

# **Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-accredited Learning**

**Summary of the  
Evaluation Report on the Pilot Projects  
April 2003 to March 2004**

**Learning and Skills Development Agency  
National Institute of Adult Continuing Education**

**August 2004**



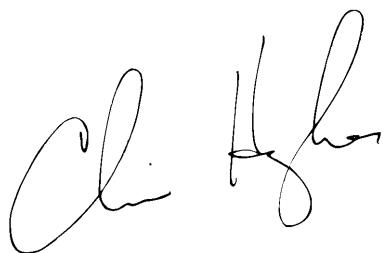
## Foreword

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has been working since 2002 to establish an appropriate way of recognising and recording the progress and achievement of learners on provision that does not lead to a qualification or external certificate. This is the provision that is described as non-accredited provision. The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) have developed a theoretical model called the Staged Process that establishes a way of recognising and recording progress and achievement on non-accredited provision.

This report is about the research that tested out whether the Staged Process could be implemented in practice. It describes and analyses the work of a range of providers across the learning and skills sector in testing out the usefulness and appropriateness of the model to their particular type of non-accredited provision. LSDA and NIACE are grateful to colleagues in many organisations who have helped to translate the model into a practical tool that will be useful to a range of different types of provider and learner.

The research identified important messages of which the most significant is that learners have benefited from the process, saying that it helped them to achieve their goals. Implementing the Staged Process has also acted as a catalyst for change in many institutions enabling them to review their quality systems and develop a more coherent quality assurance system within their organisation.

The work undertaken through the project and recorded in this report will be of substantial and lasting importance to many providers in the learning and skills sector. Indeed, the focus on individual needs within a structured process that is adaptable to many different types of provider and provision may have application in the future beyond the boundaries of 'non-accredited' provision.



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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

#### 1. RARPA

The RARPA approach consists of the application of an explicit and common **staged process** to the recognition and recording of progress and achievement, together with the **validation** of this process through a range of judgements about its consistent and effective application.

#### 2. Background

Both LSDA and NIACE were involved in preparatory work on developing the RARPA approach with LSC from 2002 onwards. This report focuses on a phase of continuing work aimed at testing the application of the RARPA approach in a variety of contexts.

#### 3. The project brief

The overall vision for the project envisages a learner-focused system of recognising and recording learning outcomes from non-accredited programmes, supported by robust and fit-for-purpose quality systems that meet each learner's needs. Providers will use RARPA as a tool for quality improvement and for increasing recognition of learner achievement.

#### 4. The project

The project focused on the practical application of the RARPA staged process across a range of contexts in the Learning and Skills sector. The project sought to locate the views of people involved in applying the staged process within the broader development of emerging government initiatives on recognising and measuring learner achievement.

### Context

#### 5. Success for All

The RARPA approach has an important role to play in supporting the delivery of the Success for All (S4A) strategy. In particular RARPA will be an important part of the comprehensive range of success measures that the DfES is committed to introduce across all aspects of provision in the Learning and Skills sector from September 2005 onwards.

#### 6. Measuring Success

Although at present the final range of success measures arising from the joint DfES/LSC/Ofsted/ALI consultation exercise on *Measuring Success* has yet to be published, it is clear that the RARPA approach will form one of the key measures of success to be used in the future across relevant provision in the Learning and Skills sector. This will be important in securing equal esteem for non-accredited provision with other types of provision in the sector.

#### 7. The Skills Strategy

RARPA also has an important role to play in supporting the delivery of the Skills Strategy. The July 2003 white paper *21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills: Realising our potential* identifies the continuing importance of non-accredited provision in supporting the development of skills necessary for both employability and social inclusion.

## 8. Extending Trust

The development of the RARPA approach takes explicit account of the work of the Bureaucracy Task Force and the Bureaucracy Review Group. The final report of the Task Force - *Extending Trust* - makes some recommendations on reducing the burden of bureaucracy on both learners and providers that have had a direct impact on the work of the RARPA project.

## 9. The funding of non-accredited provision

During the lifetime of the project significant changes were introduced or signalled in the funding of non-accredited provision. These changes continue to be introduced and the initial context within which the RARPA project was initiated has also changed significantly. Nevertheless, the more explicit connection between quality and funding, and the importance of measuring learner success as a key feature of quality systems, means that the RARPA approach will continue to be important to the process of securing LSC funds to support non-accredited provision.

