

# Motivating Adult Literacies Learners to Persist, Progress and Achieve:

literacies learners at risk of non-completion of learning targets

## SUMMARY REPORT

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## **SUMMARY REPORT**

This report presents the findings from research conducted in Scotland from June 2007 through to May 2008. The project aimed to further our understanding of the concepts persistence, progression and achievement in literacies learning and to identify the key organisational and pedagogical factors that influence attainment. Its focus was literacies learners at risk of non completion of their learning targets. Persistence, progress and achievement (PPA) were selected as the focus of this study because of a growing concern over the numbers of adults in Adult Literacy and Numeracy (ALN) provision whose life and learning circumstances militate against their continued engagement with learning and who therefore fail to achieve their learning goals.

The research adopted a qualitative methodology and was structured in several stages: a conceptual seminar with key ALN staff in Scotland and two rounds of observation and interviews with tutors and learners.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Lives and Learning**

The main factors in learners' lives contributing to non completion that emerged from the study were learners' early educational experiences, difficult home experiences during childhood, traumatic experiences in adulthood and unsettled or chaotic lifestyles.

The key drivers that encouraged them to persist and progress were the life goals that they were passionate about and determined to try and achieve. These included, employment, voluntary work, improving their capacity to support children's learning and to have the confidence to do the ordinary things in life that the majority take for granted.

Where provision recognised and affirmed these goals, learners were better able to persist and progress in their learning.

For a small proportion of the learners, primarily those with learning difficulties, attendance at classes resulted in the maintenance of skills but not always progression in learning. It is our contention that in such circumstances, attention needs to be given to how provision for these adults can foster their learning as well as providing an affirmative social environment.

### **Provision**

The key aspects of provision that encouraged learners to persist, progress and achieve were found to be the ethos of the organisation, its familiarity and accessibility to learners, 'wrap around' or holistic support networks, pre-course engagement, tutor attributes, relationships between learners and tutors, multi-tutor support within the classroom and enabling incentives, for example the payment of transport costs to the learning centres.

### **Teaching and Learning**

In relation to teaching and learning practices, tutors and learners highlighted the importance of

basing the learning on the life aspirations and interests of the learners. Other factors that emerged from the study were curricular flexibility and negotiation, an adaptation to learners' differing learning styles, a responsive, but challenging pace of learning and varying methods within the class.

In all but two of the case studies, tutors and learners alike confirmed the power of group work in encouraging social and cognitive development and in helping learners to persist, often in the face of difficult circumstances.

### **Assessment**

Mandatory formal assessment for an external qualification was felt by tutors to be neither appropriate nor desirable for learners. This point of view was usually justified in terms of the different stages that learners were at. Accreditation as a voluntary option was seen as an additional motivational spur and confidence boost for some learners. Assessment of progress was generally informal and described in terms of recognising the distance travelled towards learners' individual goals.

Whilst Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) were perceived as an important and valuable tool in structuring reflection on goals and progress, their usage varied across the groups from ones that referred to them on a weekly basis to some that did not use them at all, and others that employed them on a group, but not an individual basis.

### **Support and Guidance**

Levels and types of support and guidance varied considerably. The main contrast was between organisations that offered stand alone courses, be they dedicated or integrated, and those that provided ALN learning as one element of a broader range of provision.

The difference that 'wrap around' on site support and guidance made to the learners cannot be overstated. It enabled them to sort out difficulties in their lives and thus concentrate better upon their learning, and it helped to create a holistically supportive environment capable of supporting them through complex challenges.

However, few of the tutors had any training or expertise in guidance issues and some were not aware of who they could refer learners to. This emerged as one of the gaps in the creation of the kind of provision that could best help vulnerable learners to persist and progress.

### **Learning Hours**

Tutors were asked to estimate what they believed to be roughly the number of learning hours required for learners to progress to the next level of learning, however, none was either prepared or felt able to offer even a tentative figure because they believed that this ran counter to the spirit of the Scottish strategy. The strategies they offered to facilitate such progression are enumerated in the main body of the report. However, tutors were aware of time, resource and ethos factors that in their experience are necessary for learners to progress and it may be therefore that indices for all three might provide more appropriate criteria in Scotland.

## Definitions

One of the aims of the research was to arrive at a definition of persistence in learning that was germane to the Scottish ALN context. Our definition is drawn from discussions with participants at the conceptual seminar and ALN tutors during the fieldwork. We see persistence as continuing to learn throughout life, often struggling against obstacles, in order to achieve life and learning goals, with or without breaks in between learning episodes. This may equate with completing a course, however, non-completion on its own cannot be taken to indicate a lack of persistence in learning and the majority of practitioners recognised its longer term, temporal dimension. So dipping in and out of courses did not necessarily equate with a failure to persist. Equally, engaging in private study, going to the library, reading around interests and hobbies in between or instead of engaging in structured provision was considered to be persisting in learning.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations arise from the findings from classroom observations and interviews over time with both tutors and learners. They address key elements of ALN provision that could best support learners who are vulnerable to the non achievement of their learning targets to persist, progress and achieve, but it is our contention that they are equally relevant to all ALN provision, regardless of the target group.

### Provision

- > Learning provision is responsive to the life circumstances and experiences of the learners and accepting of the uneven, often turbulent path towards the achievement of their life goals.
- > The ethos of the organisation is welcoming, supportive and confidence building, where learners can feel at ease and secure in returning after absences from learning.
- > Organisations work towards providing holistic, 'wrap around' support and guidance that encompasses life as well as learning issues.
- > Attention is given to the detrimental effects of short-term funding on both progress and retention of learning and efforts are made to provide opportunities for more sustained engagement.
- > That an alternative to the 'learning hours' criterion is produced in Scotland that takes account of the resources, practices, support needs and time necessary to enable learners to progress to the next level of learning, as identified by both Comings (2003) and the participants in this study.
- > Opportunities for pre-course engagement work with adults who have little confidence in themselves as learners are provided and the necessity of a long lead-in time is therefore recognised and factored into provision.

### Collaboration

- > Greater and more effective partnership working between disciplines, at management as well as practitioner level, to provide the sort of holistic provision that can best help vulnerable and other learners to persist and progress and best enable learning to contribute to other life goals.

### **The Learning Programme**

- > Learning is grounded in and working towards the life goals and aspirations of the learners.
- > The value to the individual of maintaining existing states is recognised, but is not used as a proxy for learning and/or appropriate educational guidance.
- > Group work, mixed methods and curricular flexibility are factored into learning provision.
- > Whilst the pace of learning should be adapted to an individual's learning needs, it should challenge them in small steps to progress to new levels of learning.
- > Whilst assessment should be formative and informal, opportunities should be available to work towards formal accreditation where this is part of a learner's goals.

### **Support for Learning**

- > Wherever possible, support staff work with ALN staff to enhance the learning and facilitate its transfer to other aspects of learners' lives. Whilst this is especially relevant for adults with learning difficulties, it is also important for all adults experiencing difficult life circumstances.
- > Educational guidance is accessible and provision is appropriate for adults with learning difficulties to enable them to progress in their learning.
- > More than one tutor assists in classes to provide the levels of support required for tentative, vulnerable learners.

### **Tutor Professional Development**

- > More training and monitoring is provided around the use and significance of ILPs.
- > Better access to good quality staff development is available, particularly for part-time staff, so that they are better positioned to implement the above.



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