



Revolving doors?

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Table of contents:

Acknowledgements:	3
Summary:	4
Introduction	5
Methods	6
<i>Defining progression</i>	7
Section 1	9
What are the critical success factors in organisations that support progression?	9
Working in person- centred ways.	9
Effective Partnership working	11
Information, advice and guidance [IAG] and Choice	14
Effective curriculum planning	18
Section 2	19
What are the barriers to progression; how do learners perceive them; and what are the solutions to these barriers?	19
Accreditation	19
Funding Methodology	21
Cultural barriers	21
Transport	22
Some government policies and targets	23
What is the impact of progression, or lack of it, on learners?	25
Section 3	27
Recommendations	27
Conclusion	28
Section 4	29
Bibliography	29
Appendix 1 - Organisations represented at the seminars	32
Appendix 2 - What is an Education Link Officer?	34
Appendix 3 – Accessible IAG	35
Appendix 4 – Accessible IAG	36

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The case studies we have used are of real learners and organisations. Where learners have allowed us, we have used their real names, in all cases the usual permissions were sought.

Summary:

- Participants at the three seminars were pleased to see the issue of learner progression being addressed.
- The literature review found little about the impact of effective initial, formative and summative assessment on learner progression. As a result it did not feature much in the seminars, with the exception of discussions on the RARPA process.
- The main barriers to progression were identified as:
 - Learners accessing inappropriate accreditation routes.
 - Varying interpretations of the funding guidance.
 - Cultural and attitudinal barriers.
 - The lack of a comprehensive transport policy for learners over the age of 19.
 - Some Government policies and targets such as the current dominance of priority areas.
- A number of common themes emerged as being significant to the progression process to staff and organisations. We called these 'critical success factors'. They were:
 - Working in person centred ways.
 - Working effectively in partnerships.
 - Offering choice and advocacy.
 - Providing effective information, advice and guidance.
 - Planning an effective curriculum.
- People with profound and complex learning difficulties were identified as being particularly vulnerable in terms of being or becoming "stuck". The Improving Choices Pathfinder in Hertfordshire believe that

"Many young people with complex difficulties are often placed in over-prolonged education, or training, or in day care setting which are not able to help them to lead the kinds of lives that they see opening up for others of their age" (May 2005)
- The literature review highlighted a lack of source material in relation to this area. The material we did access clearly demonstrates an over reliance on the same few authors.

Introduction

For those working within the learning and skills sector the term “perpetual learner” is commonplace in relation to adults and young people with learning difficulties. They are the learners who, each September, return to the same learning provider, the same course and the same set of peers. NIACE refers to these learners as “stuck” learners. We feel this term correctly describes learners who are immured in a system that seems reluctant to let them go.

An Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) report on provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (ALI, 2006) states

“Participation is often seen as a terminus rather than a staging post in a carefully planned journey from learning or training into work. Too many adults go through a revolving door of courses, with no clear aims other than participation”.

This lack of progression would not be acceptable for any other group of learners. Systematic progression for adults with learning difficulties is vitally important. Without such progression learners’ skills and knowledge remain untested and under developed; independence and successful personal growth remain limited. In short, learners fail to become all that they are capable of becoming – and that includes making a contribution to the economy and the community.

This study set out to analyse the progression of adults with learning difficulties. We wanted to know:

- What are the barriers to progression, how do learners perceive them, and how can these barriers be overcome?
- How are learners informed of progression routes and supported in making choices?
- What are the critical success factors in organisations that support progression?
- How does curriculum design support or hinder progression?
- What is the impact of progression, or lack of it, on learners?

Methods

a) A literature review of published materials was conducted to explore the themes of progression, individual development and curriculum development. This helped to set out a theory about why progression is different from progress, what progression means for individuals and providers, and how progression can be enhanced.

b) Focus Groups

Three regional seminars were set up for practitioners from across the post 16 sector (see appendix 1). These were used as focus groups. Prior to attending the participants were each given a copy of the literature review for pre reading. The aim of the focus groups was to look for shared barriers and critical success factors in organisations across the post 16 sector.

c) Field work

We interviewed learners, managers and practitioners to get an insight into practitioner approaches and views, and to identify the learners' perspective. Four site visits were conducted. This involved interviews with:

- three educational managers,
- one social services manager,
- one disability Job coach,
- one link officer,
- a group of three learners who gave a presentation of their thoughts and feelings,
- one learner was interviewed in their place of work and
- a further eight learners were interviewed.

This report is set out in five sections.

Section 1 identifies the critical success factors.

Section 2 discusses the barriers to progression.

Section 3 gives conclusions and recommendations.

Section 4 contains the appendices and bibliography.

Defining progression

Progress and progression are terms that are used interchangeably in post 16 education. For this reason it is important to distinguish between the two in terms of this study.

By progression we mean the planned move from one course of learning to something different. e.g. from college to work, from discrete¹ provision to mainstream² provision or as one college manager informed us *“progression is also about the move into independent living.”* In this study 'progression' does not refer to the advancement of learners between levels, such as OCN Entry level 3 to Level 1. We believe this could be defined as 'progress'. Progress suggests a focus on development and improvement rather than a change to something new. This is not to say that progress is bad or wrong, in fact it's what we want for every learner. It is a precursor to progression.

The following taxonomy broadly demonstrates the various positions learners might find themselves in. Its purpose is to clarify the debate and does not of course capture the complexity of the experience of learners.

