaged in learning through the work of the adviser.
- Consideration is also needed of the learning programmes available which will be attractive to potential learners and of high quality, and which can contribute to workforce development objectives.
- The management arrangements must be established for the day-to-day work of the Learning Account Adviser and there will be advantages in establishing a stakeholder group to maintain general oversight.
- The practical working arrangements for the Learning Account Adviser must be planned in advance. For example, in the pilot advisers found that, as their workload increased, some form of administrative support became necessary. Equally important are up-to-date contact lists so that advisers do not waste time tracking down who is responsible for what at the SHA and in participating employers.

Resources

- 2.1 Adult Learners' Week, 15–21 May 2004
- 2.2 Approaching the challenges and prioritising in the first three months
- 2.3 Jackie Pratt project plan, May 2004
- 2.4 Janine Reid project plan, 12 July 2004
- 2.5 Job descriptions – Learning Account Adviser, NHSU
- 2.6 Learner enquiry form
- 2.7 Lifelong learning facilitator – generic job description
- 2.8 Lifelong learning facilitator – trust agreement November 2003
- 2.9 Management meeting template
- 2.10 NEC enrolment procedure
- 2.11 OU enrolment procedure
- 2.12 Person specification – Learning Account Adviser, NHSU
- 2.13 WEA enrolment procedure
- 2.14 WEA final sessions

The resources listed are to be found on the CD which forms part of this pack.

Relationships

Understanding the Learning Account system

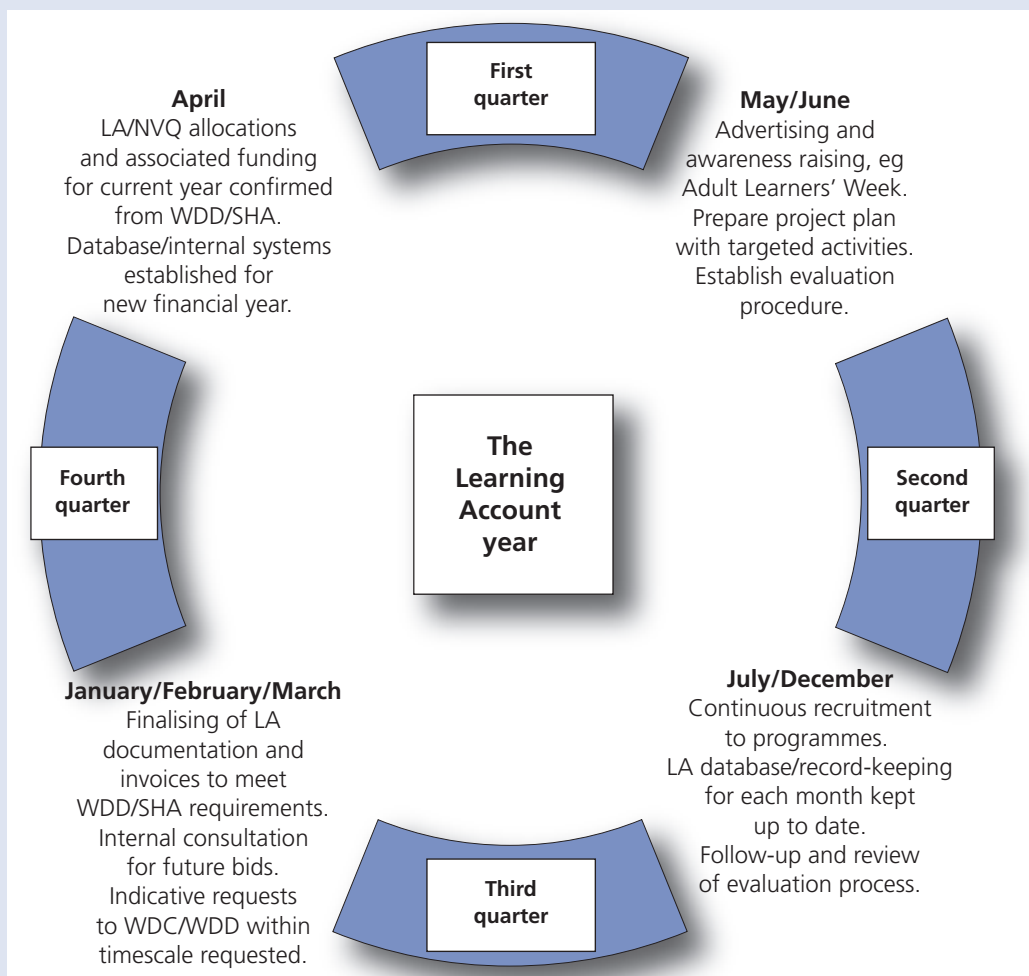
Many different organisations – the Department of Health, NHSU, SHAs, trusts (both individual trusts and, in some cases, consortia), private contractors, social care employers, GP practices, prisons, learning providers both nationally and locally, staff side organisations – have a potential stake in NHS Learning Accounts. The Learning Account Advisers in the five areas of the NHSU pilot, and those outside the pilot areas, have worked hard to build up relationships, although the ways in which they have done this have varied.

