

The Rewards of Recognition: the Value of NOCN Accreditation, Quality Assurance and Development for Non-Accredited Learning

Executive Summary

Foreword

During the writing of this report the presence of credit as a key tool in the reform of education and training has become more and more visible and important. Credit emerges as a key theme in policy and strategy from Entry to Employment to Higher Education; from Widening Participation to Workforce Development.

Credit is now recognised as a vital, central component in bringing about a transformation in vocational qualifications. The vision now is that:

“By 2007 modern qualification structures – tailored and quality assured to meet sector needs – will be fully in place within unit-based credit frameworks. Adaptable learning, assessment and funding arrangements will extend access and take-up, improve equality of opportunity and promote lifelong learning.”¹

Credit has been used outside of formal qualifications to meet the needs of millions of people that simply did not fit into the qualification boxes that the system had devised. The ability of this simple device called credit to match itself to learning needs now become vital in transforming an education system from supply driven demand-led.

But let's not forget that credit is simply a great device. As this report illustrates, it is the processes and structures around credit, and the people who bring their skills and knowledge to its use and application, that provide the real solution and power to bring about transformation.

Carole Stott
Chief Executive, NOCN

NIACE combines a long standing admiration for the role NOCN has played in keeping adult learning opportunities - not least in local authority contexts - and progression routes open with a multi-faceted interest in how learners' journeys, and their achievements en route can be mapped. This study addresses both concerns. For far too long the formal qualifications system has focused on mechanisms to monitor achievement by young learners, and has applied them to adults. The prospect now for a unit-based credit framework fit for purpose for adult learners, as suggested in the Skills Strategy is encouraging - though it will be essential to ensure that policies lead on to adult sensitive practice. The practices reported here will provide a useful benchmark to test the emerging framework against.

Alan Tuckett
Director, NIACE

¹ QCA/LSC/LSDA (not yet published – confidential until release date)

Introduction

Overview of the executive summary

This summary is intended to:

- Explain the background to the research
- Summarise the key research questions and how they were addressed
- Describe how the research connects to current policy imperatives driving Government education and social policy
- Help readers navigate the text by:
 - Summarising the content and main points of each chapter of the report.
 - Guiding potential readers of the report to findings, conclusions and recommendations that may have particular relevance for them.

Overview of the research report

The research report examines the policy context (**Chapter 2**) and how Government intervention in recognising the learning achievements of adults continues to exert a substantial influence on practice; the challenges and issues identified in some of the relevant research (**Chapter 4**); the confusion of meaning in the use of language related to recognition of achievement and accreditation (**Chapter 3**); and the OCN experiences of Local Education Authority (LEA) providers/contractors of ACL (**Chapter 5**).

Chapter 4 analyses evaluation/inspection reports of OCN projects and provision that had addressed some of the challenges and issues emerging from the research literature. **Chapter 5** examines first hand accounts of how LEAs used their OCN membership, in a variety of ways, to develop and improve their provision and offer to learners. **Chapter 6** looks at the main features of the NOCN process of quality assurance and development and compares them with the key elements described in the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) position paper *Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-accredited Learning*. The report then examines examples of local LSC-funded OCN projects that in different ways have sought to support organisations offering non-accredited learning provision, and in some cases recognise achievements associated with non-accredited learning. Each chapter's main findings and points are summarised at the end of each chapter, and help to frame the conclusions and recommendations found in **Chapter 7**.

Background to the research

In 2001, NOCN suggested that a study of the value of NOCN Accreditation, Quality Assurance and Development for Non-Accredited Learning might help the work of NIACE, Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), and others in looking at ways of recognising learning achievements that currently go unrecognised (often called 'non-accredited learning', or 'unaccredited learning') beyond the context in which that learning takes place. In the second half of 2002, NIACE, with Local Government Authority (LGA) support, commissioned NOCN to undertake this study.

LGA and NIACE interest in supporting this study coincided with their concern to examine the implications in England of the LSC funding guidance on the provision of ACL programmes. As Local Education Authorities are the largest group of providers of non-accredited learning programmes, their provision formed an ideal focus for the research project.

