Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme

> Learning+Skills Council

learning
and skills
development
agency

practical ways of improving success in Modern Apprenticeships

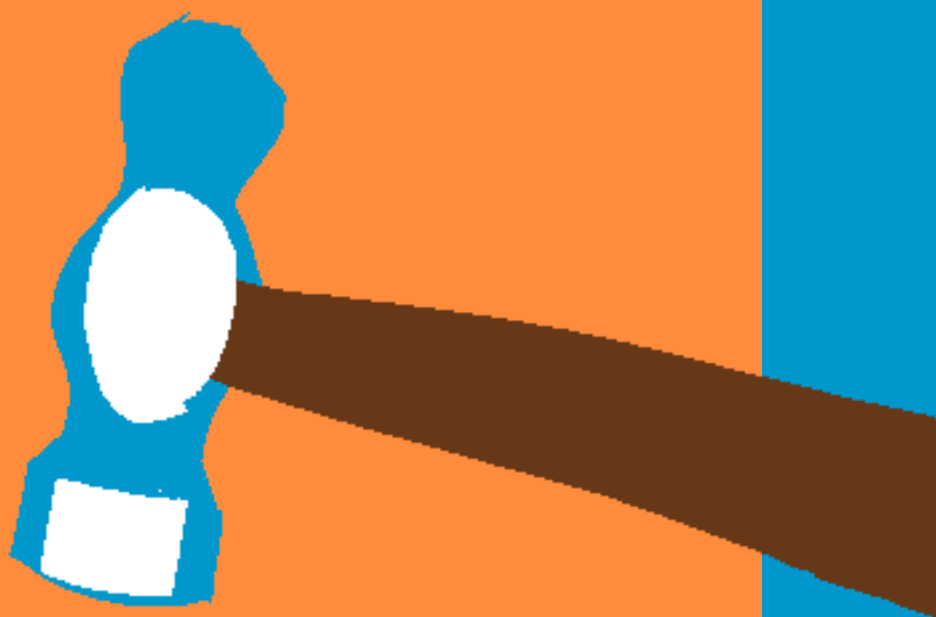John Maynard and Vikki Smith

Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme

How can providers in the work-based learning (WBL) sector improve success in Modern Apprenticeships?

This report suggests practical ways of promoting achievement and progression in WBL. With illustrative case studies, it shares the lessons learnt from 12 projects that explored different approaches to working collaboratively. Useful appendices include a sample questionnaire for a progression guidance interview and a manual describing '50 ways to retain your learner'.

This report forms part of a suite of four publications to emerge from action research projects commissioned by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in 2002/03 and funded by the Learning and Skills Council. Each publication synthesises the strategies tested and gives other providers in the sector clear guidance on how to improve learner outcomes.

Learning+Skills Council

learning
and skills
development
agency

practical ways of improving success in Modern Apprenticeships

John Maynard and
Vikki Smith

Further information
For further information about the issues discussed in this publication
please contact:
Vikki Smith
Development Adviser
Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme
Learning and Skills Development Agency.
Tel 020 7297 9091
vsmith@LSDA.org.uk

Contents

About the authors

John Maynard is a consultant within the Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme. He has many years' experience as a teacher and manager in further education and has a strong interest in quality improvement processes and the observation of teaching and learning. John has worked for the LSDA on a number of projects, including research into retention and achievement, Neighbourhood Renewal learning and future qualifications for the adult and community learning sector.

Vikki Smith is a Development Adviser within the Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme. The focus of her work is the management of a series of action research projects, whereby providers introduce a new dimension to their provision with a view to improving learner retention and achievement. Vikki has nine years' teaching experience in England, Australia and Ethiopia. She gained her PhD in post-compulsory education and training in 1997. Vikki has developed a strong interest in educational philosophy. She has worked as a researcher with the then National Council for Vocational Qualifications on the GNVQ Scrutiny Programme, as an analyst for the Value for Money Unit at the Department for Education and Skills, and, more recently, as a research fellow in work-based learning.

Acknowledgements

Summary

This publication forms part of a suite of four publications to emerge from action research projects commissioned by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in 2002/03. It aims to share the lessons learnt from a small group of projects that explored different approaches to working collaboratively within a work-based learning (WBL) context, with a view to advising providers on improving learner outcomes.

This report focuses on improving achievement and progression. The value in undertaking action research projects like those illustrated in this report lies as much in the process itself as in quality improvement; providers learn about their organisation, perhaps more than they anticipate, while developing skills for managing change.

Organisational commitment

- Change is unlikely to happen unless the organisation is committed to continuous improvement.

- Changes must be made at an organisational or cultural level, rather than simply as quick fixes.

- Quality improvements have to be realistic in terms of the resources available.

- Quality improvement is important both for increasing managers' knowledge, understanding and confidence, and for empowering staff.

Planning for realistic change

Plan only for those improvements that are feasible within the anticipated timescale by:

- focusing on a key process you want to change

- bringing together a small team of committed people

- undertaking initial research and being aware of the impact on people and processes in the organisation

- keeping things simple so that everyone can understand the change and no one feels threatened by it.

Focus on the learner

- The learner must be central to any attempt to improve achievement and progression rates.

- Improvement should focus on those processes involving the learner since all have a role to play in ensuring achievement and progression.

The importance of staff input

- To focus on learner achievement and progression is not to denigrate the importance of staff input to all the processes that lead to quality improvement.

- Get the agreement and support of all staff before implementing any of the changes planned.

- Staff involved with implementing the change must have both the necessary skills to do their jobs and / or be provided with staff development opportunities and support.

- Internal verifiers, assessors and work-based assessors must 'buy in' to any new concepts and working practices if these are to stand any chance of making an impact on learner progression and achievement.

- Where possible, elicit the help of internal champions.

Monitoring impact and sustaining improvement

- Improvements to achievement and progression need to be monitored to ensure that change is taking place and being embedded.

- Piloting a proposed change is an effective way of introducing new systems and processes.

The way forward

Providers need to pay immediate attention to:

- progression from school into WBL

- progression into WBL from initiatives aimed at widening participation and meeting the needs of unwaged adults

- lateral progression on training programmes towards the full completion of a vocational qualification

- vertical progression from a lower vocational qualification to the next at a higher level

- progression issues relating to those in employment who are 'inactive' and not seeking a work-based qualification at a higher level.

The projects suggest that progression most often leads to achievement and further development where learners:

- progress onto the right programme at the right level

- have the necessary skills, abilities and aptitudes to be retained on a programme at the right level

- experience a training programme where skills and abilities are not simply developed to meet certification requirements, but also to meet the needs of employers in the workplace

- have their progress reviewed against targets regularly and the outcomes recorded and celebrated – both in terms of unit progression and 'value added'

- have the opportunities for further progression integrated into the existing programme so that progression is seen as the natural outcome, rather than as an afterthought

- have their destinations recorded and are followed up a few months after leaving the course, either to confirm the destination or to consider further training opportunities.

Introduction

It has long been accepted that modern, highly skilled economies need the support not only of highly skilled workers, but also of workers with intermediate and lower-level skills, who underpin and sustain productivity and are vital for future development. In England and Wales, both the government and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) are committed to developing the national workforce, not only to reduce the proportion of the workforce with low skills, but also to help them progress towards achieving higher-level skills through a National Qualifications Framework.

A Department for Education and Skills (DfES) paper, for example, touches on the notion of progression and recognises the imperative of having 'a unified framework of qualifications. Any such framework must be suitable for young people across the ability range and promote progression through Foundation to Intermediate and Advanced levels' (DfES 2002).