- The Department of Health provides dedicated funding to SHAs for Learning Accounts, NVQs and frameworks to support the improvement of levels of literacy, numeracy and language.
- SHAs allocate Learning Accounts to trusts within their area, using formulae that can vary between SHAs. Often, there is an element of negotiation between the SHA and its trusts, especially when trusts feel able to use more Learning Accounts than they have been allocated.

The funding year

The Department of Health holds responsibility for allocating funding on a yearly basis to the 28 SHAs in England. Each of them is likely to administer arrangements in slightly different ways to meet their own local requirements. The diagram below seeks to present general features of the funding year likely to be common across them all.

Good practice suggests that trusts consider their application for funding in line with their annual training plan, using their own organisational priorities, together with the information gained from the Personal Development Plan (PDP) and appraisal process.



- In most of the pilot areas, the Learning Account Advisers appointed under the aegis of the NHSU pilot had an allocation of Learning Accounts specifically for individuals within trusts and elsewhere who wish to take up one of the NHSU offer courses or other appropriate courses. Some Learning Account Advisers have used part of this allocation to fund special initiatives within local trusts, eg a particular course for a group of staff, for which there is a clear need.
- It is important to understand that the five areas have set up their particular pilot in slightly different ways and with different aims. In some areas, for example, all the trusts within the SHA have been included; in others, trusts previously perceived to have been relatively inactive with regard to using Learning Accounts have been targeted for participation. In addition, some areas expanded their activity during the year, to bring new trusts, social care establishments and prisons into their portfolio, whereas others were not enabled to do this.

Building relationships

Relationships between the Learning Account Advisers and **trusts** have been key to the success of the adviser in gaining access to individual staff. The willingness of trust human resources (HR) and learning and development functions to welcome advisers into the trust has varied considerably, leading to different tactics being adopted. In one of the pilot areas, initial difficulties led to the Learning Account Adviser working almost exclusively via the established network of ULRs, which ultimately proved successful. In other areas, trusts have been very welcoming and have allowed free access in most locations, although it is clearly important to involve managers and service heads. Some Learning Account Advisers have had a mixed experience, finding some trusts welcoming, others less so. Generally, initial and continuing contact has been easiest when the trust has an individual who has specific responsibility for Learning Accounts (usually combined with NVQs) within the trust.

Learning Account Advisers have generally concentrated on establishing contact with local trusts first, before moving on to **other employers** – private contractors, etc. Approaching all the different organisations employing potential users of Learning Accounts is a big task, requiring patience, investigative skills and persistence. Advisers found that many of the organisations did not know about Learning Accounts at all, so had to be briefed before even considering whether they would be appropriate and useful. Direct access to staff can also sometimes be difficult, especially if they are very dispersed geographically. One adviser attempted to access GP surgery staff via a meeting of Practice Managers, which initially looked promising but did not lead to any take-up of the offer courses; the adviser felt that accessing GP staff directly would have been more fruitful, although this would have been difficult due to the large number of GP practices within the area. In another pilot area, the Learning Account Adviser was able to regularly attend sessions held during protected learning time for GP practice staff. By working with the PCT learning co-ordinator, they were able to contribute to meeting needs identified by the staff themselves.

Key issues to understand and tackle:

- Who are the gatekeepers – who might either facilitate or block access to managers and staff? These might be senior managers, or HR managers, or even union representatives.
- Who do you need to convince? Likely candidates are directors (to get buy-in at a senior level), staff managers, supervisors and team leaders, and ULRs. In the pilot, some Learning Account Advisers asked managers to sign commitment statements to demonstrate their support.
- How do you spread the word? Essential early action includes getting Learning Accounts onto the induction programme for new staff and into learning directories, setting up briefings for target groups of staff, and using existing learners to promote learning via word of mouth. Another tip is to organise meetings at an early stage with HR and managers, to explain how Learning Accounts relate, and add to, what is already being done.

Resources

- 3.1 Briefing for West Midlands SHA WDD Stakeholder Board, 8 September 2004
- 3.2 Hereford and Worcester project conference agenda, 12 April 2005
- 3.3 NHSU LA pilot – Features and Benefits
- 3.4 NHS Learning Account quiz

The resources listed are to be found on the CD which forms part of this pack.

Reaching learners

The target group

Staff without a professional qualification can be found in all areas of care. For the NHS itself, the following list is by no means exhaustive:

- healthcare assistants (HCAs), nursing auxiliaries, nursing assistants and care assistants
- therapy support workers, eg physiotherapy assistants
- administrative and clerical staff, eg clerks and receptionists
- ancillary staff – housekeeping (such as domestics and laundry), porters, catering
- technical staff, who typically support scientists, therapists and doctors in a huge variety of roles
- building and maintenance staff.

Very many of these staff come into regular, daily contact with patients and clients, which means that adequate training for their jobs, together with interpersonal and communication skills, are highly important. Patients will often judge their hospital experience, for example, on the basis of the interactions they have had with staff on a day-to-day basis.