## The staged process

### 10. The staged process

The five elements of the staged process are linked explicitly to key parts of the Common Inspection Framework. These five elements are:

- **Aims** appropriate to an individual learner or group of learners
- **Initial assessment** to establish the learner's starting point
- **Identification of appropriately challenging learning objectives:** initial, renegotiated and revised
- **Recognition and recording of progress and achievement during programme (formative assessment):** tutor feedback to learners, learner reflection, progress reviews
- **End of programme learner self-assessment; tutor summative assessment; review of overall progress and achievement.** This will be in relation to appropriately challenging learning objectives identified at the beginning/ during the programme. It may include recognition of learning outcomes not specified during the programme.

### 11. Testing the staged process

LSDA and NIACE together identified a range of providers able and willing to take forward the testing of the staged process in a variety of contexts, and set up systems to support and advise these projects in their work on the application of RARPA.

### 12. The core group

Two groups of projects were identified. A core group would test out the implementation of the full staged process, with consultant support. A total of 22 projects were identified for the core group. These included ACL providers (both direct and contracted out services); COVEs; **learnirect** hubs; E2E providers: voluntary organisations; Neighbourhood Renewal schemes; work-based learning providers; and specialist colleges. The core group projects were given six months to test out the staged process and were then asked to produce an evaluation report and a case study reflecting their experiences.

### **13. The wider development group**

In addition to the core group, over 40 providers (including some partnerships of providers) became part of the RARPA wider development group. These providers received support from both local and national LSC in monitoring the development of the core projects and, in many instances, testing out elements of the staged process in their own provision. Several of the wider development group projects produced evaluation reports, and these have been considered in producing the final project report.

### **14. The role of national LSC and local LSCs**

The Quality and Standards Division of the national LSC was responsible for managing the overall RARPA programme of work in 2003-04. National LSC officers offer a range of support to both core and wider development group projects. In addition, local LSC officers gave support to local projects in both groups, and in some instances facilitated local and regional networks of providers involved in some aspects of RARPA activity

## **Parallel RARPA projects**

### **15. The Post-16 Citizenship Development Programme: 2001-2004**

LSDA is supporting a range of projects taking forward aspects of the Citizenship Programme, in collaboration with QCA. From these projects, five were selected to take part in the RARPA project. Again the five projects were drawn from a variety of Post-16 providers and, between November 2003 and March 2004 were invited to test out aspects of the RARPA approach in their work on citizenship. The outcomes of this work have also informed the final report on the project.

### **16. Disability Discrimination Act (DDA): taking the work forward**

Another strand of LSDA's work also contributed to the RARPA project. Providers offering learning opportunities within the context of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) were also invited to test out the staged process in their work and a number of FE college and adult learning providers have been using the RARPA approach in their work on the DDA.

### **17. Sixth Form College Extension**

LSDA also undertook a short piece of work with Sixth Form Colleges during the RARPA project. These colleges were surveyed and asked to comment on the potential application of the staged process to their work on enrichment or extension studies. Although these colleges did not test out the staged process, their views have once again informed the final report on the RARPA project.

### **18. Achievement in non-accredited learning for adults with learning difficulties**

NIACE also undertook a parallel project designed to support the main activities of the RARPA projects. A literature search and survey was undertaken with providers of learning opportunities for adults with learning difficulties during 2003-04 and this work has again contributed to the overall work of the RARPA project.

### **Related project activity**

### **19. Recording and validating learning outcomes and achievements in non-accredited basic skills and ESOL**

In addition to these parallel projects the RARPA project team has also made reference to the previous work of LSDA undertaken on behalf of ABSSU to identify good practice in the recognition and recording of achievements for learners of basic skills and ESOL on non-accredited programmes.

### **Implementing the staged process: the impact on institutions**

### **20. Quality assurance systems**

The overwhelming response from providers involved in the RARPA projects has been positive and there is widespread support for the implementation of the staged process. The process itself supports quality improvement and promotes good practice and consistency across provision. The match to the Common Inspection Framework was seen as a particular strength of the RARPA approach

### **21. Fitness for purpose**

The majority of respondents stated that the staged process was fit for the purpose for which it was designed and could be applied to all or most of the programmes delivered across a wide range of institutions. Providers were aware that there was a need to ensure that the staged process was applied sensitively and there were numerous examples of the process being adapted to suit particular types of provision.

### **22. A catalyst for change**

One key impact of implementing the staged process was that it acted as a catalyst for the review and re-design of quality assurance and quality improvement systems. Some providers saw RARPA as an opportunity to review a number of processes operating across the institution.