Aimhigher (DfES 2003a), another government initiative on progression, focuses on higher education but necessarily has implications for 14–19 year olds. This linkage is aptly demonstrated in the Aimhigher draft guidance (DfES 2003b). This suggests that Aimhigher plans should include examples of work-based learning (WBL) activities, such as:

- *Working with CoVEs (Centres of Vocational Excellence) to ensure progression routes are in place.*

- *Linking with 14–19 curriculum developments – vocational GCSEs, LSC Flexibility Funding activities to develop smooth progression to HE. …*

- *Working with FE and schools to ensure HE progression from existing vocational programmes – Vocational A levels, BTEC, craft and technician programmes.* DfES 2003b

The draft guidance also suggests:

- *Mapping and developing routes into Foundation and other degrees … for Modern Apprentices including working with Sector Skills Councils, ensuring linkage with the Local LSC plans for Modern Apprenticeship development.*

- *Working with Sector Skills Councils, employer organisations, and trade unions to identify and develop work based learning progression …*

- *… developing learning, teaching and support strategies which reflect the needs of work based learners….*

DfES 2003b

These issues have resonance for the planning of all programmes in the 14–19 sector.

It is also apparent that progression, whenever it occurs, triggers a complex set of reactions that can have far-reaching consequences across the whole of the post-compulsory education and training sector. A learning sequence that promotes seamless progression needs to be established if we are to offer programmes capable of providing a vehicle for learners' achievement and progression, but also in terms of reaching government targets for both further and higher education.

In this climate the then Raising Quality and Achievement Programme – now the Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme – delivered by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) commissioned a small number of development projects in 2002, with the explicit aim of promoting progression. It soon became evident that the projects were finding it difficult to disentangle achievement from progression, so the remit expanded to take on board this extra dimension.

In an attempt to respond to the government directive of securing progression and the attainment of targets in the WBL arena, this publication presents a number of interventions that have been implemented in these development projects.

The context

Over the past five years, the LSDA has undertaken much innovative research into retention and achievement through its Raising Quality and Achievement Programme.

- The work of Martinez (2000, 2001) and Martinez and Hughes (2003) has built on research into school effectiveness in order to improve retention and achievement in the post-16 FE sector.

- Action research projects undertaken by colleges have led to the development and dissemination of innovative strategies for improving teaching and learning and also for improving most of the processes that help to place and support learners on programmes of study:
  - information, advice and guidance
  - recruitment and selection
  - careers education
  - initial screening and testing
  - induction arrangements
  - course transfer arrangements
  - student support.

However, while these processes have contributed to improved retention and achievement in the college sector, Martinez (2001) pointed out that there was a much smaller body of research relating to WBL. This included work undertaken by the Quality and Performance Improvement Dissemination Unit (QPID) in 1999 (DfEE 1999b), which indicated that some training programmes were experiencing similar problems with retention and achievement as vocational courses in colleges:

- trainees' inability to settle on a particular programme

- trainees with lower academic abilities having difficulty achieving vocational qualifications in the workplace

- high turnover of staff in certain service sector occupations, such as retail or hospitality and catering

- providers and employers valuing the acquisition of practical skills more than the final vocational qualification

- different concepts about what constituted achievement and progression on WBL programmes

- different views on how achievement and progression should be measured

- variation in respect of the timescale in which achievements were made
- different progression rates for learners from different age groups.

Initial research by Martinez and Hughes (2003), however, reported difficulties in trying to apply college-based solutions to the WBL sector, partly because of the:

- diverse range of subjects and programmes in WBL
- wide range of types of provider
- involvement of a third party – the employer – in the process of programme delivery.

Nevertheless, Martinez and Hughes (2003) found that since 1999 much good practice had developed in WBL, mirroring some of the improvement processes in the post-16 FE sector. For example:

- initial assessment and planning focusing on meeting learner needs
- a clear induction programme
- specific actions designed to retain learners in the early days of the programme
- effective key skills training
- learning strategies relevant to workplace activities
- effective support
- close cooperation with employers
- good assessment and verification.

As well as developing this strand of research activity in the WBL sector, the LSDA also examined the role that organisations play in delivering improved retention and achievement. Stanton (2001) recognised that although improvements to retention, achievement and progression were directly linked to course programmes, they could only take place if the management team of any organisation:

- recognised the need to improve and the possibility of improvement
- identified priority areas for improvement
- set themselves demanding but feasible targets
- knew the range of possible improvement tactics available
- selected tactics that were fit for purpose in relation to the nature of the problem and the institutional context
- monitored the effect of their initiatives on achievement and progression.

The DfES (2003c) suggests that there are many ways of planning for progression and that those responsible for learning, however it is conceived, might want to focus on:

- **skills development** 'where learners are encouraged to gain new skills, or to practise, develop, refine, maintain, combine, transfer or generalise existing skills'

- **breadth of curriculum content** 'in order that learners' access to new knowledge and understanding is extended – for example by teaching all learners about personal safety or giving them some level of financial understanding'

- **a range of contexts for learning** 'in which learners are offered a variety of activities, resources and environments appropriate to their age, interests and prior achievements – for example, encouraging learners to use their senses to explore events and environments beyond a class / session room'

- **a variety of support equipment** 'to enable learners to take control of their environment; to increase mobility; to develop and practise literacy and numeracy skills – for example, learners who have learned to make choices using a computer program might be offered greater autonomy by using a communication device to say what they want to do or to initiate interactions with others at key points in the day'

- **a range of methods of delivery** 'determined by learners' individual strengths and learning preferences – for example, promoting increasing cooperation between learners and a reduction in the need for staff support where appropriate'

- **negotiated learning** 'where learners are encouraged to take a greater part in the learning process, and in planning or measuring success – for example, learners are actively involved in compiling their Record of Achievement or Progress File'

- **working towards the indicators across different settings** 'where learners are offered learning opportunities in specialist, mainstream and community environments – for example, in encouraging learners to apply their developing numeracy skills in alternative learning environments (eg out in the community)'

- **strategies for independence** 'where learners are helped to move away from staff support and supervised or class-based activities towards autonomy and self-advocacy in the community, to foster greater independence – for example, learners might work with supervision in a vocational setting, or independently use facilities in a local community centre or college'.

Smith and Hughes (2003) also confirm the need for organisational commitment, recognising that those involved have to commit themselves to continuous improvement covering all aspects of the learners' experience and reflecting the work of the whole provider team. Smith and Hughes also note that the process of improving retention and achievement not only involves **short-term** (current year) measures to maximise performance, but also a commitment to **mid-term** and **long-term** actions to sustain development. The suggestion here is that improving learner performance cannot ultimately be separated from overall organisational strategy and has to be seen within that context. Smith (2004) has subsequently developed more detailed links demonstrating the interface between stakeholders and learners.

The research

In summer 2002, the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme run by the LSDA commissioned 78 development projects, with the aim of improving learner outcomes in WBL. These projects reported on their activities in summer 2003.

With an emphasis on action research, all the projects sought to change current practice and, as a result, to improve retention or achievement rates. Action research is an 'intervention in the … real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention' (Cohen *et al.* 2000). The rationale for employing an action research approach is that it 'directly addresses the persistent failure of research in the social sciences to make a difference in terms of bringing about action improvements in practice' (Somekh 1995, p340). Action research has the potential to generate genuine and sustained improvements, as it requires those conducting the action research to:

- reflect on and assess their practice

- explore and test new ideas, methods and materials

- evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions.

Ideally, the outcomes of the action research are shared with colleagues, and decisions are then taken as to which innovations are adopted institution-wide. This participatory process aims to end the dislocation of research from practice.

The basis for the projects in this research was to:

- explore the unity between educational research and practice

- provide an action research framework capable of supporting and encouraging myriad development activities, for example:
  - critical reflection
  - professional / learner development
  - curriculum development
  - institutional change.

As such, projects introduced new dimensions to their provision and explored changes to current practice, in an explicit attempt to raise retention and / or achievement in WBL. The quality of an organisation's (or part of an organisation's) performance was the motivating factor, with practitioners analysing a particular set of circumstances with a view to improving practice.

To gain some critical mass and to enhance the possibility of developing transferable key messages, the projects were grouped under four headings:

- preventing early dropout

- promoting achievement and progression

- working together

- integrating on- and off-the-job training.

The projects focusing on promoting achievement and progression across the WBL sector are featured in this publication. The three sister publications that will address the remaining themes are:

- *Boosting your retention rates: lessons for preventing early drop-out* (Sadler and Smith 2004)

- *Pushing back the boundaries: working with employers and other partners* (Smith 2004)

- *Rethinking the process: strategies for integrating on- and off-the-job training* (Natrins and Smith 2004)

Each publication synthesises the strategies tested and gives other providers in the sector clear and practical guidance on how to improve learner outcomes.