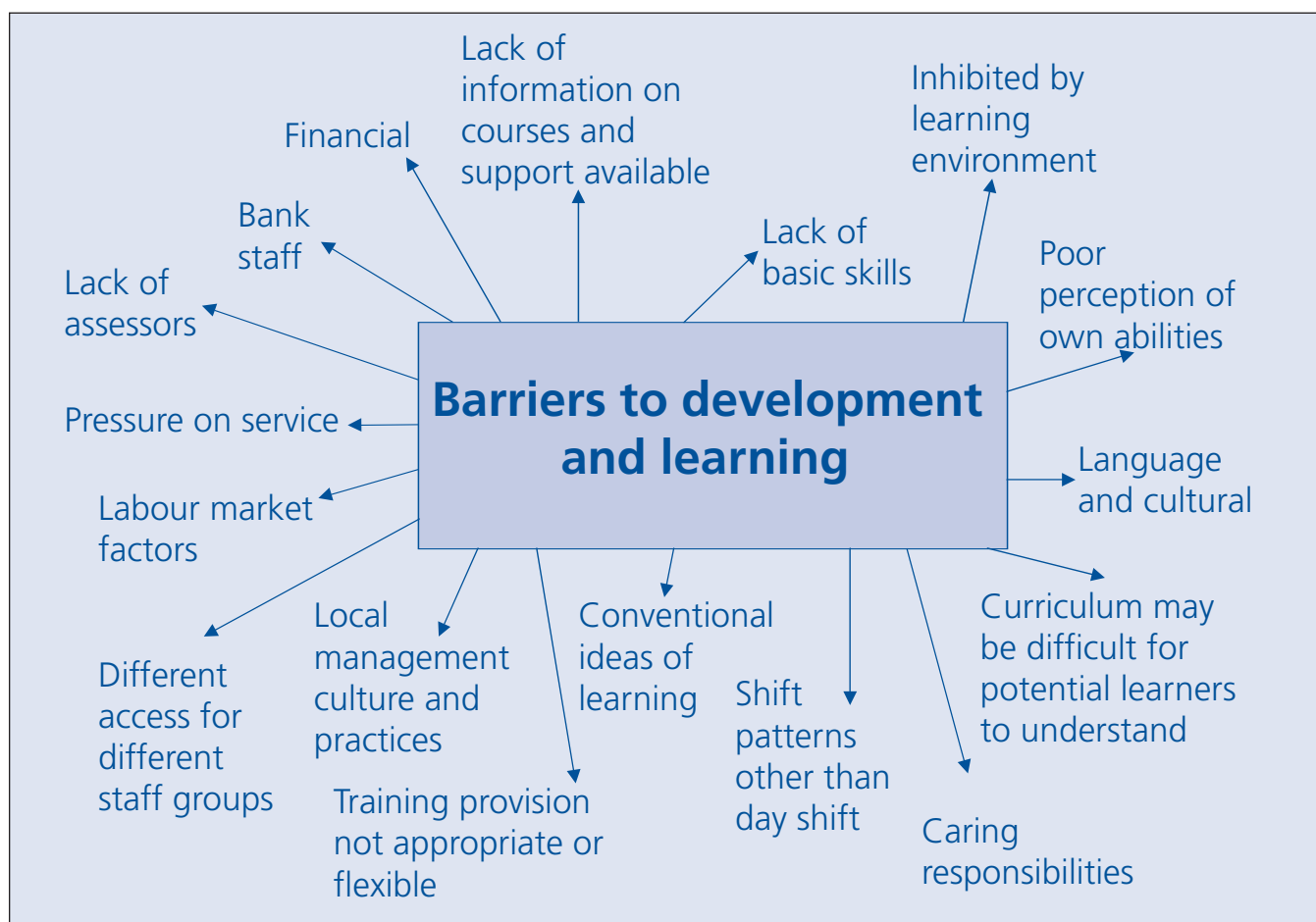
It is very important that all groups of NHS staff have access to developmental learning which will encourage them to become better at their current jobs, to expand their current roles where appropriate, and to choose pathways into more responsible and better-paid posts.

Barriers and enablers

Many individuals in the target groups (those without a professional qualification) may have left school without any qualifications, or may have not undertaken any study for many years after getting their 'O' levels, CSEs or GCSEs. They may have had a bad experience at school, which has left them with low self-esteem as far as formal learning is concerned. They, and perhaps also their supervisors and managers, may also feel that learning is not relevant or appropriate for them – *'Why do I need to learn anything? I'm only a cleaner.'* To complicate matters, they may have difficulties that have prevented learning in the past and led to basic literacy or numeracy problems, such as dyslexia. In addition, their home circumstances may mean that it is difficult to study; for example, single parents could find it very hard to attend courses in the evening, and people without transport could have problems getting to and from local colleges. Even if they do decide to take the plunge into learning, their shift patterns, or staff shortages, or reluctant managers, could act as barriers. All of these issues mean that this target groups is relatively vulnerable and in need of a 'helping hand' into learning and, often, considerable support while undertaking study.

On the plus side, there is a growing recognition of the importance of learning within the NHS, driven by pledges in *The NHS Plan* and reflected in the increasing coverage of appraisals and PDPs for *all* staff, not just professionals. Government promises to increase the number of NHS professionals, particularly nurses, mean that it is important to develop existing staff, such as HCAs, as this group constitutes an important source of supply into professional training. An increasing number of SHAs are looking to create new posts at 'Assistant Practitioner' or 'Associate Practitioner' level.