The NOCN approach

NOCN seeks to widen participation in learning and increase access to high quality and flexible education in order to promote social inclusion.

NOCN believes that everyone has the right for their achievements to be formally recognised, valued and understood and seeks to achieve this through a national framework of accreditation. All NOCN and OCN accredited provision, including qualifications, falls into this unitised and credit-based framework.

The NOCN framework offers flexibility to meet local and individual needs but, at the same time, is nationally recognised, quality-assured and regulated. It allows organisations to devise their own learning programmes and enables learners to accumulate achievement over time according to needs, circumstances and aspirations. This helps to ensure that the needs of many adults can be met, especially those who have not benefited from traditional education.

Methodology

The research report represents an analysis of the wider benefits of the NOCN 'approach' to recognising learners' achievements through accreditation, and the quality assurance and quality development of learning programmes.

The research set out to establish:

- What issues were identified through current research into recognising achievement
- Why and how some of the LEA providers and contractors of ACL used NOCN accreditation
- How current OCN projects sought to extend the current boundaries of the NOCN accreditation system and what we might learn from them

With the agreement of the research project steering group, the researchers sought to secure these aims by:

- A literature review identifying the issues associated with recognising achievement in non-accredited learning.
- An examination (and clarification where possible) of the use of the language and related terminology used to describe the processes and systems associated with accreditation.
- A survey of LEAs in members of LEAFEA², which identified membership and use of OCN accreditation; evidence of knowledge and experience, or otherwise, of NOCN quality assurance and quality development processes; and an analysis of responses.
- Examination and analysis of the NOCN quality assurance and development system to ascertain how it might be applied to recognising achievement in non-accredited learning, including an analysis of approaches to identifying and recording non accredited learning achievement in OCN projects funded by Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSC), in particular group achievement.

² LEAFEA is the national network of adult and community learning officers in local education authorities.

Summary of main points

Chapter 2 – The policy context – Government intervention in recognition of achievement and accreditation in further education

Government intervention in recognising the learning achievements of adults continues to exert a substantial influence on practice, and is driven by different and perhaps sometimes competing factors:

- The desire to measure the achievements of individuals and the primacy of the NQF for this purpose.
- The demand to measure the achievements of, among others, education providers, youth workers and regeneration managers.
- The desire to offer an inclusive curriculum to the ‘disadvantaged and excluded’ for the sake of social cohesion (and/or improved economic performance).
- The need to prove public money is being spent appropriately.
- The primacy of prescribed literacy and numeracy skills and qualifications in the Government’s adult learning strategy.
- The absence of clear success criteria for evaluating learning and learning achievements considered crucial to the success of public social policy.
- Policy as to how further education should be funded.

Chapter 3 – Language issues – some observations of meaning and understanding in the language of recognition of achievement and accreditation

Language and Meaning

- There is a wide range of terminology and language associated with recognition of achievement and accreditation.
- Inconsistency in the use of language in the field has inhibited our research and, more importantly, inhibits proper public debate and discussion of issues and ideas relating to recognition of achievement.
- A common language for recognition of achievement and accreditation would enable effective discussion and development of theory and practice to take place.

Impact on Usage

- Different interpretations of the terms ‘qualifications’, ‘awards’, ‘accredited and non-accredited learning’ may have led to less subtle distinctions being made between each category than actually exists in practice.
- Though regulations associated with NQF qualifications are constraining, different approaches to qualification design can be accommodated within the NQF.

Chapter 4 – Key issues in recognising learning achievement – a survey of current literature

Developing and supporting practice in recognising achievement

- There is a fairly substantial body of advice and information that aims to help providers and practitioners to plan, organise and conduct effective ways of recognising achievement.
- The lack of capacity of providers and practitioners to access and make use of these resources appropriately is a significant issue.