To further promote the sharing of experiences, practices and learning across the sector, each project has written up their work as a case study. These are available on the Support for Success website (www.s4s.org.uk).

The case studies

Twelve providers from different geographical regions in England – whose programmes ranged from life skills to Foundation Modern Apprenticeships (FMAs) and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships (AMAs) – undertook action research projects on achievement and progression.

Some providers specialised in specific vocational areas, such as accountancy or engineering, while others were national providers with training centres in a number of English towns and cities and offered programmes in most vocational areas.

Some providers had fairly tight entry procedures aimed at learners with specific skills and attributes, while others had some learners who came from 'hugely deprived backgrounds with all the problems that social inequality can bring.'

All of the projects, however, were seeking to improve the quality of provision and providers welcomed the chance to undertake the action research. As one provider put it: 'the structure of the project gave us the impetus to actually do it. It also required us to properly plan it and write down our project goals and methodology.'

The 12 providers who chose to concentrate on improving achievement and progression focused on the following areas of activity:

- improving progression from school to WBL
- improving learner motivation in order to aid both retention and achievement
- improving the assessment process
- improving progression from FMAs to AMAs
- developing holistic approaches to WBL which place the learner at the centre of all activities.

All providers recognised that they each had 'the opportunity to focus on key processes we wanted to change'. One in particular set out to test whether 'any lessons learnt could be reliably attributed to the method of delivery, or whether retention and achievement was the result of a complex mix of immeasurable factors both within and outside the provider's control'. It is issues such as these that are enumerated in the following paragraphs.

Improving progression from school to WBL

The action research projects in this area of activity recognised that many young people leave school with little or no understanding of the world of work or opportunities available for WBL.

One provider thought this was largely due to the fact that information about training programmes usually focuses on what a company is trying to 'sell', rather than on answering questions that learners and parents are likely to ask at the learner's interview.

There was also awareness of the fact that providers themselves need to be proactive. Otherwise there was a danger of getting stuck 'in a box' and of not responding to external influences impacting on WBL.

One particularly successful project demonstrated a proactive approach by introducing 'student apprenticeships' for Year 11 students. These offered young people the chance to gain NVQ units in engineering and key skills while continuing their studies at school. Although the project encountered some difficulties because different schools had different timetables, the links established between school, training provider and employers were well organised, effective and rigorous. This provider understood that any link programme had to be quality provision that met the needs of all stakeholders: school, students, parents and employers. The organisation also realised that sound action planning was vital because employers were unlikely to participate without evidence of a stable working plan.

The student apprenticeship programme was therefore designed along the following lines:

The training provider held open evenings for parents, students and teachers to look around their training centre. As learners would spend one day a week there, it was felt important that students, parents and teachers were happy with the learning environment and satisfied with the facilities and hi-tech equipment available.

Employers who wished to participate in the scheme identified vacancies in their companies for student apprentices. These were then advertised in local schools and colleges and targeted at students about to enter or already in post-16 education.

Students who applied for the vacancies had to complete a rigorous initial assessment exercise conducted at the school or at the provider's training centre. As well as taking an aptitude test, applicants were also tested in literacy, numeracy, verbal skills and spatial awareness.

If student applicants passed the test at a sufficiently high standard, their application was endorsed by the school and sent to employers offering the apprenticeships. Employers then interviewed all applicants and made offers based on future potential.

Students selected for apprenticeships then spent four days in school following their education programme and one day a week with an employer or at the training centre, working towards NVQ units and improving key skills. The training provider drew up training specifications for each learner and carried out progress reviews.

At the end of the programme, the provider ensured that progression was 'open' rather than rigid. Student apprentices were given the opportunity to progress onto a Modern Apprenticeship or to follow another career path. Those on the pilot scheme who progressed into higher education took with them evidence of enrichment, while those who took on a Modern Apprenticeship had sufficient experience to be committed to the programme and had already achieved units towards their NVQ.

The strength of this project lay in the fact that the training provider developed a scheme which set out to meet the needs of various partners, rather than concentrating on 'selling' training programmes. There are also lessons to be learnt here with regard to partnership and collaborative working. Schools had the opportunity to offer students the prospect of embarking on a programme of enrichment activities and work experience ; learners had the opportunity to go through a selection process where they were chosen by aptitude and ability. This meant that the opportunity to taste WBL was not presented as a 'Cinderella' experience – as the poor relation to academic programmes – but as something that had to be earned through ability. This strategy tried to impart a sense of value and worth in undertaking such a programme. Employers played a key role in the process by using real selection criteria and advertising real vacancies.

Through the apprenticeship programme the training provider was able to create a new and effective partnership between school and employment. The work was so successful that this provider has been recognised by the LSC as a 'pathfinder' provider for student apprenticeships and this model is being developed for use nationally.

Improving learner motivation

The projects dealing with learner motivation set out to determine whether :

- learners are more motivated to achieve through intrinsic or extrinsic rewards
- rewards can help overcome barriers to achievement experienced by specific client groups.

Given the current inspection and funding regimes, there was an underlying organisational need to try to get more learners to complete qualifications within contracted timeframes. One provider offering a life skills programme to particularly disadvantaged learners, however, was simply looking for a way of developing the self-confidence and language abilities of learners who lacked the writing ability necessary to record achievement.

Each of these projects recognised that there are work-based learners whose multiple problems can lead to slow progress and that their achievements can be more difficult to measure. Many of the learners were low-achievers with poor basic skills, and some had behavioural and personal problems. Although many of the providers lacked a significantly developed provision for counselling, guidance and support, they did have strong links with external agencies and many had developed supportive tutorial / review sessions.

Providers tackling learner motivation generally recognised that:

- there is a need to treat all learners as individuals and to meet their individual needs

- some learners are more 'at risk' than others

- 'at risk' factors need to be recorded and monitored as soon as the learner accesses a training programme

- providers need to set realistic milestones for each qualification and monitor attainment against these targets

- learners need to have their progress continuously reinforced so that they experience success / achievement as an ongoing process

- achievement for these learners is not simply a unit towards an NVQ – providers need to recognise good attendance and punctuality, improved attitude to study and interaction with others in the workplace.

One provider set out to engender additional learner motivation by ensuring that each process in the programme was supportive and that learner success was always celebrated. This provider ensured that induction was comprehensive, involving not only necessary information but also team-building exercises and the chance to 'buddy up' with other trainees. Tutors and assessors were encouraged to share good practice and learner achievement was celebrated, where possible, with in-house certification. The provider believed quite strongly in this: 'their successes, however small, [are] celebrated because each step along the path to a qualification can be accompanied [by] a rise in self-esteem and a desire to achieve'.

Another project was particularly interesting. It set out to determine whether financial rewards and rewards in kind would significantly increase achievement by boosting learners' intrinsic motivation. The provider conducted a survey of learner attitudes to various forms of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and then put in place a number of reward systems, including monetary rewards for attendance and successful completion of a work placement. The learners' achievements were then compared to those of trainees at other centres who were not benefiting from any financial incentives. The results were not what the company was expecting: 'we measured achievement levels among the sample group after several months … and to our surprise found they had decreased compared to both the baseline levels and subsequent control groups'.

When the provider looked again at the learner questionnaires, they realised that learners had actually rated the value they placed on motivating factors in the following order (from most important to least important):

- teaching and learning
- group rewards
- intrinsic goals
- lifestyle
- individual reward
- financial
- extrinsic.

This provider concluded ruefully that 'concentrating on improving teaching and learning may have had far more significant results' than spending money.

Improving the assessment process

Providers undertaking projects for this study were all too aware of constraints placed on them by contractual obligations and the perception that learners must achieve within a certain timeframe. They were also conscious that during the lifetime of the projects the Adult Learning Inspectorate was collecting information about learners' progression and achievement on WBL programmes and that these would eventually become key indicators for setting future performance standards. The three projects undertaken in this area therefore focused on reviewing the assessment process in order to improve FMA/AMA framework completions. The providers adopted different approaches, but their work proved to be significant.