### **23. Managing and organising RARPA**

Where the RARPA approach was successfully implemented, the staged process was owned and led at a senior level within the institution. In addition to identified senior staff the involvement of curriculum leaders or staff with responsibility for a curriculum area was also crucial to successful implementation of the process. The reports confirm that there is nothing inherently problematic with the implementation of the RARPA approach, providing that it is well prepared and well-managed by all concerned.

### **24. Institutional collaboration**

Difficulties had a risen in the implementation of the staged process where different quality assurance cultures existed between providers and contracting organisations. Questions arose as to who owned the staged process and the records that supported it. These are not insurmountable problems, and evaluation reports also illustrate positive examples of collaboration between providers in implementing the staged process.

## **Implementing the staged process: the impact on staff**

### **25. The response from staff**

The project has demonstrated that a wide range of staff – managers, curriculum leaders, support staff and administrators – are involved in the implementation of the RARPA approach. In most projects staff were enthusiastic about the benefits of RARPA, though some staff showed less enthusiasm for the staged process. There is a connection in most instances between the attitudes of staff towards the staged process and the support they received from their senior managers in its implementation.

### **26. The role of tutors**

Tutors played a key role in implementing the staged process and it worked best when it was presented to learners as an integral part of the process of teaching and learning. The great majority of tutors involved in the projects were enthusiastic about the benefits of the RARPA approach to their learners. The project also revealed that newly appointed staff were generally more enthusiastic about RARPA than more experienced tutors.

### **27. Curriculum differences**

There is no evidence from the reports from providers of a curriculum area where the staged process cannot be applied successfully. However staff working in certain curriculum areas experienced more difficulties in implementing the RARPA approach than others. So for example, staff involved in swimming, keep fit and line dancing programmes revealed more misgivings about the application of the staged process than those in other areas. There was evidence from some reports that staff were misinterpreting the intentions of the RARPA process in these areas. Although the evaluation reports also included positive examples of the application of the staged process in these activity-based curriculum areas, advice and guidance on RARPA for staff involved in applying RARPA in these areas will be needed in the future.

## **28. Bureaucracy and paperwork**

There was a general concern across most providers that the staged process could generate increased bureaucracy if it became over-dependent on paper-based methods of recording progress and achievement. However, in most instances staff were content that a proper balance between learning activities and the recording of progress and achievement had been established. More work needs to be done to develop and share creative examples of alternative approaches to paper-based recording of progress and achievement as RARPA is rolled out nationally.

## **29. Staff development**

All providers involved in the core projects had established a staff development programme of some kind to support the implementation of the staged process. The time devoted to these activities varied considerably across different types of provider and provision, but most focused on improving aspects of existing quality systems rather than introducing radical changes. Where local or regional networks of staff were established these functioned effectively to support staff development for RARPA.

## **30. Capacity**

There were concerns from some providers about the potential costs and time involved in implementing the staged process, especially where institutions employed large numbers of part-time staff. There is no doubt that the implementation of RARPA takes time to manage, prepare and implement. Nevertheless, most providers seemed to be managing this time effectively.

## **31. Costs**

In some reports the costs of implementing the staged process and the costs of managing the RARPA project were difficult to separate. Although the costs of staff development were mentioned by a number of respondents it was generally recognised that these would diminish over time. In general those providers identifying significant costs in implementing RARPA were those where existing quality systems were relatively less well developed.

## **32. Funding**

Some providers were concerned that funding available to them in the future from LSC would not enable them to maintain investment in an effective staged process. These concerns were raised particularly by small voluntary organisations, though the same issue was also raised by some sixth form colleges.

## **33. Curriculum**

The staged process was tested in a wide range of curriculum areas and successful examples of its implementation can be found in each of the areas tested. There is some evidence that the RARPA approach is of particular benefit to skills-based programmes, while the difficulties of applying RARPA in activity-based provision have been referred to above. To date RARPA has had little impact on curriculum design, though there is evidence of future

intention by providers to review course documentation based on learner feedback through the application of the staged process.

## **Implementing the staged process: the impact on learners**

### **34. A learner-centred approach**

A large number of learners were involved in the RARPA project, either through the core group or the wider development group. The projects have clearly demonstrated that raising the learners awareness of the learning process is beneficial to the learner, to staff and to the providing institution. These benefits were maximised where learners experienced the staged process as an integral part of the 'normal' teaching and learning on their programme.

### **35. Benefits to learners**

Many providers reported enthusiasm from learners about setting goals and following progress towards them. Benefits identified by learners included better motivation, faster progress and better engagement in learning. The process seems to be a major benefit to learners with previously negative experiences of learning, where gains in self-confidence and positive attitudes to learning were reported.