Valuing Achievement

- Not all learning is measurable quantifiably. However, where ‘measure’ means to identify an indication of change, there is the potential to record and recognise unanticipated learning outcomes and personal development.
- Not all outcomes of learning are learning outcomes. There may be economic and social benefits that need to be recorded and recognised in a different way.
- The primary focus of public social policy may be economic and social regeneration. ‘Traditional’ accreditation, and non-accredited approaches to recognising individual achievements, will not register these gains, especially where they are achieved over a long period (beyond ‘the course’).
- In valuing achievement, there is a need to recognise collective achievement and reward it and to develop an approach that captures wider benefits of learning over time.
- Learning programmes need to be offered in such a way that learners are able to individualise curriculum content and have different levels of achievement recognised.
- It is possible to offer accredited learning to those ‘whose initial educational motivation might be very weak’, in a context that is not off-putting or perhaps even perceptibly ‘educational’.
- Learners can begin to access OCN accreditation through informal learning opportunities.
- Learning that may begin as a non-accredited experience can lead to OCN accreditation.
- ‘Soft outcomes’, fundamental to the success of youth work practice, are identified and recognised by OCNs.
- “...There is a strong case for giving credit for what people do, not least as a tool to aid progression. OCNs provide the most effective bridge that has yet been designed between different levels of learning and different learning environments.”

Proving Quality

- The drive to provide proof of quality of provision may override the subtlety of learners’ aspirations and achievements. This pressure can apply as much to non-accredited as accredited learning provision.

Additional lessons from OCN Current Practice

- Evaluation reports suggest the potential of OCN-brokered partnerships to develop the capacity of member organisations to approach curriculum development and delivery supportively and effectively. For example:
 - Organisational and professional development strategies are built on partnerships and expertise among more experienced providers who work together to quality assure provision.
 - OCNs provide curriculum guidance, staff development and support to meet quality assurance requirements for different kinds of organisations in their networks.
 - OCN provision was described as ‘relatively cheap with no hidden costs’.
- Using a credit framework, with no prescribed curriculum, but with clear routes for progression, is perhaps the best offer a learner can be made

Chapter 5 – Adult and community learning provision – a survey of LEA and OCN relationships

The LEAFEA questionnaire

Just over 300 questionnaires were circulated to LEAFEA members. The survey generated 64 responses, with 15 of these stating that at present they were not members of an OCN.

Overall, the questionnaire results suggest that:

- LEAs offer accreditation, especially OCN accreditation, in a wide range of curriculum areas. Given that ACL providers are not obliged to offer accreditation, they may believe that:
 - Learners benefit from accreditation.
 - The ACL provider benefits from the accreditation process and OCN membership in improving and quality assuring ACL provision.

It may be that learners are not offered accreditation because of the bureaucratic burden they may be placed on providers, including tutorial staff. This has two effects:

- Firstly, it obscures the rationale for making (or not making) an accreditation offer.
- Secondly, it is difficult to support an 'entitlement to accreditation' argument, if accreditation bodies themselves place obstacles in the way of learners seeking accreditation.

Follow up interviews

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with seven LEA heads of service, six with OCN member LEAs, and one with an LEA not in membership of its OCN.

In summary, the interview questions asked providers to explain:

- How they currently measured achievement.
- How they reviewed programmes.
- What aspects of NOCN quality assurance systems they thought could be applied to non-accredited provision.
- Questions were also asked concerning awareness of any good practice in the areas of quality development and assurance, or recording group achievement.

Quality assurance and development

LEA ACL providers use OCNs for quality assurance and development. Importantly, the relationship between OCNs and their members is a complex one, with the OCN providing central services as well as brokering partnerships between members to support quality development. This is significant, as OCN members use OCN networks to form communities of interest within each network. The OCN is therefore providing substantially more than a staffed central accreditation service to its membership.

Moderation

NOCN systems, designed for quality assuring accredited learning, were being used to support the quality assurance and development of non-accredited learning. 'Synergy' between the NOCN approach and that expected by LSC for the quality assurance of non-accredited learning is explored in Chapter 6 of the report.

Progression

There is evidence that using an OCN provides a reliable network for progression among OCN members. Confidence is increased among members by use of a consistent OCN quality assurance system. The absence of any obligation on providers to check progression of learners is perhaps a fundamental weakness in the organisation of ACL provision. A clearer sense of what constitutes progress and progression for learners on ACL programmes, based upon an examination of good practice in OCN member progression relationships, could help to promote the value and position of ACL alongside other programmes.