The 'less paper portfolio'

The first provider's project, called the 'less paper portfolio', sought to improve FMA/AMA framework completions in business administration, where completion was relatively modest.

The provider's initial strategies were to:

- undertake a fundamental review of paperwork procedures, then to eliminate unnecessary paperwork

- improve the skills of assessors and internal verifiers by 'modernising their working practices'

- fully document new systems, publishing detailed procedures in a *Quality assurance manual*

- reduce and simplify internal verifier paperwork so that staff were left with four key items:
    - initial learning and assessment plan
    - multi-purpose activity record
    - formative assessment record
    - summative assessment record.

This paperwork system was then used with one pilot group of trainees, while control groups in other centres continued using the original paperwork. Assessors and verifiers were then trained in the new system and those who were confident 'buddied up' with staff requiring further support.

Following an investigation of learner attitudes to portfolio-building, the provider also encouraged trainees to develop new ways of collecting evidence. The use of audiotapes was encouraged and systems were put in place so that learners could contact assessors via a bulletin board or e-mail. The provider also used its awarding body's 'e-NVQ' system to enable learners to submit evidence electronically.

A framework manager was employed to track learner progress and assist learners towards completion.

To the provider's delight, there was a 52% improvement in MA framework completions in the pilot centre compared with the control centres.

A holistic assessment process

The second provider to focus on assessment also did so with the aim of reducing paperwork but, more significantly, wished to end repetitious assessment on care courses, where the same skills were assessed in different units. They also recognised that learners under 25 were three times more likely than older learners to leave training without completing an NVQ.

The provider felt the only way these issues could be resolved was by developing 'a holistic assessment process'. The provider:

- identified those optional units in the qualification that were most appropriate to the job role for the majority of candidates

- mapped skills across mandatory and optional units to determine commonality of evidence requirements

- devised assessment paperwork that mapped sources of evidence across the units

- trained work-based assessors willing to try out the new method

- piloted the new assessment process, with a small group of learners being assessed holistically and a comparable number assessed under the old system as a control group.

Although the pilot group was small, their results were significantly better than those of the control group. Of those who were assessed holistically, one achieved the NVQ qualification within four months and all bar one learner (who left the programme) completed their qualification within 13 months. None of the control group had completed their NVQ by the end of the project.

While the provider acknowledged that the sample was small, it was clear that curriculum-mapping to determine common evidence had resulted in a simpler assessment system and helped learners to achieve faster.

More assessor visits

The third provider to tackle assessment did so by increasing the number of assessor visits to a level that best suited the individual learner. This work built on a previous project that this provider has carried out, where additional local LSC funding had helped to support 10 'at risk' learners by providing more assessor support.

The provider devised a new questionnaire to determine learner needs and chose a number of FMA/AMA 'new starts' to take part in the pilot process. The learners completed the questionnaires and these were analysed to determine what individual support was needed. FMA learners were then visited in the workplace every two weeks; AMAs were visited monthly. Employers welcomed these visits and believed they encouraged learner motivation, although one AMA in management asked for fewer visits because his job was too demanding.

The outcomes for this provider were that:

- FMA achievement improved by 28% compared to other learners

- AMA achievement rose by 10%

- all learners involved in the pilot were able to achieve their qualification aims ahead of schedule

- the increased visits proved particularly valuable to FMAs, especially those initially thought to be at risk.

The provider acknowledged, however, that learners with basic skills needs would probably find the pace of assessment too fast and would probably not complete their key skills on time. Those with more responsibilities in the workplace might also have difficulties completing quickly. The provider also noted that all project interventions have financial implications, not only in relation to the cost of increasing assessor visits, but also because of funding implications if learners were not on a training programme for a specified amount of time.

Improving progression from FMAs to AMAs

The provider which undertook action research in this area wanted to find out why learners who had a positive learning experience on FMA programmes failed to progress to an AMA as 'the natural outcome' of a learning programme.

Initial investigation suggested that part of the problem lay in both the quality and the timing of guidance given – not all FMA learners were aware of AMA programmes, and recruitment staff tended to give generic advice rather than specific guidance linked to learners' vocational skills and how these would be further developed on an AMA programme. More worrying was the fact that access to WBL in the organisation appeared to involve guidance where 'learners were being selected against their ability to complete the NVQ only and evidence from their key skills initial assessment was not being deployed effectively'.

Investigating reasons for non-progression also highlighted other problems for the provider:

- vocational areas were not applying advice and guidance consistently

- some vocational areas offered no opportunities for progression at all

- little discussion about progression occurred until the end of the programme

- there was a general lack of information about progression.

The first step for this provider was to change recruitment personnel to ensure that advice and guidance was vocationally oriented and structured to the needs of the individual. Steps were then taken to ensure that progression issues are embedded in the learning programme so that on a one-year course the following take place:

- at 6–9 months – progression opportunities are discussed

- at 9 months – learners are given a leaflet setting out progression opportunities

- at 10 months – learners are interviewed about opportunities for progression (a sample interview questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2)

- at 11 months – an in-depth skill scan of the learner's job role is carried out and an initial assessment / accreditation of prior learning for the FMA programme is looked at again. An employer is then selected, based on their ability to provide the learner with a suitable learning environment

- at 11–12 months – provider and learner decide whether progression to an AMA is suitable. Progression is finalised.

Despite the changing dynamics of WBL and the evolving requirements of Modern Apprenticeships, investigating one particular issue gave this provider 'the opportunity to focus on a key process we wanted to change'. They also acknowledged, however, that 'timescales need to be realistic' and that further improvements have to continue after the lifetime of the original research project.

Developing holistic approaches

The word 'holistic' was used in several case studies – providers have become increasingly aware that delivering programmes involves a range of processes that can all be improved.

A learner-centred ethos

One project focused on placing the learner at the centre of delivery. The provider set out to evaluate its experience of delivering training programmes, to determine whether there were any factors that were promoting retention and achievement. The project team then decided which of the issues identified could be improved for the next contract year.

When the team looked at what factors contributed most to learner achievement, they realised that 'things went well when the learner was treated as an individual and individual needs were met'. Conversely, when they analysed feedback from early leavers, it confirmed that motivation to learn and achieve had stopped because the learner had not been central to the delivery process. Early leavers had either been put on the wrong course or had received insufficient support from the provider (in terms of resources and training facilities) or from the assessor (in terms of time, materials and consistency of approach).

As a result of these explorations, the project team devised a new delivery strategy that focused on the learner. Key features were:

- ensure that the learner's prior achievement and current skills match the purpose of the programme and the unit content of the NVQ

- use initial assessment to develop a delivery plan for each unit, with realistic and achievable targets

- ensure that all learners fully understand their programme and what is required for completion – this understanding was to be the focal point of progress reviews

- all programmes should relate to the context of the learner's own workplace

- all learners should be resourced adequately in terms of travel, training facilities, assessor time and materials – money was spent on each learner according to their individual needs

- providers should keep asking themselves one fundamental question about all their processes and working methods: are the needs of the learner central to the methods chosen?

Although it was too early to measure the impact on achievement, this provider had seen a learner-centred ethos having a marked impact on retention rates and learners being better able to recognise their own abilities and skills.

Best practice manual

A second provider which took a broader overview was a large organisation that had already begun to make fundamental changes in its working practices. It had produced a 'key learner process' manual for staff – a guide on strategies for improving learner outcomes by introducing a structured approach to all the key processes in the learners' experience of their training programmes. Now it wished to foster an ethos of retention and achievement by focusing its staff on recruitment, retention and achievement.

To achieve this, the provider conducted primary research using a questionnaire designed to evaluate the different, often informal, methods that managers and trainers used to retain learners. Based on this research, it then produced a manual called *Fifty ways to retain your learner* (reproduced here in Appendix 3) – a synthesis of best practice from individual centres that could then be used in all centres. Not surprisingly, it reflects some of the issues also focused on in other projects concerned with achievement and progression.