1. Revolving – Learner moving from one course to another within an institution without development or improvement. They repeat the same courses year after year. *As one advocacy organisation informed us “Students at various providers in our area often repeat courses or start again at a lower level than they have already achieved”.*

2. Movement – Learner moving from one provider to another without development or improvement. *For example, a learner would “do the rounds” of providers in the area with little or no collaborative working between agencies. This can result in learners repeating courses or working at different levels with different providers whilst following a similar subject.*
“Movement” that enables progress and progression and that is planned and systematic can be a good thing. It can offer the learner the chance to develop skills that they are unable to nurture with other providers in the area.

3. Progress – Learner improving and developing. Inclusive Learning (FEFC, 1996) highlights three forms of progress – incremental, lateral and maintenance of skills. Incremental progress suggests that learners build on existing skills and learn new ones e.g. a learner attends a cookery class and builds on existing skills with increasing levels of difficulty. Lateral progress suggests that,

¹ Discrete provision is provision specifically for adult learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

² Mainstream provision is open to all learners

"learners develop the capacity to respond positively in a variety of situations or by learning to apply his or her skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of different contexts" (DfES, 2002).

Maintenance of skills may be appropriate for some learners who need regular practice in order to retain skills and knowledge.

To maximise the benefits of progress, planning for progression needs take place. If this does not happen the likelihood is that the learner will eventually end up "stuck".

3. Progression – The planned, systematic advancement of learners from one provider to something different with accompanying development and improvement. *For example a learner attends a cookery course with the aim of getting a job in the catering industry. He might start with an ACL provider or Supported Learning Department in a college and move onto a mainstream Level 1 catering course that involves work experience. From this the intention would be that a job within the catering industry would be secured.*

Oaklands College work with their learners on their progression pathways from the moment they choose to attend the college. The college believes this is an essential ingredient in successful progression. Working in this manner allows the college to personalise learning and offer learners a programme of learning based on their hopes and aspirations. As one learner explained.

" Staff give us time here and they listen. They work with us".

At the college there is a firm focus on 'what learners want to do **beyond** college' as opposed to 'what they want to do **at** college'. This ensures a clear purpose with regard to curriculum offer.

Section 1

What are the critical success factors in organisations that support progression?

A number of common themes emerged as being significant to the progression process. We called these 'critical success factors'. They were:

- Working in person centred ways
- Working effectively in partnerships
- Offering choice and advocacy
- Providing effective information, advice and guidance
- Planning an effective curriculum.

Working in person- centred ways.

Working in person-centred ways is a key tenet of the Valuing People White Paper (DoH, 2001). Being person-centred involves organisations listening to the people they serve and working with them so they can live the life they want, in the community they want. Being person centred means that

" the wishes and aspirations of individuals should be taken as the starting point of any individual programme; holistic, individualised services should be created around them, rather than individuals with learning difficulties having to fit into pre-determined services" (Maudslay, 2005)

There is a similarity between the concept of being person centred and that of Inclusive Learning (FEFC, 1996). Tomlinson describes inclusive learning as avoiding

" a viewpoint which locates the difficulty or deficit with the student and focuses instead on the capacity of the educational institution to understand and respond to the individual learner's requirement".

If providers are to be inclusive and person centred they need to listen to their learners and offer them a curriculum that is personalised

"around where they are and where they want to be" (Maudslay, 2005)

Tomlinson's vision was of a learner, who would be autonomous and had a positive self-image, which was,

"realistically grounded in the capacity to live as independently as possible and contribute both to the economy and the community."

Much the same vision was outlined in Valuing People.

Being person- centred is the common denominator in the critical success factors that go together to make progression a reality. In order to have effective

educational information, advice and guidance (IAG), organisations need to be person centred. In order to have a responsive curriculum offer, organisations need to be person centred and so on and so forth.

Assessment is a crucial aspect of both inclusive learning and working in person centred ways and as such is critical to learner progression. The Improving Choice Assessment Pack (LSC at al, 2005) states that assessment should,

“ be person centred, focusing on the aims and aspirations of the young person”.

A person centred assessment process would involve the following steps.

- What do I want to do? Involves initial assessment to identify the learner's hopes and aspirations and to discover the learner's current level of skills (initial assessment).
- How am I doing? Involves formative and summative assessment.
- What next? As a result of formative and summative assessment and through discussion with the learner and significant others in the learners life the next phase/transition is set in motion.

Interestingly, the relationship between assessment and effective progression was not obvious from the literature review. Nor was it obvious from the seminars, as the seminars were based on the findings of the literature review.

When Pete finished school at 16 he was very scared at the thought of attending college. It took over a year to build up the confidence to enrol. During the year prior to joining he attended taster classes. Throughout the year Pete had support from the college, he could speak in private and confidentially to the manager and gradually he felt he would be able to manage college. At first he only had the confidence to attend one day a week so following a detailed initial assessment and based on his hopes and aspirations for the future individualised arrangements were made to allow him to follow a fitness class and an IT class on the same day, as these were his key areas of interest. Pete became more committed to college and began to see the progress he was making in both areas of work. He was also able to get a voluntary job.

This year Pete is attending 3 days a week. On Mondays he attends a fitness class aimed at teaching him to use the gym independently and to increase his knowledge of healthy lifestyles. On Wednesday he takes a cookery class which complements the work on healthy eating and is teaching him cookery skills. Within the cookery class he will take the food Hygiene Certificate. On Fridays he is continuing to learn I.T. skills so he can use the Internet and email.