Initiatives related to widening participation, such as Agenda for Change (especially the Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF)) and Improving Working Lives, encourage the acquisition of competencies, skills and qualifications. In some areas of the NHS, progression pathways are becoming the norm, and staff are growing to expect, and look for, development and learning opportunities; trusts are badging their commitment to learning by meeting standards such as those set by Investors in People. All of these developments mean that learning has a higher profile within healthcare than ever before – although there are real fears that withdrawal of dedicated funding for Learning Accounts, NVQs and Skills for Life frameworks, and the possible ending of NHS Learning Accounts in 2006, could break the link in the chain of progression that has been forged so far.



Promotion of Learning Accounts and learning opportunities

Although awareness of opportunities is growing, some individuals in the target group still feel 'unworthy' of learning, while many others simply do not know about Learning Accounts and the courses that are open to them. Learning Account Advisers in the pilot have found that marketing – both of Learning Accounts generally, and of specific courses (in-house or provided externally) – is really important, and have undertaken this in a variety of ways. Examples include direct mailings, information attached to payslips, leaflets, posters, briefing sessions, displays in staff canteens – some advisers even donned special T-shirts, to attract interest and be readily identifiable when visiting local trusts! Later in the pilot, NHSU produced posters and fliers, with a space for local contact details; these proved very popular in some pilot areas, less so in others. One lesson learnt in the pilot is that marketing needs to be repeated and varied; people may need several exposures before they are finally 'hooked'. Other ideas include organising open days and drop-in sessions and making presentations at induction sessions.

Points to bear in mind include:

- the need to offer equality of access to everyone in the target group, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, disability or staff group
- the requirement to be aware of, and work within, specific time lines – for example, course dates, college deadlines, internal budgeting or planning frameworks
- that there is no substitute for face-to-face contact with individuals and groups previously not engaged in learning.

Using ULRs

In some trusts, ULRs are very active at encouraging individuals to take up their Learning Accounts, and can often keep in touch with them day to day while they are on their courses.

Trade union involvement has been welcomed both in the pilots themselves and in the national reference group overseeing the project. UNISON, with WEA, has contributed three learning programmes to the national core NHSU 'offer'. At local level this involvement has taken a number of forms:

- participation by trade union representatives in stakeholder groups
- articulation of staff priorities in terms of learning opportunities
- promotion of courses and the encouragement of members to take up learning. In two pilots, UNISON sent a letter to all relevant members in the area to alert them to the opportunities available.
- attendance by ULRs and other local union representatives at sessions at the conclusion of programmes to consider further, follow-on learning and development opportunities for participants.

The creation of a network of trained ULRs is a relatively recent development in health and social care, as it is in other sectors of the economy. Since 2002, ULRs have enjoyed the statutory right to paid time off to carry out their duties. The Skills White Paper (*Skills: Getting on in Business, Getting on at Work*, 2005, DfES) refers to there being over 8,000 ULRs across the country. The largest trade union, UNISON, estimated that it has 800 ULRs in the health service.

One of the pilots worked in partnership with the TUC, local SHA, the NHSU region, UNISON, Amicus, WEA, OU and Careconnect to customise a training course for workplace. Nineteen staff completed an initial five-day course and nine went on to complete the accredited progression units. In the following month, 45 new learners were recruited by one of the new ULRs. The new representatives continue to work as a group and are active in identifying the development needs of staff and in marketing learning opportunities.

In order to share best practice, a successful regional conference was held and each individual attending took away with them one action to begin the process of developing the ULR role in their organisation.

'There are now over 8,000 ULRs across the country. Last year, they helped over 60,000 workers back into learning, at all levels of skills and qualifications, from basic literacy through to higher education. They have proved particularly effective in giving low-skilled adults the confidence, motivation and support to return to learning, generally in the workplace. For example, within the Skills for Life strategy, they helped almost 9,000 learners last year to gain literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace.'

Skills: Getting on in Business, Getting on at Work available at: www.dfes.gov.uk/publications

Resources

- 4.1 Assertive Enough, leaflet
- 4.2 Assertiveness, poster
- 4.3 Attention all GP surgery staff, leaflet
- 4.4 Barriers and enablers
- 4.5 Breakthrough to Mathematics, Science and Technology, leaflet
- 4.6 Distance Learning, poster
- 4.7 Don't get left behind, leaflet
- 4.8 Don't miss the boat, leaflet
- 4.9 Improve Your Study Skills, poster 1
- 4.10 Improve Your Study Skills, poster 2
- 4.11 Learning 4 You, poster
- 4.12 Learning representatives, application form
- 4.13 Learning representatives, flyer
- 4.14 Letter to members from UNISON
- 4.15 Living in a changing society, leaflet
- 4.16 NHSU Learning Account Courses, leaflet
- 4.17 NHSU national leaflet
- 4.18 NHSU national poster
- 4.19 Programme for 12 January 2005
- 4.20 Recommend a Friend, leaflet
- 4.21 Understanding Children, leaflet
- 4.22 Understanding Children, poster
- 4.23 Understanding Health, leaflet

The resources listed are to be found on the CD which forms part of this pack.

Ways in which access can be improved

Financial

- Making efficient use of funding streams, eg SHA, LSC, employer training pilot, union funding, community education.
- Regular review of training budget, consider allocating according to need and to staff not already covered by a local levy or ring-fenced funding.