### **36. Unanticipated outcomes**

Several projects reported positively on the facility afforded by the RARPA approach to report on the unanticipated outcomes of learning. Sometimes these outcomes needed reinforcement by tutors in order to be fully valued by learners. However this process is not without some issues of concern – some providers felt that these unanticipated outcomes were confidential to the learner in many instances and should not be recorded by tutors as part of the RARPA approach.

### **37. Learner engagement**

There was evidence from a number of projects that the introduction of the staged process led to an increased level of engagement by learners in their learning. In some cases this engagement was transferred to other activities outside the learning institution. In some instances it took time for both tutors and learners to become engaged in the staged process, and it seems there was most engagement by learners where staff were enthusiastic about the RARPA approach.

### **38. Issues for learners**

Despite this generally positive feedback from projects about the involvement of learners, some providers voiced concerns about the negative impact on learners if the staged process was not applied sensitively. Some providers questioned whether the individualised approach to the staged process was appropriate in all cases. Other providers found it difficult to identify clear learning objectives for some groups of learners (eg basic skills learners or homeless people).

### **39. The use of paper and other methods of recording**

There were several references in evaluation reports to the negative consequences of introducing paper-based methods of recording progress and achievement into learning contexts where these had not previously been used. More work needs to be done in confirming to providers that the application of the staged process does not need to be based on paper methods of recording. There are a number of positive examples of alternative methods being used by providers, but more concrete reassurance is needed from both LSC and the Inspectorates that these are acceptable methods of recording and presenting evidence of learner progress and achievement.

#### **40. Older learners**

In general the staged process was successfully applied across provision offered to learners of all ages. However, some projects reported that older learners found the introduction of the staged process uncomfortable or irrelevant to their needs. The future application of the staged process therefore needs to take account of learners ages as a variable in designing implementation strategies that are fit for purpose.

### **Issues arising from the RARPA projects**

#### **41. An alternative perspective**

Below the surface of some of the evaluation reports it has been possible to interpret some responses to create an alternative perspective on some aspects of the application of the staged process. It has also been interesting to read the reports from project consultants on the different experiences of providers in approaching their work on RARPA.

#### **42. Organisational context**

It is not possible to identify an organisational blueprint for the effective application of the RARPA approach. Nevertheless, where lines of accountability were clear the experiences of applying the staged process were more positive, even where responsibilities for overall quality assurance of provision were shared between different organisations.

#### **43. Staffing structures**

It was also clear from the reports that some staff were working in unsupported or even isolated conditions in applying the staged process. In some instances this isolation was a result of the particular organisational structure of the provider (eg a small voluntary organisation operating from a network of centres using self-employed staff). In other cases it was the fact that the provision itself did not lead to a qualification that seemed to be a cause of isolation from the mainstream quality assurance procedures of an institution geared towards the delivery of programmes leading to qualifications.

#### **44. Full- and part-time staff**

There is an interesting correlation between the involvement of full-time staff in the application of the staged process and the positive experiences of RARPA in the evaluation reports. Although there are examples in the reports of part-time staff being actively involved in the staged process, where full-time staff

are also involved (either alone or working alongside part-time staff) there are more examples of positive feedback.

#### **45. Balancing structure and flexibility**

It seems that a balance needs to be struck between structure and flexibility in the application of the staged process. Where there was a great deal of flexibility for individual staff to develop their own approaches to RARPA, problems arose in ensuring comparability of learner experience of the staged process. Conversely where a single approach and documentation was applied across a very wide range of provision, problems arose in the application of the process to certain types of provision. A balance based on fitness for purpose is required and providers will need guidance on an appropriate weighting of these factors in different circumstances.

#### **46. RARPA and inspection**

Some providers underwent an ALI inspection either during or immediately before their RARPA project. Some providers saw this as a positive opportunity to use the staged process to produce evidence for inspection. Others viewed the inspection process as a complete distraction from their RARPA project. It seems in general that those providers with a positive experience of RARPA also had a positive experience of inspection.

#### **47. The costs of implementing RARPA**

The costs and benefits of applying the staged process are considered in detail elsewhere in this report. However, it is worth noting that there was no evident correlation between the actual costs reported of implementing the staged process and the providers perception of these costs. In other words providers reporting low actual costs also reported that costs were high, and vice versa. We should be wary of drawing any firm conclusions about the long term costs of implementing RARPA from these reports.