All of Pete's classes are aimed at providing him with an increase in real life skills that will enhance his non-college life. Since starting to use the gym at Oaklands he now uses his local gym. He is able to use the equipment that he is familiar with and can do this in his own leisure time. He is able to help with cooking at his home and he hopes to get a computer.

Pete now feels able to move on from his voluntary job. His home staff is seeking employment for him locally. When a position is found he will be supported through Oaklands with their outreach worker supporting him in the workplace and by joining the work based learning group who study Edexcel Skills for Working Life – Health and Safety Unit.

A study conducted last year on person-centred planning and post 16 education (NIACE, 2005 unpublished) worked with organisations who were developing person centred approaches across their provision so they could be more responsive to all learners with learning difficulties by:

- *Working in partnership with other organisations.*
- *Raising awareness of PCP at a regional level.*
- *Developing IAG services to help co-ordinate the choices learners are making as part of person centred plans but also choices for learners who do not have plans.*
- *Listening to and involving learners in how provision is developed.*
- *Supporting people with learning difficulties to access college.*

NIACE, 2005

There are many similarities between the critical success factors identified at the regional seminars and the above points.

Effective Partnership working

College staff told us that effective partnership work, "*requires a tremendous amount of effort in the beginning*" but, assured us that "*it does get easier*". The concept of working in partnership is not new. However it is one that is fraught with difficulties. Not unsurprisingly both the literature review and information gathered at the seminars pointed to poor planning between agencies, especially at transition points. This in turn leads to dislocating experiences for young people and adults with learning difficulties and their families. In contrast our site visits to providers who were successful in planning for progression all demonstrated healthy partnership working. 'Valuing People' (DoH, 2001) states that effective partnership working by all agencies is essential for achieving social inclusion for people with learning difficulties. The objective is to,

'Promote holistic services for people with learning disabilities through effective partnership working between all relevant local agencies in the commissioning and delivery of services'.

Partnership work and effective communication between partners is especially important at transition stages in a person's life:

"Where an individual is being fully supported and is progressing well, it will often be at the point of transition into alternative provision or employment that they are at risk of dropping out".
(LSC, 2005)

In a study (Dee, 2004) it was found that there was a lack of systematic information sharing between providers with regard to progression:

'One of the difficulties highlighted through the project has been the lack of local coherent progression routes for individual learners. There is little or no co-ordinated planning between further and adult education providers even when they are both part of the same organisation' .

A recent project by NIACE corroborates this view, identifying that systematic information sharing amongst Adult and Community Learning providers was not common. Findings from a survey demonstrated that only 35% of providers had a system in place to share information (Berkeley & Tolhurst, 2005, unpublished).

Lack of effective information sharing about learners may be a serious impediment to progression, as different providers in the same geographical area will not be informed about the capacities, preferences and needs of different learners.

The following two case studies from our field visits demonstrate that it is possible for different agencies to successfully work together.

The Supported Learning Manager at Peterborough Adult Education College, the regional Link Officer (see appendix 2) and the local Job Coach have a close working relationship. It is this link that has made John's experience of the workplace such a positive one.

John attended a special school. This was followed by 7 years at the local college in the supported learning department. Whilst at the college he improved his communication skills and social skills however John felt that after 7 years he was going nowhere. He had enough. He wanted a job. The college contacted Steve, the Job Coach. Steve organised work for John in a local charity shop. He worked in two shops and gained valuable experience.

John now works 10 hours a week for a local company who loan out medical equipment. He loves his job and is very proud of his achievements. John earns

£75 per week. He has lost his income support but is not unduly worried about this, as his family are very supportive.

John did go back to learning. He attended a mainstream IT class for which he paid the full price. At the moment John is not accessing any learning provider but he is aware they are there should he wish to develop an existing skill or learn something new.

The manager of a day centre and the local Inclusive Learning manager had an excellent working relationship. This had been built up slowly and purposefully. At a termly meeting between the two managers the idea of some joint working was expressed, in relation to getting some of the service users into work.

For their part the adult education provider agreed to facilitate a Preparation for Work course. There would be an element of work experience in the course and the learning provider would be the partner that liaised with local businesses to organise this. The Day Centre for its part agreed that they would ensure the same support worker was with the group every week, that their premises could be used and that they would pass on any contacts they had of local employers who were willing to give their service users a chance.

Amir spoke about the class with his key worker and also had the chance to meet the tutor during a taster session she facilitated on the subject. Amir is in his late 40's and had never worked previously. Over the course of a year learners prepared for the world of work. Amir had his work experience placement at a large local supermarket. He loved it, especially being in charge of collecting the trolleys. He also stacked shelves and packed customers' bags, with support. His work experience was for 4 days over the space of a month. He got a glowing report and was offered some paid work. He now also works in the bakery section of a different store for the same supermarket chain.

Currently Amir is out of the day centre with the exception of one day a week and finished the Preparation for Work course. Ideally he would like a full time job.

In the literature review we found examples of how organisations can become more responsive during transitional periods. Importance is placed on investing time in getting to know individual learners as well as providing opportunities for them to familiarise themselves with new or unfamiliar environments. Also emphasised was,

'the importance of ensuring that everyone with whom the learner will come into contact has time to work together and pass on relevant information'.
(Dee et al,2002)

It is argued that professionals pursuing inter-agency cooperation to support learners throughout adult learning must:

- break down or remove professional boundaries
- share roles and responsibilities
- develop shared aims for their work and shared understandings about its purposes
- assess individual learners together and work collaboratively on priority objectives for them
- plan, practise, monitor, review and evaluate work together
- share responsibilities for record keeping
- undertake professional development together
- value one another's contributions and areas of expertise.