Labour market factors

- Ensuring the staffing establishment allows for study leave.
- Improved planning of training and staff rostering (well in advance).
- Funding backfill cost if staff need to be away from training.
- Redesigning training interventions.

Ensuring training interventions are appropriate

- Promote and support the evaluation of the impact of training.
- Partnership working with providers to improve the match with service needs.

Equality of access

- Research equality of access to training and development and act on findings.
- Timing.
- Location.
- Better use of web-based solutions and IT.
- Consistent, implemented policies on training and development.
- Develop whole-organisation approach to Skills for Life.

Provide sufficient numbers of mentors and assessors

- Need to accurately determine how many there are and where they are currently, and project an estimate of how many needed.
- Also develop a common preparation for staff to act as assessors and mentors for all types of learners.

Improve identification and planning of individual and organisational needs by:

- using ULRs
- improving management development programmes such as appraisal training
- using new pathway advisers at the LSC's IAG network
- better use of PDPs – identify needs and also show how needs can be met through work-based learning
- working with Skills for Health to promote the new suite of National Occupational Standards (NOS) for healthcare staff, eg operational services
- using staff survey, information systems and study leave patterns to develop understanding of staff and organisational needs
- promoting benefits of Agenda for Change to staff.

Improve poor perception of own abilities by:

- researching the motivation to learn in the organisations – ‘What’s in it for me?’
- developing ‘first step’ opportunities to build confidence.

Raising the profile through improving information available

- Ensuring that a training prospectus is available and distributed widely.
- Open days.
- Learning Account Adviser to network effectively to ensure that information regarding current developments is available to the organisations and to learners.
- Targeting areas of low take-up.
- One-stop shops for information.
- Use organisational information systems – newsletter, intranet, etc.

Supporting learners

People taking up Learning Accounts for the first time may be very anxious about their undertaking, liable to fall at the first hurdle, and vulnerable to feeling easily discouraged and even dropping out. Learning Account Advisers have adopted a variety of mechanisms to give learners the support they need, from application stage onwards.

- Initial form filling is very daunting and time-consuming, and advisers in most pilot areas have found it best to sit down with learners and help them through the process. Several forms have to be completed – the LA1 to apply for the Learning Account (or SHA variation of the LA1, which was initially a Department of Health form); the LA2 (learner characteristics); and the enrolment form for the learning provider (eg OU, NEC, WEA or local college).
- Tutor support has been found to be very important on the NHSU offer courses, as learners are typically very unsure of themselves at first, and need a lot of help and encouragement when doing initial assessments or assignments. The NEC has customised its existing provision to give additional tutor support on its two offer courses.
- Learning Account Advisers and the three partner education providers sought to identify and meet Skills for Life needs. As a result of the pilot the WEA and NEC are collaborating on further developing programmes which incorporate Skills for Life.
- Activity in the pilots was supported by NHSU staff dedicated to enhancing local capacity to improve literacy, numeracy and language skills. Materials to raise awareness of the issues involved have been included in the resources accompanying this pack.
- In some trusts, ULRs (see previous section) are very active at encouraging individuals to take up their Learning Accounts, and can often keep in touch with them day to day while they are on their courses.
- Learning Account Advisers have found it useful to touch base with learners from time to time while they are on their courses, to ensure all is well, and will also provide learners with their contact details.
- Learners find fellow course members very helpful in providing mutual support. In addition, one adviser set up a 'buddy system' for one course, under which the first cohort of people to complete the course provide support to the next cohort.
- Some learners use telephone helplines, such as u-i for general support, or provider lines for specific course support.
- The support of line managers and supervisors has been an important factor during the pilot. The pilot has attempted to involve supervisors and managers, for example via briefing sessions, in ways that will lead to sustainable improvements in the capacity to support learning.
- Trust intranets can be a useful source of information about Learning Accounts, available courses and contacts.
- Learning Account Advisers can provide useful information sheets for staff less likely to use the intranet – for example, on accessing Learning Accounts, on different courses and their availability, on different training providers and delivery methods.
- Learners will often make useful contacts on sign-up days, or at briefing sessions, with whom they maintain contact.

The one-to-one approach to supporting learners

- In two of the pilot areas, the Learning Account Advisers enjoyed particular success through taking a one-to-one approach in supporting learners. This is not to say that they did not also seek to work through key managers and ULRs as described above. However, their backgrounds and experience equipped them with the skills and expertise to develop a special rapport with individual learners. One had previously worked for the National Probation Service and the other had been a project worker and community teacher with the YMCA. Both were therefore used to one-to-one work involving counselling, mentoring, action planning and the regular review of an individual's progress.
- The one-to-one approach consisted of all of these elements, and both Learning Account Advisers would regularly advertise in advance 'drop-in' events at trusts and other employers. These might be aimed at particular groups of staff and would result in potentially lengthy discussions with an individual member of staff. A single discussion and advice session often lasted for in excess of an hour. Typically, an individual might indicate an interest in a number of different courses and the discussion would range over the course level, context and relevancy before arriving at an agreement on the most appropriate programme. Alternatively, a member of staff might have a clear idea of their preferred course, only for a full discussion to lead to the conclusion that another programme might be much more suitable or preferable. While the NHSU 'offer' course was promoted, where another learning opportunity was actually more likely to meet a specific defined need or ambition, an alternative was sought and usually found.
- As part of the one-to-one with the potential learner, information regarding Skills for Life was offered. Direction was also given, as appropriate, to the NHSU u-ihelpline. The importance of lending support in the completion of relevant documentation associated with the application processes for courses should not be undervalued. Finally, the two Learning Account Advisers were keen to ensure that learners were confident in the knowledge that they could follow up any further query or problem by contacting them at any stage of their learning journey.