#### **48. The use of time in applying the staged process**

Most providers implementing the staged process had integrated it effectively into the normal processes of teaching and learning. However, there were other approaches to the use of time in the application of the staged process. One provider added time to the normal length of courses in order to apply the staged process effectively. Another reported that the application of the staged process saved time because expensive one-to-one reviews of progress now needed to be undertaken less frequently. In general, although the time taken for effective application of the staged process was an issue, most providers reported positively that the RARPA approach could be implemented without significant additional time spent by staff or learners.

#### **49. Further contexts to explore**

More work needs to be undertaken in the application of the staged process to areas either unrepresented or underrepresented in the current project in relation to the totality of provision and types of provider in the Learning and Skills sector. We refer in other parts of this report to the need to follow up initial findings in the work of **sixth form colleges**. It is also true that **work-based learning** providers have been thinly represented in the project, while

there are still areas of work in **general FE colleges** that merit further attention before attempting to introduce the RARPA approach.

#### **50. Measuring the impact of RARPA on the quality of provision**

There are a number of comments scattered throughout the reports from individual projects that the staged process is having some impact on the overall quality of provision. As these will only be some of a wider range of influences on the overall quality of provision it will be difficult to identify precisely the long-term impact of RARPA on overall improvements in quality across the Learning and Skills sector. However it seems that we can be confident that the application of the staged process will have a positive impact on the quality of provision, even if its precise influence is impossible to measure.

## **Recommendations**

### **The scope of the RARPA approach**

1. The plans for future implementation of the RARPA approach should encompass all types of provider and all areas of provision in the Learning and Skills sector where no qualification or externally accredited certificate is offered to learners.
2. The staged process is introduced within the context of an overall set of effective quality assurance procedures to be operated by a provider.
3. The staged process is used as a positive catalyst for overall change and improvement in the future design and delivery of learning opportunities relevant to the RARPA approach
4. Guidance should be produced for small voluntary and community-based organisations on the implementation of RARPA within the LSC's *Working Together* strategy.

### **Quality systems**

5. The staged process should be introduced within the context of an overall set of effective quality assurance procedures to be operated by a provider.
6. The staged process is used as a positive catalyst for overall change and improvement in the future design and delivery of learning opportunities relevant to the RARPA approach.
7. Further guidance is produced for providers to emphasise the importance of adapting the particular approach to implementation of the staged process to the characteristics of both the provision and the types of learner involved.
8. Advice and support is made available for providers to illustrate the interconnectedness between the different elements of the staged process, and the possibilities that elements may be combined or re-ordered in certain instances

### **Different types of provision**

9. Advice and support is made available for providers that recognises the particular difficulties that may be experienced in implementing the staged process in some areas of provision and with some types of learner.
10. Explicit and specialist guidance should be given on the application of the staged process to learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

### **Staff development**

11. The particular needs of part-time staff, especially peripatetic staff, in relation to the staged process are recognised in future advice and support available to providers on the RARPA approach.
12. The needs of more experienced staff are also reflected explicitly in such advice and support.
13. Briefing and advice on RARPA is an integral part of all induction and staff development programmes for new staff entering the sector.
14. The effective application of the staged process should be recognised as an integral part of the responsibilities of staff with an explicit quality assurance remit for relevant provision, and that this responsibility is reflected in job descriptions and work schedules for these staff.
15. Support for the development of local and/or regional staff development networks should be made available through RARPA champions, focused on the continuous improvement of the RARPA approach.

### **Standards and qualifications**

16. The implementation of the RARPA approach should become part of the expected responsibilities of leaders and managers of non-accredited provision across the Learning and Skills sector and is reflected in revised standards and qualifications for leadership, and through the work of the Centre for Excellence in Leadership.
17. The particular responsibilities of tutors, support staff and administrative staff in applying the staged process should be reflected in future standards and qualifications for these staff across all types of non-accredited provision in the Learning and Skills sector
18. These responsibilities should be reflected in the future development of initial teacher education (ITE) targeted at new recruits to teaching in the sector, and should be reflected in the future work of the DfES Standards Unit in ITE.

### **Support for providers**

19. Clear information and advice should be made available to providers about the need for careful long-term planning in the introduction of the staged process in their institution, and for phasing in the RARPA approach during 2005-06.
20. Support for providers should be made available on the development of creative recording techniques for initial, formative and summative assessment based on media other than paper
21. Advice and support is made available to providers that clearly separates out summative assessment from course evaluation and review processes.
22. Providers should be encouraged to develop explicit strategies for learner engagement in the staged process.

## RARPA Summary Final Report

Advice and support should be made available to staff involved in curriculum development activities that highlights the particular features of provision that will support effective implementation of the RARPA approach.