Professional development

Most LEAs had either no budget or a very limited budget to support professional development. They also employed a very large number of part-time sessional staff, some of whom were described as facilitators. The non-member LEA had a large number of facilitators who were trained and supported in-house. Although NOCN staff development is cited positively, there is little evidence of substantial planned and funded staff development.

The contribution of learners to quality development of the learning programme

How learners are engaged in curriculum development and improving learning opportunities for themselves and others perhaps requires new approaches, and even a change in the relationship between the provider, tutor and learner. New ways of asking learners what they think about their learning experiences are needed, as well as considering more active ways of engaging them in curriculum design and planning.

Programme/contract review

There is an impression that providers, having devised 'QA checklists' and obliged staff and contractors to use them, are not quite sure when and where their use should stop. It is not clear how these checking processes contribute to quality development or improvement of provision.

The potential for use of NOCN quality assurance and development systems with provision that is currently non-accredited

- LEAs believed that most providers are struggling to come up with internal quality assurance and development systems that can be applied to non-accredited courses and would benefit from input and support from NOCN.
- As LEAs very often operate in a variety of venues they would welcome a system that would promote a consistency of approach and practices by all their area centres.
- LEAs felt that most learners would like recognition for their learning.
- There was caution about the imposition of NOCN quality assurance and development systems on all ACL provision.

Recognition of achievement

Measuring achievement - key findings

- The majority of providers are working towards a learning outcomes model with, in some cases, the use of individual learning plans.
- There is clearly interest and, in some circumstances experience, in using NOCN systems for recognising achievement to inform, support and link progress from non-accredited to accredited learning.
- Some providers are using the NOCN system to link non-accredited learning to OCN accredited provision.

Initial assessment - key finding

There are attempts to conduct some form of initial assessment in order to create the sort of individual learning programme required to meet ALI and CIF requirements. There were examples of this assessment being informal and not recorded as effectively as records kept of formal assessment.

Recording of group achievement - key finding

There have been attempts to capture common elements of programmes and record them in some way with a group document; however, there was no evidence that providers were attempting to record group processes.

See Chapter 6, example five, for an examination of an OCN accredited group achievement project.

Group interviews with learners

Learners' comments on accreditation suggest:

- Learners may take up an offer of accreditation provided the mode of assessment suits them and their learning.
- Learners are not always offered the choice of accreditation.
- Learners without qualifications should have formal recognition of their learning achievements through ACL.

What do learners want?

There appears to be a concern on the part of some providers surveyed through LEA FEA, and within the literature reviewed, that learners do not want accreditation and would find accreditation off putting. This does not match the findings of the research, either through the follow up face-to-face interviews, the telephone /e-mail interviews, or the group interviews, which offered the following perspectives.

“For learners there should be equality of access to high quality provision. There is a need to acknowledge that all learners should be entitled to have any learning acknowledged and valued by offering accreditation.”

“It is easier to show what has been learnt if a learning outcomes approach is used. Most learners would like it as it provides a much more detailed description of what they have learnt.”

“I think any learning can be recognised, but whether you want it to be, or whether the learner would want it to be is another matter. I think it is very much about what the learner wants and what their objectives are and if they want to do learning for progression or not. The learner that starts off saying ‘I’m just doing this for fun’ and then at the end of the course says ‘I thought we were doing it for fun but I’ve really got into it and want to go on’, that’s the kind of flexibility you want to keep in the system.”

Chapter 6 – The NOCN approach to quality assurance and development and recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning

- There is significant synergy between LSC’s proposed quality assurance requirements for ACL providers and the potential of NOCN’s quality development process to assure, validate and develop the quality of ACL provision.
- There is the potential, supported by evidence from interviews with ACL managers (Chapter 5), to investigate how NOCN credit principles might be applied outside the NQF, responding to key elements of the LSC Position Paper ‘Recognising and Recording Progress in Non-Accredited Achievement’ (the Staged Process, and national system for validation).
- OCN projects cited addressed the needs of ACL providers, providers, practitioners and learners, offering a quality assurance framework and organisational, staff and curriculum development by providing:
 - Support for organisational capacity building
 - Provision of an objective, external, and peer-referenced assessment of the quality of non-accredited learning, including judgements on how well that learning programme meets its intended aims and outcomes, the ‘distance travelled’ by participants, and the organisation’s ability to support the provision.
- OCN projects cited also enabled:
 - Significant learner involvement in negotiation of curriculum
 - Learners to reflect on past experiences and identify ‘blockages’
 - Learners to discover their preferred learning style
 - The building of effective relationships and group solidarity
 - Learners to focus on setting targets and goals
 - Learners to relate life experiences to learning activity
 - Learners to be aware of their generic skills and abilities
 - The recording and tracking of learners’ progress through the learning process
 - The screening for and identifying of basic skills needs
 - Individual learning experiences to be captured in an unmediated way
- One project was able to define and recognise group achievement, and for the purpose develop:
 - An assessment strategy

- Methods of recording assessment
- A model for moderation
- Ideas of appropriate evidence of achievement

Conclusions

Conclusions and recommendations in the report are grouped around the following themes.

1. The impact of Government intervention in recognising the learning achievements of adults.
2. Language, meaning and understanding, and the recognition of learning achievements.
3. Building the capacity and capability of providers to deliver ACL and meet standards.
4. Quality assurance and development.
5. Recognition of achievement.
6. Learner involvement and learner choice.
7. OCNs and the value of partnership.
8. The value of NOCN credit frameworks for learner choice and progression.

Recommendations have been included where appropriate.

1. The impact of Government intervention in recognising the learning achievements of adults

Conclusions

Government intervention in recognising the learning achievements of adults continues to exert a substantial influence on practice and is driven by different and perhaps sometimes competing factors, including:

- The desire to measure the learning achievements of individuals and the primacy of the NQF for this purpose.
- The demand to measure the achievements of education providers.
- The desire to offer an inclusive curriculum to the 'disadvantaged and excluded' for the sake of social cohesion (and/or improved economic performance).
- The demand to prove public money is being spent appropriately.
- The primacy of prescribed literacy and numeracy skills and qualifications in the Government's adult learning strategy.
- The absence of clear success criteria for learning and learning achievements judged crucial to the success of public social policy.
- Whether learning for the sake of it should be funded, or not.
- How further education should be funded

2. Language, meaning and understanding, and the recognition of learning achievements.

Conclusions

- There is a wide range of terminology and language associated with recognition of achievement and accreditation.
- Inconsistency in use of language in the field has inhibited our research and, more importantly, inhibits proper public debate and discussion of issues and ideas relating to recognition of achievement.
- Different interpretations of the terms 'qualifications', 'awards', 'accredited and non-accredited learning' may have led to less subtle distinctions being made between each category than actually exists in practice.
- A common language for recognition of achievement and accreditation would enable effective discussion and development of theory and practice to take place.

Recommendation

The research community needs to work with key stakeholders to develop and promote adoption of a common understanding and interpretation of the language and terminology used by all in relation to the recognition of learning achievement.