Resources

- 5.1 Assertiveness At Work, info sheet
- 5.2 Improve Your Study Skills, info sheet
- 5.3 Introducing Counselling Skills, info sheet
- 5.4 Learning 4 You, info sheet
- 5.5 NHSU Orientation Workshop, Skills for Life and Health Awareness Session
- 5.6 Pathways, info sheet

The resources listed are to be found on the CD which forms part of this pack.

Measuring success

Record-keeping

Employers and SHAs clearly need to keep careful records of learners, their courses and their progress, for both administrative and accounting purposes. They need to provide evidence of the ways in which their allocations of Learning Accounts have been used. Typically this means:

- being aware that all records could be inspected, so must be capable of being audited – this means accurate and up to date
- candidate tracking is essential – start date, completion date, certificate received date and candidate signature
- maintaining the candidate record and keeping a copy of the front sheet (containing the candidate's name and number)
- keeping invoicing documentation – the letter of authorisation, the invoice request form and a record of when the invoice was received and paid.

There is no standard national system of keeping these records. For the pilot schemes, this meant that the Learning Account Advisers had to organise their own administrative arrangements to conform to the local employer and SHA systems.

Crucial to the pilots was the ability to be able to review previous and current take-up in order to make judgements about access and participation. When the NHS Learning Account Scheme was first introduced, standard forms were devised nationally to record learner details. For the first year of the scheme, a standard form (LA2) was used nationally to collect informatics, on an anonymous basis, dealing with gender, hourly rate of pay, working hours per week, full time or part time, occupational group, disability, ethnic origin, qualifications prior to current course and whether the learner had separately opened a DfES-sponsored Learning Account. The details entered were then aggregated on a national basis, by WDC area.

From April 2002, the responsibility for collecting this information about participating learners was devolved to WDCs and most continued to use either the original actual form or a modified version of it. Each WDC was asked to submit six-monthly returns, made up of both quantitative and qualitative informatics. With respect to the former, the number of planned and actual Learning Accounts and NVQs were submitted alongside the respective planned and actual expenditure on each. For the qualitative element of the report, WDCs were asked to submit a short document with four or five key points under each of the following headings:

- NHS Learning Accounts (covering both individual and group learning)
- National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)
- Adult literacy and numeracy skills – including screening assessment and learning opportunities
- Creating partnerships – highlighting key current and developing partnerships which will form the foundation on which learning and development is improved.

Guidance from the Department of Health referred to WDCs also wishing to collect additional informatics to conduct local evaluations to assist the effective local management of the Learning Account Scheme.

The national reporting system in place as the pilots commenced was essentially unchanged since April 2002. There can, therefore, be substantial variations between both the information collected and the method of collecting it at SHA level. This in turn led to differences in the data available to make assessments of access for particular groups of staff as a basis to review historical patterns of participation.

One particularly important area of information that has not formed part of the national reporting arrangements concerns learner completion, achievement and progression. As far as possible, the pilot partnerships wanted to track not only how many learners were recruited to start a course, but how many completed, what they achieved and whether they progressed to further learning and development opportunities.

Another consideration for NHSU was its desire to identify the postcode of the learner. By using an LSC computer programme, this would enable an analysis to be conducted of the social background of learners on an ongoing basis. With an initial benchmark established, this could facilitate the regular review of progress in terms of widening participation in learning. None of the SHAs in the pilot areas collected information on learner postcodes, and for the purposes of the project it was separately collected through the NHSU registration form, which all learners were asked to complete.

A number of trusts and SHAs have pointed to the advantages of adopting a national data set in maintaining records on Learning Accounts and NVQs and, indeed, on all learning and development activity. It might be that the introduction of the electronic staff record will provide an opportunity to do this. In the meantime, however, the experience of the pilots has shown the complications and difficulties faced by trusts in this area. In introducing or further developing their record-keeping and monitoring systems, they have to consider the following:

- The reasons and purposes for collecting the information. There are a variety of perspectives on how to define success and, therefore, what measures are necessary.
- The Learning Accounts Manager (LAM) is a commercially available software package widely used by trusts and SHAs. It collects and produces management information about take-up of Learning Accounts and NVQs as well as tracking funding commitments. The information collected expands on that listed in the original national forms LA1 and LA2 and includes data on completion and achievement. It does not collect home address postcodes.
- The importance of locating learning supported by the Learning Account and NVQ funding stream within the wider range of learning and development available to staff. Employers and SHAs will increasingly need to track the progression pathways for individual learners, and to operate systems that are compatible with the requirements of major funding organisations, particularly the LSC.
- The balance to be struck between the range and detail of information sought and the likelihood of persuading learners and managers to provide it. There is also an issue here about the danger of putting potential learners off through requiring multiple or lengthy forms to be completed.