(Dee *et al*, 2002)

Information, advice and guidance [IAG] and Choice

At all 3 consultative seminars colleagues felt that effective, accessible IAG was an important factor in progression. Effective IAG informs choice. Making choices can be empowering. It is important that IAG is accessible. This means that,

- Written information can be produced in different formats – large print, audio CD, Braille, use of signs and symbols, Information on DVD or video with subtitles or BSL
- Additional time is allowed during any interview process
- The use of trained mentors to support learners with any IAG process.

These learners should be encouraged, just like any other learners, to consult with careers advisors who should have specialist training to support them in their role.

At the Bradford seminar the group felt strongly that there was a perception in some organisations that other staff did not need to take responsibility for addressing the needs of these learners.

The participants at the London seminar felt that the tutorial system would be an effective vehicle for IAG services and should be offered to both full and part time learners alike.

A recent LSDA report (Davies *et al*. 2006) concurs with this. The LSDA findings offer five broad methods of providing support and guidance to learners. They were:

- covering progression as a topic within the tutorial system
- providing specific progression information and progression events
- giving advice, guidance and support to learners from the start
- motivating learners and raising aspirations
- liaising with other services.

Whilst the LSDA research was not aimed specifically at learners with learning difficulties the findings are somewhat similar to this study.

To be person centred in their approach to IAG, the challenge for providers is to enable learners to advocate for themselves, with the appropriate support, and genuinely express their goals and aspirations and that negotiation leads to a suitable progression arrangement. An active engagement in learning requires that learners have input into the process of matching their requirements and preferences to provision, in line with Tomlinson's thinking on inclusive learning (FEFC,1996).

Research undertaken by LSDA and The University of Wolverhampton demonstrates that obtaining information from learners with learning difficulties is essential if providers are to respond effectively to learner requirements, rather than those perceived by professionals:

'Listening carefully to students, in order to design well-matched curricula and allocate appropriate resources, is central to engaging with the philosophy of inclusive learning' (Anderson et al, 2003:ii).

Throughout our study we came across cases of learners and providers working together to actively engage with learners in the IAG process.

The Education Link Officer (see appendix 2)

A Link Officer is someone who helps adults with learning difficulties in Peterborough to make the most of all the learning opportunities available to them. The link officer works closely with adult education providers to help develop and promote courses. She has regular contact with adults with learning difficulties to find out what they want and need. She also works with the local providers to develop new and different learning opportunities. Sharon's salary is co financed by Adult Social Services, Peterborough Regional College and Peterborough Adult Education.

One of the main tasks of the Link Officer each year is to produce "The Green Book" (known as this because of its colour). The book is an accessible account of ALL the discrete learning opportunities open to learners with learning difficulties across Peterborough– next year the link officer has plans to provide it in DVD format. The Green Books are given out in Adult Learning Week each year after which "Green book workshops" are organised in Day Centres etc. to support learners make suitable programme choices.

See appendix 3 for example and appendix 4 for further accessible information offered to learners in Peterborough.

The ACL provider in Peterborough organised a conference for their learners to have a say on education and employment. The aim of the day was to identify the needs of learners in Peterborough looking at what is already available and what people would like to do in the future. The conference gave people with a learning difficulty the opportunity to speak up and say how they feel, which they have not always had the chance to do in the past.

The research also found taster days and open evenings very useful for informing learner choices with regard to what and where to study, and for discussion of support issues. This is endorsed by Dee (2004) who found that difficulties learners faced when making choices were overcome to some extent,

'By offering taster programmes, staff training, providing training for learners in making choices, improving publicity material and investing time and resources in developing new courses'
(Dee,2004).

However, it is perhaps prudent to note that advocating 'choice' as a panacea is also problematic:

'Choice' as an underpinning principle of provision fails to recognise that 'realising this principle in practice is complex and often problematic' (Dee,2004).

Dee goes on to highlight the difficulties learners may face with the formulation and exercise of choice:

- Not understanding the concept of 'choice'
- Fear of changes in routine
- Conflicting advice or pressure from other people in the learner's life
- Relying on a third party to communicate preferences accurately
- Only having a limited range of experiences to draw on
- Lacking first-hand experience of the range of choices that were available.

Gardner & Nudler (1997) cite 'experience' as a key dimension that must be satisfied if learners are to make informed choices.

'If they are to make informed choices, people need to have a range of "concrete life experiences" in order to gain "experiential familiarity with the possible alternatives'

An awareness and familiarity of alternatives is essential for planning progression, and progression will in turn help the learner to gain experience and improve their awareness of different options:

'If learners are only exposed to that which is safe and predictable, they will never have the experience of taking risks and coping with the unpredictable, which in turn further disadvantages them in adapting and coping with change in their everyday lives'
(Dee,2004)

A group of 7 learners met every Wednesday night as part of a discrete programme. They attended an Independent Living Course. Six of the ten learners came from the same residential home. At least 7 of the learners had been attending the class for over 12 years. It had become an extension of their social life. Moving them on was proving a difficult task for the new Disabilities Manager. Whenever he tried to bring up the subject he was met with barriers – from the learners, the parents and carers of the learners and indeed from the tutors of the group themselves.