3. Building the capacity and capability of providers to deliver ACL and meet standards.*Conclusions*

- There is a fairly substantial body of advice and information that aims to help providers and practitioners to plan, organise and conduct effective ways of recognising achievement. However, the lack of capacity of providers and practitioners to access and make use of these resources appropriately is a significant issue.
- Evaluation reports suggest the potential of OCN-brokered partnerships to develop the capacity of member organisations to approach curriculum development and delivery supportively and effectively.
- Snapshots of recent and current OCN projects provide useful illustrations of how OCNs and their member organisations organise themselves to make what they consider to be a different offer to learners. They have several positive features in common which appear to address the issues and challenges emanating from the research discussed earlier in the chapter. These features are:
 - OCNs can act strategically to form local partnerships across sectors to develop curriculum and offer accreditation.
 - The projects cited appear to have tried to address all needs in approaching their objectives: organisations, practitioners and learners are developed as part of each project.
 - The curriculum offer appears to be diverse and not prescriptive within the bounds of possibility offered in an OCN accredited programme.
 - Assessment is continuous, not based on end testing, and involves peers, whether learners or practitioners.
 - Building capacity of organisations to offer ACL sustainably emerges as themes from more than one project. This may be a stated objective or an incidental benefit of collaboration.
 - Progression is offered using a curriculum (OCN credit) framework.
- LEAs had either no budget, or a very limited budget, to support professional development.
- The costs of staff development for (very) part time and/or unqualified staff may put off LEAs from using accreditation.
- There are significant staff development benefits for LEA OCN members delivering ACL provision.
- Individual experiences of OCN membership can vary quite widely among LEA ACL providers. However, these responses suggested that the bureaucratic burden of OCN accreditation may be off-putting for some providers, whether or not accreditation itself is judged to be in the learners' interests.
- NOCN quality assurance systems need to avoid being paper dependent and bureaucratic.
- Although NOCN staff development is cited positively, there is little evidence of substantial planned and funded staff development.
- There is an impression that providers, having devised 'quality assurance checklists' and obliged staff and contractors to use them, are not quite sure when and where their use should stop. It is not clear how these checking processes contribute to quality development or improvement of provision.

Recommendations

- LSC needs to develop a capacity building strategy that will enable current and new ACL providers to deliver high quality ACL provision sustainably.

- The DfES Standards Unit should consider how OCNs can contribute to long term capacity building of organisations delivering publicly funded learning opportunities, particularly non-traditional providers.
- NOCN should continue to work to reduce the bureaucratic burden on providers, practitioners and learners.

4. Quality assurance and development

Conclusions

- The drive to provide proof of quality of provision may override the subtlety of learners' aspirations and achievements. This pressure can apply as much to non-accredited as accredited learning provision.
- LEAs believed that most providers are struggling to come up with internal quality assurance and development systems that can be applied to non-accredited courses and would benefit from input and support from NOCN.
- Responsibility for moderation (both internal and external) created the most anxiety where non-accredited provision was concerned. The LEA that was not a member of OCN had anxieties concerning the adequacies of their systems, as many of their processes were not formalised.
- NOCN internal moderation systems could be used to standardise assessment decisions in non-accredited learning.
- NOCN external moderation could be used to 'verify' the quality assurance of internal assessment decisions made in non-accredited learning.
- The majority of LEAs that responded to the LEAFEA questionnaire were members of their local OCN:
 - Many used OCNs for quality assurance and development purposes.
 - 87% felt that programmes had benefited from OCN support.
 - Almost a third of non-OCN member LEAs that responded are considering joining their local OCN.
- Imposed systems of quality assurance could have a reductive effect on learning and learners. At least in NOCN's case, tutors, practitioners and the research community can and should challenge the NOCN approach to evolve and develop new approaches to accreditation.
- There was caution about the imposition of NOCN quality assurance and development systems on all ACL provision.
- There is significant synergy between LSC's proposed quality assurance requirements for ACL providers and the potential of NOCNs quality development process to assure, validate and develop the quality of ACL provision.

Recommendations

- Develop greater synergy between resources invested in ACL quality improvement by NIACE and LSDA and the quality development strategy and actions of NOCN.
- NOCN to work with LSC to identify ways of making best use of the NOCN system and approach to quality development, for ACL providers and provision.

5. Recognition of achievement

Conclusions

- There is no pedagogic difference between learning achievements that can be recognised by an external accreditation body and those that might be recognised internally, i.e. by tutors and practitioners themselves. There may be limits to what learning should be recognised or limitations in systems that recognise achievement.
- Not all learning is measurable quantifiably. However, where 'measure' means to identify an indication of change there is the potential to record and recognise unanticipated learning outcomes and personal development.