Some tips: thinking about success

At the workshop held in Birmingham in March 2005, participants had many suggestions for defining and measuring 'success'. These are reproduced below.

What might success look like for a learner?

- Start of journey
- Career progression
- A second chance at learning
- Increased receptivity to change
- Confidence
- Personal fulfilment
- Influence on colleagues
- 'Recommend a friend' initiative – details given by learners of colleagues to approach
- Self-esteem/respect
- Validation of what they do
- Motivation.

What might success look like for the organisation?

- Improved retention
- Higher level of service delivery
- Reduced sickness absence
- People having confidence to contribute suggestions for change
- Improved recruitment, especially of younger people (can offer a career, not just a job)
- Feeds into Investors in People, Agenda for Change, KSF, Modernisation, Improving Working Lives
- Workforce supply improves (growing own)
- Performance indicators improve
- Opportunities for organisation to change/improve without having lots of barriers and resistance being put in the way (because people are more receptive to change)
- Improved attitudes of staff
- Helps organisation to develop
- Workforce feels valued, leading to better relationships between support staff and managers.

What might success look like for the Learning Account Adviser?

- Progression (further courses, professional training)
- Widened participation (reaching new learners from hard-to-reach groups)
- Variety of mechanisms to reach potential learners
- Working with learners and managers to meet needs
- Being able to offer different models
- Marketing methods that work in different contexts
- Putting on tailored courses that staff and managers need
- Links to PDPs and KSF (ie Learning Accounts built into organisational systems).

Evaluation: layers of complexity

It is notoriously difficult to evaluate the longer term, organisational benefits of initiatives such as NHS Learning Accounts, but much easier to evaluate individual courses and their impact on learners. Some of the following questions can only be answered over time, and then only imperfectly:

- Did the course meet the needs of the individual learner?
- Has the learner benefited personally (eg increased confidence, skills, knowledge, awareness)?
- Does the learner perform his or her job better?
- Have patients benefited as a result?
- Has the organisation benefited, eg via improved performance in the job, or ideas that the learner has had to improve systems, record-keeping, etc? Or from the learner going on to further improve his or her skills via an NVQ or other qualification?
- Has the NHS benefited, eg from learners progressing into professional training?

At SHA level, it is good practice to evaluate the ways in which Learning Accounts are being used. The best time to catch learners and ask them to complete evaluation questionnaires is at course closure – otherwise, questionnaires have to be mailed out, which yields a lower response rate.

At trust level, it is important to assess local providers and their courses, as well as satisfaction levels of individual learners and their managers. It is at local level that links can sometimes be made between learning and job performance – either anecdotally (by talking to learners and managers) or more formally, via appraisal records and PDPs.

Resources

- 6.1 KPI statistics template
- 6.2 LA1 Application for Funding, LAM
- 6.3 LA2 About You, LAM
- 6.4 LA budget template
- 6.5 LAM summary
- 6.6 Offer course key details
- 6.7 Pocketheader

The resources listed are to be found on the CD which forms part of this pack.

Don't lose sight of the real winners!

Throughout the evaluation, the benefits to individuals within the target group, who have bravely taken the plunge and used their Learning Accounts to undertake learning, have been apparent. Learners themselves, their managers, Learning Account Advisers and ULRs have all reported increases in confidence, self-esteem, enthusiasm for learning, motivation and appreciation of the bigger picture. There have been many stories of learners progressing into NVQs and professional training. If any doubt remains, consider the learner testimonials below, which encapsulate the purposes and real aims of this pilot.

Case study profile 1

'I decided to undertake the Open University course because I am looking to change my career in the future and saw this as the first step to returning to education, which I am hoping will give me the confidence to carry on along my journey towards my goals.

'The support that I am receiving is excellent. The next decision I have to make is which degree course I should undertake! I have always felt that I have never reached my full potential and have felt unfulfilled in my job.

'I feel as if I am making small yet positive steps forwards. Who knows, that cap and gown photo will be on my fireplace one day!

'My tutor is lovely and has inspired me during our chats, she has made me think about following this with a degree course. She was telling me she returned to education in her 30s like myself and has never looked back. I feel that this course is easing me into education again and giving me some idea as to what is expected of me as a student again.'

Case study profile 2

'Prior to the open day held outside the staff restaurant earlier this year, I had no knowledge of the Learning Account scheme. It came as quite a pleasant surprise to find out that clerical staff were able to do courses. I always thought that courses were only available for nursing staff. I was attracted to the course because I am interested in the subject of counselling. In the past I have been to talk to a counsellor myself, and found the experience very helpful. I would like to think the experience of the course would help me understand other people better. I was a little spoiled for choice from the courses available; however, counselling was of great interest to me. I had to start somewhere, and hope to go on to do other courses. So far I have enjoyed the course. I have found it very interesting and it has helped me to understand myself a little better.'

Case study profile 3

'I didn't have any prior knowledge of the NHS Learning Account Scheme until I saw an email advertising Learning 4 You. I hadn't done any study in a while and was looking for a course to get me back into it again.

'I really enjoyed the course and learnt so much, which has helped with my work, such as I'm more confident in letter writing, using a computer and generally more confident dealing with people.

'There were 10 of us doing the course and we really gelled as a group, which of course made the course easier and more enjoyable. I really enjoyed the classroom settings, with the interaction and meeting other staff from the trust. My tutor was great; she was supportive of us all and gave us plenty of handouts.