The value of this project was not simply in compiling a record of best practice throughout the organisation. At a local level, the research raised understanding among managers of the variety of approaches being used to measure and improve retention and achievement. The manual is now being used by the company to ensure consistency of approach to recruitment, retention and achievement across the organisation and by managers to disseminate good practice to their staff. The 'traffic light system' described in the manual (see Appendix 3, point 8) has also been used by other providers in one LSC area after the local LSCs highlighted it as good practice.

Lessons learnt

The value of an action research project lies as much in the process itself as in the resulting quality improvement. Providers not only learnt more about their organisation than they had anticipated, but also learnt about the skills involved in managing change, which proved invaluable.

Organisational commitment

Most providers agreed that change is unlikely to happen unless the organisation is committed to continuous improvement. If quality improvement is to be truly effective, however, one provider firmly believed that 'changes must be made at an organisational or cultural level rather than simply [as] quick fixes'. Quality improvements have to be realistic in terms of the resources available. One major provider pointed out that 'small organisations will not have the resources available for big changes', while another advised that the bigger the change, the bigger 'the time and cost implications'. That said, providers also appreciated that quality improvement was important both for 'raising managers' knowledge, understanding and confidence' and for empowering staff.

Planning for realistic change

Because providers generally felt under pressure to improve achievement and progression, there was a tendency to plan for more improvements than were feasible within the anticipated timescale.

One provider began to implement changes without appreciating the importance of initial research and without anticipating the impact of proposed changes before attempting to put them in place. Trying to move too fast meant the organisation became involved in 'an entire re-engineering process, which had not been anticipated'. Having reflected on its experience, it concluded that the following steps are important in trying to improve achievement and progression in WBL:

- focus on a key process you want to change

- bring together a small team of committed people

- undertake initial research and be aware of the impact on people and processes in the organisation

- plan the improvement within a realistic timescale

- keep things simple so that everyone can understand the change and no one feels threatened by it.

Focus on the learner

All the projects focusing on achievement and progression recognised that the learner is central to any attempt to improve achievement and progression rates. Improvement therefore needs to focus on all processes involving the learner.

The case studies suggested the following checklist:

Action	Comments	Please tick
What information do you have that will help students to progress from school to WBL?		
Does your information on WBL give students, teachers, parents and adults the information necessary to make informed judgements or is its primary function just to sell courses?		
Do you encourage students, teachers, parents and adults to visit training facilities or take up taster opportunities in WBL?		
Do you offer open days/evenings targeted at specific client groups for the purpose of widening participation or promoting equality of opportunity?		
Do you offer local schools the opportunity for students to experience WBL as part of their 14–19 programme and gain unit accreditation that could facilitate progression onto a WBL programme?		
Do you work actively with Jobcentre Plus staff, employers and voluntary organisations to identify current/future vacancies that could be matched to the skills and abilities of current or future trainees?		
Does progression into WBL involve rigorous initial assessment of both key skills and job-related skills which ensure that the learner is on the right programme?		
Is progression into WBL used as an opportunity to identify any barriers to learning so that individuals can be supported and motivated to achieve and progress?		
How strong are your links with external agencies who are able to give counselling and support to learners with behavioural and personal problems, eg alcohol abuse, housing problems, benefit issues?		
How do you motivate learners on all stages of their programme to achieve and progress? In particular, how do you help learners on life skills programmes to take small steps towards improvement, eg unit achievement or changes in attendance patterns and punctuality? How do you record changes in personal behaviour in terms of 'value added'?		
What systems are in place to ensure that learner progress is reviewed regularly and that learner feedback is sought about key organisational processes and practices?		
What steps are you taking to make assessment both more holistic and less reliant on 'paper' evidence? Are assessor visits targeted effectively at those who need the most support?		
Is there a progression strategy built into every WBL programme so progression is a natural part of the programme rather than a short bolt-on procedure at the end?		

The importance of staff input

To focus on learner achievement and progression is not to denigrate the importance of staff input into all the processes that lead to quality improvement. All the projects stressed the importance of getting the agreement and support of all staff before implementing any of the changes planned. However, it was felt that staff must have the necessary skills to do their jobs and be provided with staff development opportunities and support when any new changes to promote achievement and progression were introduced.

One provider thought that this was particularly important in the case of recruitment, since staff working in this area have a key role to play in progressing learners into training and ensuring they are on the right course. Not surprisingly, however, most emphasis was placed on the role of internal verifiers, assessors and workplace assessors, especially as the latter, in the words of one provider, usually had 'a lonely, and often thankless and unpaid role'.

The key message from providers was that internal verifiers, assessors and work-based assessors had to 'buy in' to any new concepts and working practices if these were to stand any chance of making an impact on learner progression and achievement. This was not always easy to achieve. One provider found some assessors 'entrenched in their ways' and unwilling to change long-standing assessment practices to make them simpler and more user-friendly. This provider took the approach of using the most enthusiastic and capable staff as 'internal champions', which 'along with the support of mentors … proved a very effective method of driving and reinforcing change'. The same provider also advised, however, that 'changing working practices and encouraging staff to develop new skills is a long process, requiring continual support over many months – it is not just a question of redesigning paperwork'.

Not all providers experienced the same problem, however. The high morale of staff at one company was attributed to the fact that managers 'empowered staff to use a variety of approaches to encourage individual learners to stay on-programme'.

Monitoring impact and sustaining improvement

Almost all the providers advised that improvements to achievement and progression take time and need to be monitored to ensure that change is taking place and being embedded.

One provider cautioned against looking for an early impact because some changes do not take effect 'for at least 12 months'. Nevertheless, it was clear that some projects had been remarkably effective within a relatively short timescale, although these were usually pilot projects with small numbers of learners. Piloting, however, was seen as an effective way of introducing new systems and processes, not simply because, as one provider put it, 'you can't do everything at once', but also because the impact of change was easier to measure.

The way forward

Next steps for the projects

All the providers whose projects focused on achievement and progression intend to carry their initiatives forward or apply a pilot model to a larger sample of learners.

The school links programme already developed by one provider has been recognised by the LSC as one of 12 pathfinder models, out of which a final model will be developed and offered nationally.

Another large national training organisation will be incorporating its project outcomes as a formal procedure in the company's policy. The company has produced a retention guide that will be introduced into the company's quality system so that 'all staff will be required to use the guide and the supporting documentation as company policy and procedure'.

Although other providers appear to be less ambitious, this is merely a reflection of their size and the lessons learnt from their action research. All intend either to expand pilot work to embrace a larger, more robust sample, or to review other key processes and procedures in order to improve achievement and progression. One provider, for example, intends to review its 'employer pack' information and procedures, while another is already developing a holistic assessment strategy for an NVQ 3 qualification. Others intend to invest in training and resources to support key skills and technical certificate achievement, while embedding the outcomes of their action research projects in their existing polices and procedures.

Improving achievement

These action research projects have demonstrated that many providers operating in the WBL sector are being proactive in making quality improvements capable of improving progression and achievement. More needs to be done, however, if the UK is to meet the challenge set by its international competitors. Workforce achievement at NVQ 3 remains low and work-based skills remain low at most levels. Progression in learning is therefore a cornerstone of both national economic success and social inclusion.

The projects undoubtedly indicate a way forward for WBL providers, encouraging individual continuous improvement and signalling ways of responding to the challenges facing the sector as a whole. However, the project outcomes also show that more changes lie ahead if providers are to meet the more difficult challenges of those disadvantaged learners who are currently least able to achieve full qualifications, framework outcomes or technical certificates.

Improving progression

Providers need to pay immediate attention to a number of specific issues on progression:

- progression from school into WBL

- progression into WBL from initiatives aimed at widening participation and meeting the needs of unwaged adults

- lateral progression on training programmes towards the full completion of a vocational qualification

- vertical progression from a lower vocational qualification to the next at a higher level

- progression issues relating to those in employment who are 'inactive' and not seeking a work-based qualification at a higher level.