Utilising some research funding the Disabilities Manager employed an Advocacy Organisation to work with the learners about moving on. Over the space of 6 months the advocacy worker built up a relationship with the learners. They made posters about what they would like to do, what they enjoyed learning about and what their hopes and dreams were for the future. They did this work on a one to one basis.

When the Disabilities Manager went along to the residential home to talk to the learners about choices for the following year the advocacy worker accompanied him. The manager of the home tried to sabotage the process. The feeling the Disabilities Manager got was that it was easier for the staffing rotas in the home if all their clients were out together at the one place.

After a lot of intensive work the result was that:

- One learner joined an adult learners' mainstream class and only had to have a support worker with her for the first few weeks
- Three other learners went onto the 'mainstream programme'
- One learner joined a local reminiscence group
- Two of the learners decided not to take up any other options
- The original class ceased to exist.

Effective IAG takes account of listening to learners. Ravenhall (2001:1) believes that, for practitioners', listening to learners is 'fundamental to their work'. Whilst the concept of listening to learners might appear straightforward, there are some learners, (for example, those who are non-verbal and learners who have profound and complex learning difficulties), to whom we need to pay particular attention when seeking their views with regard to progression. Learners with little or no verbal communication will be dependent on professional or parental advocacy. Even with the best of intentions, there may be a disparity between the perceived needs of the learner and their actual needs and preferences:

'If it is difficult to ascertain the person's preferred activities then it is important to spend more time observing and noting preferences, and where necessary, providing the opportunity for a wider range of activities'
(Ferris-Taylor,2002).

Effective curriculum planning

Anderson *et al* (2003) found that there may be experiential differences between learners of mainstream and discrete provision. Those on mainstream programmes were usually very clear about their plans, intending to progress to work or further study. Learners on some discrete programmes were less clear because their studies were concerned with extending their general education, rather than having clear or specific academic or vocational aims. These learners were less clear about their own goals for attending college and more uncertain about their future. This is a clear example of courses not designed to enhance progression. Some discrete programmes therefore may not provide learners with the skills to cope with change in their lives:

'Discrete programmes that are not time restricted or linked to a specific learning outcome or award can be problematic in terms of progression. Students on these programmes need to know exactly when they will complete them and how they will know that they have been successful' (Anderson *et al*,2003).

More recently the ALI(2006) informed us that,

"Too many learners on discrete programmes are, however, studying a curriculum based on independent living skills and skills for life that does not have a meaningful context, and does not prepare them adequately for the possibility of engaging in the open or intermediate labour market."

Ketan is 20 and is on a full time Entry Level Studies course at an FE college. He says that being on the course has boosted his confidence and that staff are very patient. He enjoys the variety of working with others as well as on his own. In the future he wants to have his own home, get married and have a part time job. Ketan particularly enjoys the cooking session which he does twice a week and he comments that his Curriculum Leader is "going to try and move me on" by organising for him (and others) to do a Food Handling Course so he can progress to a catering course. Ketan hopes this will lead to a job.

Section 2

What are the barriers to progression; how do learners perceive them; and what are the solutions to these barriers?

The participants at the 3 seminars raised some consistent and strong messages when it came to talking about barriers to progression. The common barriers were:

- Inappropriate accreditation (“Death by Certificates”)
- Varying interpretations of the funding methodology
- Transport
- Cultural attitudes e.g. fear of loss of benefit, fear of change, parent’s fear, inflexibility and an unwillingness to change
- Some Government policies and targets e.g. the current focus on learners to gain a full level 2 qualification, the focus on 16-19 year olds and the focus on the Skills for Life strategy.

Accreditation

At the London seminar it was acknowledged that accreditation provided motivation for learners and an external validation of their achievements. A Further Education Funding Council (FEFC, 1999) report on national awards for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities found that some learners gained confidence and self-esteem from achieving awards, and that some awards gave an appropriate structure for courses. The report states that awards,

‘Are most effective when they are designed specifically to prepare students for progression to vocational courses by helping them to learn the vocabulary and study skills that they will require for these programmes’ (FEFC,1999)‘

However, the same report states the some awards result in the development of fragmented and inappropriate programmes for learners, whilst some are composed of assessing activities that bear little resemblance to life in the real world.

‘ Some awards accredit activities which are of little significance and require learners to learn skills which are not relevant to their lives as adults with learning difficulties’ (FEFC,1999:ii).

Whilst an excessive focus on accredited programmes may marginalise those unable to meet certain targets, some would argue it is necessary to provide clear realisable goals for learners and demonstrate tangible progression routes. Accreditation needs to be devised and implemented in creative ways that increase self-confidence and self-esteem, rather than enforcing potentially harmful notions of success and failure. *Bury Lifelong Learning Service* discovered that,

'The most surprising impact of the project was evident when learners were presented with internal Certificates of Attendance, outlining the curriculum areas in which they had taken part. All group members were pleased and proud to receive them, despite not wishing to take part in accredited courses!'

Comments included, "It makes you feel important" and, "I feel as though I've done something" (cited in NIACE,2001). However not all learners we spoke to were happy with their certificates. One learner explained her feelings,

"I went to so many colleges it was unbelievable. I had so many certificates but at the end of the day they did not make a difference. I wanted a job at the end of it".

(Learner with a learning difficulty)

Accreditation may place emphasis on hard skills and specific standards of achievement linked with language, literacy and numeracy. The pursuit of targets may discourage curriculum development and innovation and thus impede progression routes for adults with learning difficulties who require responsive and flexible means of assessment.