'The last learning I did was about five years ago and was a health and safety course which lasted for eight weeks, before then I had completed NVQ assessor's training in customer care, catering 7061/2 training and GCSEs.'

Case study profile 4

'I am a healthcare support worker working on an acute psychiatric ward. I work three nights a week.

'My job involves talking and listening to patients. So I found the introduction to counselling skills very helpful in my job, as it allows you to learn different listening skills. It also gives me the confidence to feel I am able to take different approaches to various situations.'

Case study profile 5

'I had been looking at continuing my professional development, subsequently applying for occupational therapy training through Coventry University, when I first found out about NHSU and the Introduction to Counselling course. Reading the description of the course inspired me to develop skills directly related to my job as an occupational therapy technical instructor. As I've worked through the course I've found it invaluable in informing and improving my practice. Completing this course will give me the confidence in starting and succeeding in the course I've already applied for.'

Case study profile 6

'It's been hard to find time to do this but I'm finished! You have to learn to be very disciplined and to manage your time well.

'What the course has given me though is confidence in my own abilities and the insight to recognise that I have skills that are valuable and transferable. I've found out things about myself that I never knew before. The course has helped answer many questions.

'Before I started I had all sorts of doubts, I felt vulnerable and nervous and asked myself "Will I be able to do it? What if I fail?" I was worried that I would let myself down and let other people down too.

'I would recommend this taster course to anyone like me who has been out of a learning environment for a long time. It's a good preparation for learning and the tutor was excellent. And if like me you were a bit nervous, with a course like this you can work at your own pace.

'It has spurred me on to want to do something else like an NVQ or a degree.

'This experience has been fantastic and I would never have done it without the help of my Learning Account Adviser.'

Case study profile 7

'The course has been very enjoyable and I feel that I have gained a great deal from it. At the risk of sounding melodramatic, it has been a life-changing experience for me!

'I now realise and accept both my strengths and weaknesses and am able to deal confidently with situations that I previously found difficult.

'I am now more able to say no to things without feeling guilty or needing to justify myself. I have learned to put myself first when needed but also to accept other people's needs and beliefs and act accordingly.

'As a consequence I am much calmer and content. Everyone I have spoken to has said they have noticed a difference.

'However, even with this new-found confidence I know that I will sometimes (being only human) slip back into my old ways, but hopefully this will be few and far between.

'I will continue to develop my assertiveness skills in all areas of my life and have already arranged with Rob to attend the training centre to help out with some of the courses they are running. I am also considering a counselling skills course and looking into the possibility of doing a teaching course – so perhaps a change of career direction is on the cards!'

Contacts

Amicus	www.amicustheunion.org
Adult Learning Inspectorate	www.ali.gov.uk
Department for Education and Skills	www.dfes.gov.uk
Department of Health	www.dh.gov.uk

Links to (five-stage process)

1. Policy and guidance
2. Human resources and training
3. Learning training and personal development
4. Pre pre-registration
5. Individual Learning Accounts

Institute for Employment Studies	www.employment-studies.co.uk
Learning and Skills Council	www.lsc.gov.uk
Learning and Skills Research Centre	www.lsrc.ac.uk
National Extension College	www.nec.ac.uk
National Institute of Adult Continuing Education	www.niace.org.uk
NHSU	www.nhsu.nhs.uk
Open University	www.open.ac.uk
u-i	www.nhsu.nhs.uk
UNISON	www.unison.org.uk

Links to

- Education and training
- Learning and organising services

Workers' Educational Association	www.wea.org.uk
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Glossary

ALI	Adult Learning Inspectorate
CLAM	Confederation Learning Accounts Manager
CSE	Certificate of Secondary Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DH	Department of Health
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GP	General practitioner
HCA	Healthcare assistant
HR	Human resources
IAG	Information, advice and guidance
IES	Institute for Employment Studies
IiP	Investors in People
IT	Information technology
IWL	Improving Working Lives
KPI	Key performance indicator
KSF	Knowledge and Skills Framework
LA	Learning Account
LA1	Learning Account application form
LA2	Learner characteristics form
LAA	Learning Account Adviser
LAM	Learning Accounts Manager
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSRC	Learning and Skills Research Centre
NA	Nursing assistant
NEC	National Extension College
NHS	National Health Service
NIACE	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OU	Open University
PDP	Personal Development Plan
SHA	Strategic health authority
TUC	Trades Union Congress

u-i	NHSU information and advice helpline for learning in health and social care
ULR	Union learning representative
WDC	Workforce Development Confederation
WDD	Workforce Development Directorate
WEA	Workers' Education Association



08000 150 850

NHSU information and advice helpline
for learning in health and social care

Email

u-i@nhsu.org.uk

Web

www.nhsu.nhs.uk

NHSU is the 'corporate' university for the NHS. Its aim is to improve patient care by offering learning opportunities to staff at all levels in health and social care.

Following the review of 'arm's-length bodies', a new organisation is to be created in 2005 which will replace NHSU and two other bodies, the Modernisation Agency and the NHS Leadership Centre. The new organisation is designed to promote excellence and improvement in the NHS and help drive reform through the key areas of service and technological innovation, leadership and learning.