Progression, however, is not simply a matter of adding bodies to swell the numbers of those accessing WBL. The projects suggest that progression most often leads to achievement and further development where learners:

- progress onto the right programme at the right level

- have the necessary skills, abilities and aptitudes to be retained on a programme at the right level

- experience a training programme where skills and abilities are not simply developed to meet certification requirements, but also to meet the needs of employers in the workplace

- have their progress regularly reviewed against targets and the outcomes recorded and celebrated – both in terms of unit progression and 'value added'

- have progression opportunities integrated into the existing programme, so that progression is seen as the natural outcome, rather than as an afterthought

- have their destinations recorded and followed up a few months after leaving the course, either to confirm the destination or to offer further training opportunities.

  Recent research for the LSDA by Doyle and Taylor (2003) suggests that the way ahead depends on broadening our understanding of the word 'progression', not simply associating it with progress on an upward trajectory. For some young people and adults in particular, progression may be 'stop-start'. Others may wish to:

- progress from WBL in one area to another course at the same level in order to broaden knowledge

- add a new specialism

- enhance new skills in order to make them more secure.

  The government and awarding bodies may therefore need to put building blocks in place to ensure 'vocational progression pathways' (Doyle and Taylor 2003), or to enable units gained as part of a work-based training programme to form part of a credit transfer system that will encourage further participation within a reasonable timeframe.

  Providers undertaking action research projects have also recognised that while many prospective learners might have vocational skills and aptitudes, they fail to progress into training and along learning pathways because of: limited basic skills, personal and behavioural problems, limited equality of opportunity and access.

  The way forward for these learners involves providers and other agencies ensuring:

- better advice and guidance systems, including proactive brokerage between agencies such as Jobcentre Plus and learning providers; advice and guidance, however, must ensure that learners progress into training that can support their individual needs, rather than simply signing them up to a general programme where their needs are of secondary or little importance

- that well-planned 'first step' programmes are available to help individuals re-engage in learning; these should offer flexible qualifications that can be built up unit by unit over time and tailored to individual needs

- better targeting of support (eg tuition costs, childcare) for low-skilled adults and young people in order to remove barriers and build motivation and confidence

- specialist support with strong links to external agencies, which can help learners deal with specific problems (eg alcohol abuse, anger management).

Finally, the action research projects on progression and achievement recognised that achievement depends on learners understanding that they are not only making progress in terms of certification, but that they are also developing other skills that will help them progress into work or further learning. While most providers ensure that learning plans and progress reviews are in place to discuss vocational achievements, there is a clear need to monitor and record progress in key skills, basic skills or any personal targets that promote the needs and interests of the learners. Learners can also be encouraged towards achievement through 'buddy systems' or 'learning champions', who might still be in learning themselves but who can, with training, act as role models and mentors for others.

Being learner-centred

In the words of one provider, the way ahead lies in a holistic approach to the delivery of WBL that makes 'the learners and their experiences central to all decisions'.

Although this means essentially offering a tailored service that suits individual needs, this provider saw the strengths of the approach as ensuring that every process in an organisation contributes effectively to how each programme is delivered. This is primarily because all processes interface with each other. When used in isolation, processes such as training needs analysis are, therefore, ineffective, 'as the learner is not central. Accurate identification of needs and poor training delivery does not tackle improving retention and achievement and misses the point of being learner-centred.'

Being learner-centred does not simply mean determining the value and the purpose of each programme with the general learner in mind, but asking yourself, as a provider, whether you can confidently justify particular programmes for particular learners.

It means recognising that all processes need to be improved – continuously – if you are to meet the challenges ahead and enable learners to progress in a quality work-based training sector that is equal in terms of rigour and standards to academic programmes.

References

ALI (2002). *Retention and achievement data from work-based learning inspections*. Coventry : Adult Learning Inspectorate.

Clark R, Wall P (2002). *Good practice in work-based learning in colleges.* Quality information pack. London : Association of Colleges.

Cohen L, Manion L, Morrison K (2000). *Research methods in education,* 5th ed. London, New York : Routledge Falmer.

DfEE (1999a). *Leaving TfW – Trainees who do not achieve a payable positive outcome.* Annesley : Quality and Performance Improvement Dissemination Unit.

DfEE (1999b). *Tackling early leaving from youth programmes.* Annesley : Quality and Performance Improvement Dissemination Unit.

DfES (2002). *14–19: opportunity and excellence.* Annesley : Department for Education and Skills.

DfES (2003a). *Aimhigher.* At www.aimhigher.ac.uk / en / about_us / index.cfm ?view=screen&, accessed 27 November 2003.

DfES (2003b). *Vocational and workbased learning* (Appendix B of *Aimhigher*). Available via www.uwe.ac.uk / widen / wbl.htm, accessed 27 November 2003.

DfES (2003c). *Planning for progression for all learners with the curriculum framework*. At www.dfes.gov.uk / curriculum_pre-entry / planning /, accessed 27 November 2003.

Doyle L, Taylor S (2003). *Adult learning pathways: raising aspirations and tackling barriers to progression*. London : Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Gray J, Hopkins D, Reynolds D, Wilcox B, Farrell S, Jesson D (1999). *Improving schools: performance and potential.* Oxford : Open University Press.

Martinez P (2000). *Raising achievement: a guide to successful strategies.* London : Further Education Development Agency.

Martinez P (2001). *Improving student retention and achievement: what do we know and what do we need to find out?* London : Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Martinez P, Hughes M (2003). *Improving retention and achievement in work based training.* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Natrins L, Smith V (2004). *Rethinking the process: strategies for integrating on- and off-the-job training.* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Sadler J, Smith V (2004) *Boosting your retention rates: lessons for preventing early drop-out.* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Smith V (2004). *Pushing back the boundaries: working with employers and other partners.* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Smith V, Hughes M (2003). *Making the difference: provider support for learner retention and achievement in work-based learning.* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Somekh B (1995). The contribution of action research to development in social endeavours: a position paper. *British Educational Research Journal*, 21(3), 339–355.

Stanton, G (2001). *Lessons learned on raising quality and achievement.* London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

TSC (2000). *Promoting equal opportunities.* Coventry: Training Standards Council.

Appendix 1 # Case study organisations

The case studies undertaken as part of these action research projects can be found on the Support for Success website via:
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=page&page=home&id=3

Web links for the individual projects that informed this publication are:

Academy of Training
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=393

Accountancy Plus (Training) Ltd
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=414

Associated Care Training Ltd
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=421

Crystal Training
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=396

Derwent Training Association
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=395

John Clive Training
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=412

KEY Training Services
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=410

Protocol Skills
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=428

S & S Training Services
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=389

SYTG Ltd
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=411

Training for Tomorrow
www.s4s.org.uk / index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=430

Appendix 2 **Progression guidance interview – sample questionnaire**

One provider undertook action research on improving progression from FMAs to AMAs (see page 18). The following questionnaire was used in interviews with learners to assess their opportunities for progression.

Progression guidance interview

Note: The interviewer should strike through questions that are not relevant to the client.

Name of interviewer:

Date of interview:

*I have made the client aware that any information that he/she gives me or other staff, either now or in the future, is in **professional confidence** and may be shared with other members of staff or other relevant individuals (eg careers staff, employment service staff) if it is necessary for [the client's] progression. If there is any information they do not wish to be shared (**strict confidentiality**) then the client must make this clear beforehand. All confidential information will be recorded and sealed in an envelope in the client's file.*

Signed by interviewer:

Signed by client:

1   Current programme details

Do you have an up-to-date CV (curriculum vitae)?   Yes / No

What programme are you currently completing?

What key skills have you completed / are you working towards ('WT')
(please tick and circle WT if not yet complete)

☐ Communication   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

☐ Application of Number   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

☐ Information Technology   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

☐ Improving Own Learning   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

☐ Working with Others   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

Have you completed external assessments for any key skills?

☐ Communication   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

☐ Application of Number   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

☐ Information Technology   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

☐ Improving Own Learning   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

☐ Working with Others   Level _____ WT Date achieved:

Client's name:

Progression guidance interview

How do you feel about your performance and progress in training so far?

Are you going to be completing your training as scheduled   Yes / No
in your individual learning plan?
If no, then please state the reason(s) for delay:

2 Progression programme details

Which programme are you hoping to progress to?