It is essential therefore that scrutiny be applied to the form and content of accredited programmes, if awards are to facilitate rather than impede progression. Accreditation should not be pursued at all costs.

Delegates at the London seminar felt that there needed to be greater flexibility in the way qualifications were rewarded, e.g. part qualifications. The work currently being undertaken by QCA on the Framework for Achievement and the Foundation Learning Tier might result in a

"more flexible credit system that will support progression into further learning and promote the recognition of cumulative achievement"
(LSC, 2005).

There is an increasing interest amongst providers in the possibilities provided by RARPA, the process for recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning. The RARPA process is soon to be extended to accredited provision.

'This model fits well with the focus on ILPs (Individual Learning Plans) and the part that they play in developing more learner-centred approaches to assessment and accreditation. Despite this, staff continue to report confusion among managers in their colleges and adult education about whether non-accredited courses will attract funding' (Dee,2004).

Developing RARPA and improving providers' knowledge of the process may assist the progression of learners with learning difficulties. Non-accredited courses that have benefited from adopting the RARPA process may have added

rigour, and fit more readily within frameworks of provision, whilst maintaining the flexibility and informality that courses lose as a result of formal accreditation. RARPA may therefore counter both the excessive bureaucratisation of learning that accredited courses invoke, and the lack of clear or specific academic or vocational aims of generalised separate provision for learners with learning difficulties.

A study on the RARPA process for teaching learners with learning difficulties received positive feedback from providers. A key benefit identified was that they felt that learners were able to move on more sensibly as a result of identifying hopes and aspirations. Two respondents from the FE sector highlighted that RARPA was beneficial:

"This allows us to look at transitional planning and to adapt our provision. To ensure students are on the appropriate course at the appropriate level; to keep them focused, committed and working towards their personal goals."

(Maudslay & Nightingale, 2004)

Funding Methodology

At each of the 3 regional seminars funding was identified as an issue because it was felt that provider organisations and LSCs were interpreting funding guidance differently and this impacted on provision. Participants felt that local LSCs were driving demand for increasing vocationalisation. This sentiment is echoed in the LSC strategic review (2005):

"The targets assigned to the LSC by the Secretary of State are primarily qualification focused. Although we have stated that a focus on non-qualification driven outcomes should be introduced, we must acknowledge that we live in a qualification driven world".

The review called for a common funding approach across the entire post 16 sector that would effectively meet the needs of all learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Cultural barriers

The recent ALI report (2006) stated that expectations of these learners are generally too low. Attitudinal resistance to progression by underestimating learners' capacities can be viewed as *cultural* impediments to progression for learners with learning difficulties. Studies on disparities in provision, including access to services for older people with learning difficulties, suggest that difficulties are much greater for older learners:

'Support staff were cautious about the ability of older adults with learning difficulties to acquire new skills, so much so that 30 percent of staff did not see training as of relevance for people over 60' (Sutcliffe & Jacobsen, 1998).

Anderson et al (2003), highlight the fact that,

'Some parents are reluctant to allow students to move on, even when they are keen to leave'.

The following example of partnership work highlights how a shift in cultural attitude can impact on learners:

An assistant manager at a day service admitted that a few years ago the main aim was to get as many people out of the day service as possible, and if she got 20 people enrolled onto courses, this was seen to be an achievement. Now, the courses are offering more opportunities to learn useful life skills, and the day service staff are making every effort to see how the learning can be used in people's real lives to help them to achieve goals around independence, and attendance or a return to college is only suggested if a person has a clear need for learning in another specific area at a later stage in order to achieve their personal goals.

This has been achieved by the shared vision that now exists between the two organisations.

Ethnicity is a variable that may impact on learners' experiences. Mir & Nocon state that there is a,

'Need to take particular account of diverse cultural values and meanings when seeking to provide services that are appropriate to people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds' (Mir & Nocon,2002)

The most recent work around ethnicity and disability (DfES, 2006) suggests that,

"Many learning programmes for people with learning difficulties are specifically designed around a very Western concept of independence, with the emphasis being upon young people learning how to look after themselves and having greater autonomy over the choices they make.....Such skills may be precisely what young people with a learning difficulty from a different cultural background want. However, an assumption that this is automatically the case can result in confusion and conflict for the young person and for their family."

Transport

Ineffective transport provision can and does severely limit the progression options available to individuals. In 2003 NIACE was asked by the DfES and the LSC to undertake a study that identified the issues around transport for adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Eight main categories of transport-related barriers were identified. One was concerned with,

"The impact of transport on learning choices including: making the decision for potential learners on whether they study or not; restricting the initial choice of learners on where to study; and what to learn."

(Nightingale, 2006)

The report found that

"problems particularly arise when at the magic age of 19 they have made the transition into adult funding streams". (ibid)

Whilst the main focus of the study is about the impact of transport on learning it goes without saying that this will further impact on the progression of learners.

In his report to the LSC Little (2005) has asked that,

"DfES and other Government departments to consider and propose appropriate transport legislations for those learners over the age of 19, with learning difficulties and/or disabilities".

Participants at all 3 seminars identified transport as a barrier to progression. Many of the participants felt that travel training should be more widely available and better funded.

Some government policies and targets

There was strong feedback from the participants of all three seminars on the need to ensure that this group of learners is not isolated in the drive to meet government targets.