Why do you wish to progress?

Will you remain with the same employer / department?   Yes / No

3 Current employment details

Is your existing employer supportive of your decision?   Yes / No

Has your job role changed since starting training?   Yes / No
If yes, please give details:

On starting your next qualification, will you have supervisory responsibilities?   Yes / No
(Applicable to AMA progressions only)

Are you / will you be employed (ie on Minimum Wage   Yes / No
or an enhanced training wage)?

Do you have a specific day off?   Yes / No
If yes, please give details:

Client's name:

Progression guidance interview

Would you be prepared to visit the centre on your day off?	Yes / No
Has your employer agreed to allow you to carry out day-release or off-the-job training during working hours?	Yes / No
What is your long-term career aim?	

4   New employment details

Position in company / job title:

Name and address of company:

Name of manager and contact number:

When do you start in your new post?

Do you anticipate leaving within the next 12 months?	Yes / No
Does your new employer support your decision to continue training?	Yes / No

What hours do you work?

On starting your next qualification, will you have supervisory responsibilities? (Applicable to AMA progressions only)	Yes / No
Are you / will you be employed (ie on Minimum Wage or an enhanced training wage)?	Yes / No

Do you have a specific day off? Please give details:

Would you be prepared to visit the centre on your day off?	Yes / No
Has your employer agreed to allow you to carry out day-release or off-the-job training during working hours?	Yes / No

What is your long-term career aim?

Has your new employer requested any specific training other than the MA? If yes, what?	Yes / No

Client's name:

Progression guidance interview

5   Comments from key partners involved in the potential progression

Comments from **trainer/assessor** on suitability for progression:

Signed: Date:

Comments from **learner** on their suitability for progression:

Signed: Date:

6   Checklist for interviewer

Have you discussed with the learner the difference between the levels   Yes/No
of the qualifications, ie the difference from level 2 to level 3?

Has the initial assessment been revisited?   Yes/No

7   Personal

Are there any personal details that have changed, eg address, name?
Please give details:

Any additional information regarding the application may be noted in this space:

Client's name:

Progression guidance interview

For office use only

Which funding body will the client be accessing: TVC ☐   FE ☐   LSC ☐

Summary of client interview (overall impression, reasoning for decisions, any key areas that need to be addressed on the ILP)

Potential risks identified:

Action that could be implemented to overcome risk:

Outcome decision: Suitable ☐ On hold ☐
Next steps for 'suitable' client:

Anticipated start date for work trial:

Date of refresher induction and further diagnostic assessment:

☐ Please tick if you believe there is sufficient evidence for additional learning needs / additional support needs funding for this learner and complete an LSC funding form (copy to learning support manager)

Client's name:

Appendix 3 # 50 ways to retain your learner

As part of the action research projects conducted for this study, one provider (see page 20) produced a best practice manual for managers and trainers on ways to retain learners. The manual is reproduced below.

Here are 50 different ways to help you improve learner retention and to support progression and achievement

1 Right learner, right programme
Check your recruitment and initial assessment practices are actually placing learners who want to learn on programmes that are the most appropriate for their ability and job role. Ensure that non-employed learners consider fully a range of opportunities and are given sound advice.

2 Tell it as it is
Check that your recruitment practices are 'selling' the whole programme including key skills testing, time off for study and technical certificates (where relevant). No one wants a nasty surprise halfway through the programme!

3 A true workplace mentor
At recruitment, encourage the workplace supervisor to become a true workplace mentor for the learner. Outline their role and responsibilities in relation to their involvement in learning and assessment. Stress that the learner will value his / her learning programme more highly if the employer does.

4 Linking appraisal to progress reviews
At recruitment, the timing of progress reviews and feedback from progress reviews should be 'sold' as a valuable source of information for the employer to use as part of the learner's appraisal at work. If the learner thinks he / she may receive praise or criticism from the workplace supervisor because of progress or lack of progress, then he / she will be more motivated to achieve. In some cases, employers will give pay increases based on achievement of qualifications or progress!

When an employer doesn't have an appraisal system, progress reviews should be 'sold' as a sort of valuable appraisal system for that business.

5 'Cause for concern' forms

This standard document should be initiated where there is any cause for concern with any learner. It will act as a record of the reason for the concern, the action taken and management responsibility for overseeing that the situation is resolved to the best of the company's ability. This document should be considered confidential and should be stored in an envelope in the front of the working file for the learner. Writing down issues about the learner does not breach confidentiality; it is a clear way that any issues can be addressed now and in the future by any new or different members of staff.

6 The dropout peak

Whatever the framework or occupation, dropout peaks at around 2 to 3 months, at 13 months and at 19 months. Increase the frequency of staff contact with the learner during this high-risk period. It is often better to make telephone contact very regularly so that each visit is valued and progresses the learner significantly.

7 Meet the learner's true needs

Many learners may have difficulty with mathematics or English. This should be identified right at the beginning of the programme. Check which of your learners are struggling and make sure this is part of their personal learning plan. Make sure that learning materials are used to support these needs – whether the learners are ALN [*Additional Learning Needs*] or not.

8 Traffic light system

Print out a list of live learners and fix it to the wall. You could print out the list according to training consultant or occupational area. Add new learners to the list as they are recruited. Buy stick-on dots in green, yellow and red. Now get your team to stick on green dots where they feel the learner is clearly motivated and will complete, yellow dots where they feel the learner may not stay. Discuss as a team the reasons why learners may be in danger of leaving and what can be done to prevent this. At every team meeting, look at the list and add red dots if the learner has left. As a manager, it should indicate where your best practice lies, find out the reasons why and enable you to share this with your team. Arrange work shadowing of the best-performing training consultant and others in the team.

9 Staff retention

Encourage and support your staff to stay with the company as this has a positive effect on learner retention. Learners tend to have good working relationships with their training consultant and feel disappointed when staff leave and sometimes give up at this point. If staff do leave, then ensure you manage the handover process using the formal process and the call centre support process.

10 Continuity of provision

Ensure all learners are in frequent contact with their training consultant – an absolute minimum of one visit a month. If there are any extreme circumstances when this will not happen, ensure that both the employer and the learner are contacted by phone and by post – sending out learning materials and asking for them to be sent back to be checked. Always record contact with the learner on a visit progress record.

11 Out-of-hours contact

Many learners work shifts and unsociable hours. It is important that they can feel confident about contacting their training consultant or training provider if they need to. Ensure learners have out-of-hours contact numbers where possible.

12 On call

Ensure your learners and your employers know they can telephone the call centre if they have a problem. The number should be given regularly to the learner and employer by the training consultant to remind them of this useful support mechanism.

13 At your service

Use the information provided by routine calls to learners at 2-month and 5-month stages to consider if there are similar issues arising across all your learners in certain occupations or with certain training consultants. Take actions to improve by exchanging best practice in your centre.

14 A different face

Often employers and learners will 'open up' if a different person visits or telephones, particularly where there is a long-term relationship with certain training consultants. Managers should carry out an interview and find out reasons for dropout or demotivation of certain learners.

15 Changing faces

Sometimes there will be a personality clash between an employer, a learner and a training consultant. Consider if this can be remedied through discussion or even changing the training consultant.

16 Incentive scheme

The company has an incentive scheme that offers learners a series of vouchers if they progress in time through their programme. Use it and celebrate it as a success.

17 Positive praise

There is nothing like praise to develop and motivate! Ensure your team is using praise during feedback on progress visits and reviews. Where a learner has failed to reach the standard in an assessment, give negative feedback in a positive way. Remember the feedback 'sandwich' – positive, negative, and positive!

18 Peer support

Where group learning sessions are planned, eg induction, portfolio-building, ensure that these are stimulating and fun. Give learners activities in pairs and small groups. Also ensure that learners share their names and contact details in order to network outside the session. Plan sessions in advance so that learners want to come back and meet their new friends. Give learners work to do outside the session – where feasible. Work-based learning can be lonely, relying solely on a visit from a training consultant to help the learner progress through their qualification. Learners learn from each other – use this method more.