Government priority areas such as Skills for Life, the focus on 16-19 year olds and those learners seeking full level 2 qualifications can put pressure on providers to meet targets. Anecdotally we have heard of providers running courses to support people with learning difficulties into employment focusing on the accreditation of the course to the extent that they have lost sight of the final goal which is to get individuals a job. Undoubtedly there are learners with learning difficulties and/or difficulties participating in these target groups. However, much discrete provision for adult learners does not fall into any of these categories. As a result there are

'...concerns about the narrowing of programmes for this group of learners. Their comments also indicate that fears about possible withdrawal of funding are not only distorting the curriculum offer but discouraging providers from accepting the full range of learners' (McGivney, 2005).

Operating in this manner goes against the principles of working in person centred ways and impacts on learner progression plans.

A recent DoH survey (2005) showed that about 1 in 6 people with learning difficulties had a paid job (17%). This is much less than people in the UK in general. 65% of the respondents who were unemployed would like a job. Much work is needed with employers in order for them to see the benefits of employing a person with a learning difficulty. A recent DRC campaign aimed to raise awareness of people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and the issues surrounding them in terms of employability.



I'M GOOD FOR NOTHING.

ARE WE TAKING THE DIS?

Only 17% of people with learning disabilities are in paid work. Alan is paid nothing.

Have your say at disabilitydebate.org

 Disability Rights Commission

3

Whilst paid employment is not a panacea for all, planned progression would enable many learners to take a different road, including employability, out of post 16 provision instead of the traditional one of day care. The modernisation programme currently underway in health and social care might force some providers to rethink their curriculum offer and work in partnership with local services to think of new and better ways of their learners progressing.

The Pathfinder project in Hertfordshire, Improving Choices, is systematically developing "Social Firms" in conjunction with partner organisations, to offer meaningful progression pathways for learners.

A social firm is a business created for the employment of people with a disability or other disadvantage in the labour market. Social firms have been developed to provide employment opportunities in an environment that brings together the best of business practice and social support. A significant number (but not all) of its employees will be people with a disability or disadvantage in the labour market. Every worker is paid a market rate or salaries appropriate to the work whatever their productive capacity. Work opportunities should be equal between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged employees. All employees have the same employment rights and obligations.

(Grove et al 1997) accessed at www.socialeconomybriston.org.uk on 24 January 2005.

³ Accessed via www.drc.gov.uk - February 06

Another example we came across was that of the social enterprise:

Zakir is a young man in his 20's who was accessing direct payments as a means of paying for a support worker to help him in his job. Zakir was working for himself as a Fair Trader. He sold fair trade products such as tea, coffee and biscuits in local industrial estates. Zakir mainly needed support with the ordering of goods on line. However, his support worker was there to offer support to Zakir when he needed it.

Stepping on Out is a non-profit making charity run by people with learning difficulties and physical disabilities. **Stepping on Out** came out of the Business Studies course "Stepping Up" which runs at Richmond Adult Community College(RACC). This group is supported by the college as part of an Edexcel B Tech course.

The course is Business Studies. The learners on this course set up and ran their own business as a context for learning work related skills. The business proved successful and very motivating to the learners who did not want to dissolve it at the end of the year. Therefore, with Power Employment and the People with Learning Disabilities Team from Richmond Social Services the group have registered their company as a business and a charity and are continuing to run it as a real organisation. The college provides training and uses the business for accreditation and learning opportunities. The group have just received confirmation from the Direct Payments Team that direct payments can be used to pay for a carer/co-coordinator. This will enable the business to develop further.

Current learners on discrete courses at college are now interested in joining the business as it presents a real work opportunity - one where a person with a learning disability can gain skill/experience at the different levels of a company. They can be managers "and not just do the washing up."

What is the impact of progression, or lack of it, on learners?

As stated in the introduction, learners who do not experience systematic progression will have their skills and knowledge untested and under developed and their independence and successful personal growth will remain limited. In short, learners will fail to become all that they are capable of becoming – and that includes making a contribution to the economy and the community. In two of the three seminars practitioners used the terms "fossilisation" and "institutionalisation" to describe the effects of non-progression. This leads to a lack of confidence and a culture of dependency.

The literature review discovered many references where learners were,

“Remaining at college for years, sometimes repeating courses, or returning to the day centre from which they were originally referred, only to come back to college a few years later”. (Jacobsen, 2002)

or put another way, learners

“Can move into a vacuum, or they can get on a seemingly endless conveyer belt which might include periods in a Day Centre, repeating education programmes or moving from course to course without ever achieving a real outcome” (NIACE, 2003).

Especially vulnerable, when it comes to progression, are learners with profound and complex learning difficulties. Concern was raised at all three seminars about this cohort of learners who left their specialist residential college, only to return home to a different world to the one they had left some years previously, former friendships and networks having lapsed. The Pathfinder project in the East of England is working towards improving choices for this cohort of learners. The model for all the sites is one of a partnership approach.

Section 3

Recommendations

The recently published LSC strategic review *Through Inclusion to Excellence* (LSC 2005) touches on and makes recommendations on many of the themes discussed in this study. For example,

- the recommendation that appropriate legislation on transport be considered for those learners over the age of 19
- that a common funding approach across the whole of the post 16 education and skills sector is put in place
- that providers should introduce more effective means of listening to this cohort of learners
- that partnership work is seen as central to provision that is person centred and appropriate to the needs of people with learning difficulties.

We would urge the LSC to explore fully these recommendations with a view to how they will impact on and make a difference to learner progression.

NIACE are currently working on a set of briefing sheets targeted at different audiences (employers, carers, learners, IAG organisations, education managers and teachers). The briefing sheets aim to offer advice and guidance on effective progression, with an emphasis on employment. Initial fieldwork strongly backs up the findings in this report.

An additional approach which we strongly recommend is that of a participatory action research project similar to the project overseen by LSDA "DDA and Beyond" (LSDA, 2003/2004). This form of participatory action research would put the onus on providers to take up the challenge of learner progression and will provide a rich source of research material for other providers to access and identify working practices that they themselves might utilise in their organisations. The project would encourage providers to work with learners, who they have identified as being stuck, to fulfil their hopes and aspirations. It would also add to a body of knowledge that our literature review found to be lacking. As a result of the action research "good practice guides" could be written and disseminated.

This report addresses and explores the findings of the "common themes" from the literature review and from the three seminars/focus groups. There were some issues that were mentioned but were not common to the findings of all three seminars and as such were not included in this piece of work. It would be interesting to further investigate these little mentioned areas. They included:

- How can teacher training address the issue of learner progression?
- What role does senior management play in the process?
- How can employers be engaged in the process?

Conclusion

Progression cannot be seen in isolation. It needs to link with everything the learner does and this study has demonstrated that providers need to plan for progression at the very beginning of a learner's learning journey. If organisations fail to plan for progression they can expect to plan to fail with progressing their learners.

A coherent system needs to be in place so we can best serve all learners as they start off on their learning journey. The finishing line needs to be in sight at all times. However, for this to be realistic it means teachers and the organisations they work with cannot work alone. The skills, expertise and support of other agencies need to be harnessed to support effective progression.

This study has highlighted the factors that contribute to the barriers and facilitation of progression for adults with learning difficulties. Definitions and a model of 'progress' and 'progression' have been provided to generate a sensitising framework with which to address the key issues. A complex combination of structural and cultural factors impacts upon the *adults with learning difficulties and progression* debate. This complexity precludes straightforward solutions. It is vital to recognise that people with learning difficulties are not a homogenous group and,

'As with any group of students, individuals have very different needs, aptitudes and interests. They will come from diverse backgrounds, have different lifestyles and be aiming for different long-term goals. It is therefore impossible to have one level of provision, which will meet the needs of all students with learning difficulties'
(FEFC, 1999).

Section 4

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Appendix 1 - Organisations represented at the seminars

Cambridge

Connexions Cambridge and Peterborough
The Prospect Trust
Learning and Skills Council, Cambridge
Northamptonshire County Council
Tendring Adult Community College
Community Services Tea, Cambridge Mencap
East Northants and Wellingborough Adult Learning Service
IAG Nextstep
Suffolk County Council ACL Service
Hertfordshire County Council
Jobcentre Plus
Learning Skills Council, Cambridge
Adult Social Care
Sense East
Foundation Education/14-16 Way to work
MacIntyre x 2
Norfolk Adult Education x 2
Peterborough College of Adult Education
Learning Disability Partnership
LSC
Suffolk County Council
Huntingdonshire Regional College
Consultant
Skills for Access & Independent Living

Bradford

Dearne Valley College
Calderdale College
Heaton Adult Association
York College
Park Lane College
Rotherham College of Arts & Technology
Doncaster College
Bishop Burton College x 2
Grimsby College
Learning and Skills Council North Yorkshire
Hull College x 2
Brighouse Adult & Community Learning Centre

London

South Thames College
Kensington & Chelsea College
Hackney Community College
LB Westminster Disability Learning Team
National Star College
LSC Berkshire
City Lit
Lambeth Connexions
College of North West London
Longslade Community College
Aylesbury College
Mencap
Richmond Adult Community College
Working Men's College
LB Waltham forest Community Learning & Skills Service
Adult Care Services, Herts County Council
Oaklands College
CfBT Advice, Guidance & Connexions Service W London
Croydon College
Croydon Education & Training Service

What is an Education Link Officer?

- ★ Someone who helps adults with learning disabilities in Peterborough to make the most of all the learning opportunities available to them.

What does an Adult Education Link Officer do?

- ★ Works closely with Adult Education Colleges to help develop and promote courses
- ★ Has regular contact with adults with learning disabilities to find out what learning opportunities they want and need
- ★ Works with local colleges to develop new / different courses and learning opportunities in the Peterborough area
- ★ Helps to make going to college an enjoyable and exciting experience!





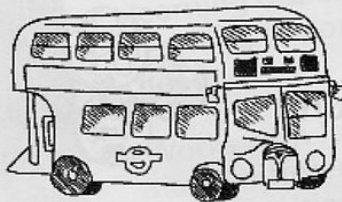
Supported Employment Services



What do we do?

We can -

- Help with finding a suitable job
- Help with applications and interviews
- Provide on the job training and support, working with you, your employer, and colleges
- Provide ongoing support if you need it



- Help you manage transport to and from your work

- Develop work skills



How do you contact us? ●

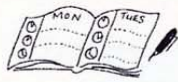
Speak to your social worker/tutor or key worker or you can phone us directly on 01733 746341/3 and ask for a referral form.



Peterborough College
of Adult Education



Pottery



Where? PCAE Pottery Room

When? Thursday 10am - 12pm

Tutor? Jassy Bainse

What will you learn about?

- Using clay to create different pieces
- Expressing yourself and being creative
- Different techniques with clay
- You will work towards an OCN certificate



Requirements for the course

- An interest in the area