19 Parental involvement

Where learners are 16 or 17 years of age (and where appropriate), involve their parents from the beginning of their programme. It is important that parents or guardians support the learner to complete and that they know the benefits of completion. Write a letter [*to the parents or guardians*] and perhaps include a copy of the most recent review.

20 Tripartite reviews

It is important to include employers in the formal review that takes place every three months (or according to contract).

21 Value the employer's learning input

An employed learner spends over 75% of the time in work. It is important that you value the learning that takes place in the workplace – taking account of the prior learning before the learner was recruited and the learning that takes place on the learning programme. By valuing the workplace learning, you are valuing the role of the workplace supervisor and highlighting his/her importance in the process. Praise workplace supervisors and encourage them to give witness testimonies.

22 Value the learner's interests

From the start ask the learner about interests and hobbies. Value the learning that occurs in the learner's own time. You can use some of these to develop basic or key skills. For foundation-level learners, this may be the key to keeping their interest and motivation.

23 Conversion to NVQ

In special circumstances, managers have agreed with their local funding body that a learner can do an NVQ rather than a framework.

24 Difficult times

In special circumstances, managers have agreed that a learner can put their qualification on hold for a short period of time. This has been agreed with their local funding body.

25 Stopping the training/keeping the job

Many early leavers continue to work in their same jobs but just stop their training programmes. This is a waste in terms of their own employability and the benefits of higher skills to the employer. Write a letter to a learner who is in danger of leaving to encourage him / her to stay by celebrating their success so far. Write a letter to the employer emphasising the same points. Emphasise the point to your team – an early leaver is a loss in terms of time, money and effort invested – which is so significant in the first three months!

Research shows that learners often wish they had continued their training – usually after a period of 6–9 months. This is the best time to follow them up and bring them back into training.

26 Changing jobs and stopping the training

Some early leavers change their jobs but remain in the same industry. Send a letter to the learner at home to celebrate their success in achieving new and possibly better employment and encourage them to continue with their qualification as a further means to improve their career prospects. Develop the business opportunity.

Research shoes that after 6–9 months learners will be more receptive to continuing their training – so contact them!

27 Employer involvement in assessment

It is important that an employer knows that their employee (learner) will be 'tested' at the next visit and on what. It is also important that they know their role is supporting their employee in preparation for that planned assessment. Once the assessment has occurred, it is also important to note that the employer receives the feedback as well as the learner (where possible) so that they can help with extra work or receive praise when the employee meets the criteria.

28 Framing achievement

Some managers put unit certificates in an inexpensive frame for those learners at risk of leaving and present it to the learner at work. The frame is placed on the wall of the establishment. This motivates the learner and motivates other learners in the same workplace.

29 Intensive mentoring of learners

In some centres, managers have set up intensive mentoring of learners who are in danger of leaving their programmes early. This includes weekly telephone calls and fortnightly contact meetings until the learner re-engages with the programme or takes the final decision to leave.

30 Unit certificates

At the discretion of the manager, unit certificates will be applied for and given to the learner to demonstrate success to date.

31 Value the workplace mentor

Keep the manager involved to aid motivation and, when the learner achieves, recognise the employer has achieved too.

32 Retention officers

With funding body support, retention officers are used as an additional resource to contact and monitor learners, taking appropriate action where possible.

33 Success cameos

Ask each completer to do a short 'cameo' of their time with [*the company*], outlining their difficulties and how they overcame them, also to explain any career developments resulting from their success. Share this information with new recruits and reinforce with learners who may be thinking of leaving their programmes.

34 Publicise success

Have a file of newspaper clippings and 'cameos' with learner photographs in the reception area of your centre. Show this to new recruits and reinforce where possible during in-service training sessions.

35 Wall of success
One centre photocopies every certificate achieved by learners.
The certificates are placed across a whole wall and updated regularly.
This acts as a motivator for staff and any learners who come into
the centre.

36 Roll of honour
Produce a roll of honour for your centre every month, where learners have
started or completed learning units, completed assessments for a unit,
completed their whole qualification or framework or made some progress
in their job roles. In some way, try to include the names of learners who
are perhaps at risk of leaving. Training consultants should distribute this
roll of honour during their visits in the month to both learners and
workplace supervisors.

37 Early leaver destinations
Some managers analyse very carefully the destinations of their early
leavers so that they can consider whether the circumstances were beyond
their control or not. Some managers have broken down the funding body
early leaver codings even further to make these analyses. This is looked
on positively by the funding bodies and is useful when discussing learner
retention rates.

38 Challenging goals
On many occasions learners are not set clear and challenging actions to
be completed for the next contact with their training consultant. It is better
to set too much work – learning activities, evidence collection and
preparation for assessment – rather than too little.

39 Buddy system
Set up a 'buddy system' for learners at risk of leaving with those learners
who are completing. This works best with learners who work for the same
employer or for learners who are centre-based. However, it can work for
learners who are together for group sessions. Set up short meetings with
a specific agenda, eg where they each discuss one challenge they are
facing at work, at home or in their leaning programme. They both discuss
ways to overcome the challenge.

40 Learner questionnaires
Ask the learner to complete a questionnaire to identify where they feel they
face difficulties in completing their course. Analyse the result and attempt
to take remedial action.

41 Management intervention at exit

The formal exit process encourages every manager to speak to a learner and / or employer where the learner is leaving the programme early. This intervention can help encourage the learner to stay.

42 Early leaver sign-off

Some managers take responsibility for discussing every learner with the training consultant. An early leaver can only be signed off when the manager has explored all the possibilities with the training consultant to try to keep the learner on the programme.

43 Award evenings

Some mangers run award evenings in either the centre or a local prestigious venue. They invite parents and employers to the evening, along with the learner. Awards can be given for good attendance, unit progress, key skills test success and improvement in attitude. For many learners, this may be their first-ever award. Managers give out vouchers, tokens, other appropriate prizes or certificates.

44 Use stimulating learning/assessment resources

Learning materials should be appropriate for the learner's level and ability. The quality of photocopied materials should be good. Staff should use the range of learning materials that are available. A range of resources should be considered to facilitate quick and effective progress – camera, laptops, videos, dictaphone.

45 Complaints process

Use complaints from learners and employers to examine whether this is a 'one-off' or a trend. Look at the range of complaints that have been made historically and use this information to make improvements.

46 Share good practice across training centres

The company now benchmarks learner retention rates for each centre. It is important that managers are encouraged to consider why some centres have higher retention rates than others. What do some managers do and how can other managers emulate this? Managers sometimes visit different centres to exchange practice.

47 Benchmark

Funding bodies will compare retention rates across their area. Ask them to support you in benchmarking your learner retention rates with other providers in the area. However, comparison with college retention rates is not appropriate as the measure is not quite the same. Ask your funding body to give you suggestions to improve your retention rates.

48 Share good practice with local providers
Either through your funding body or local network of training providers, consider if any local providers got very good ALI inspection grades or have very good retention rates. If appropriate, make contact and consider what measures can be used in your own centre.

49 Develop expertise
Ensure your staff are developed to be knowledgeable and proficient – it shows to both employers and learners! To support learners' basic / key skills, staff should be well trained and able. Staff should be up to date with the newest developments in their fields so that they can advise employers and speak with authority. Use the occupational strategies to update your staff and encourage them to continue their professional updating in a variety of ways.

50 Specialist agencies
Don't be afraid to involve specialist agencies to support personal difficulties being faced by learners. The company is compiling a list of support agency telephone numbers and leaflets to support you with this.

**Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme**

**The Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme
is funded by the Learning and Skills
Council and delivered by the
Learning and Skills Development Agency
in partnership with the Association
of Colleges and *Inclusion***

The Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme
is part of

successforall

The Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme
aims to help providers to :

- share good practice

- enhance their capacity for self-improvement

- devise targets and development plans

- be more responsive to the needs of
  learners, employers and communities

- develop a customer-focused approach
  to quality improvement

- improve in areas of underperformance.

Find out more about the Support for Success
Quality Improvement Programme at
www.s4s.org.uk