- Not all outcomes of learning are learning outcomes. There may be economic and social benefits that need to be recorded and recognised in a different way.
- The primary focus of public social policy may be economic and social regeneration. 'Traditional' accreditation, and non-accredited approaches to recognising individual achievements, will not register these gains, especially where they are achieved over a long period (beyond 'the course').
- In valuing achievement, there is a need to recognise collective achievement and reward it and to develop an approach that captures wider benefits of learning over time.
- Resistance to accreditation may be symptomatic of lack of confidence in tutors' ability to assess achievement.
- It is possible to formally recognise and certificate learning achievements characterised as soft outcomes.
- It is possible to recognise and give credit for group achievements in the ways defined by the Northern College and Open College Network South Yorkshire and Humberside study.
- The majority of LEAs surveyed in OCN membership offered their learners accreditation, either through OCN or another awarding body.
- The majority of LEA ACL providers are working towards a learning outcomes model with, in some cases, the use of individual learning plans.
- There is clearly interest, and in some circumstances experience, among LEA OCN members, in using NOCN systems for recognising achievement to inform, support and link progress from non-accredited to accredited learning.
- Some LEA ACL providers are using the NOCN system to link non-accredited learning to OCN accredited provision.
- There are attempts to conduct some form of initial assessment in order to create the sort of individual learning programme required to meet ALI and CIF requirements. There were examples of this assessment being informal and not recorded as well as more formal assessment where written records were kept.

Recommendations

- Key stakeholders should work together to promote a wider discourse on assessment issues and significantly improve clarity and guidance on approaches to assessing achievement.
- LEA ACL providers should be encouraged to make better use of the NOCN approach to quality development to share and improve practice in assessing achievement.
- LEA ACL providers should be encouraged to challenge and improve NOCN systems for assessing and recognising achievement.
- Improve and share practice in assessment systematically at a local level, using existing well-established OCN networks.
- NOCN to adopt the definition of group credit from the OCNSYH and Northern College Study report. NOCN should pilot the use of this approach to recognising group achievement across the national network of OCNs.
- NOCN should negotiate an appropriate funding mechanism with national funding bodies for group accreditation.
- NOCN and NIACE to support the Northern College and Open College Network South Yorkshire and Humberside group achievement project dissemination strategy.

6. Learner involvement and learner choice

Conclusions

- Learning programmes need to be offered in such a way that learners are able to individualise curriculum content and have different levels of achievement recognised.
- Learners say they would not be put off attending a course with good quality assurance systems that offered them credit, as long as there were no tests or exams (in the traditional sense) involved.

- Learners surveyed often did not have a choice between an accredited or non-accredited course because the only one offered in their locality was non-accredited, for example a very well attended (21 learners) evening class in Egyptology.
- Learners surveyed were not aware of what 'credit' is, but did know that they were working towards some learning outcomes that had either been set by their tutor or agreed by the tutor and learners jointly.
- Most learners surveyed felt that they should have formal recognition of their learning achievements, especially if they had no previous qualifications.
- Part-time sessional tutors surveyed were not aware of credit. There was a perception that accreditation would involve more paperwork.
- This quotation epitomises the views of a number of LEAs interviewed in the LEA FEA the survey: "For learners there should be equality of access to high quality provision. There is a need to acknowledge that all learners should be entitled to have any learning acknowledged and valued by offering accreditation."

Recommendation

Successful examples of learner involvement in designing and quality developing learning provision that can lead to recognition of achievement should be identified and shared.

7. OCNs and the value of partnership

Conclusions

- The strength of OCN networks to act as sources to broker and develop partnerships is clear throughout.
- In terms of programme recognition and development, with the support of their local OCN, LEAs created networks and partnerships that included voluntary organisations and delivered accredited programmes to suit local needs.
- NOCN accreditation provides parity of status amongst all stakeholders, whatever their power relationships: the accreditation system is both common to and external from all organisations using it.
- LEA OCN members have their own ideas of how to make the best of OCN membership: to form networks of interest, and/or design new curriculum approaches.

Recommendations

- NOCN should promote the purpose and value of OCN membership to ACL providers/contractors. NOCN should do this strategically, both in consort with national organisations and networks, and through OCNs, with regional and sub-regional networks of LEAs.
- NOCN needs to take steps to raise awareness of its organisation and services across LEAs offering or contracting out ACL provision.

8. The value of NOCN credit frameworks for learner choice and progression

Conclusions

- There is significant value in credit frameworks with clear progression routes for learners. Credit frameworks provide a comprehensive and realistic choice to learners and an excellent basis for curriculum negotiation between practitioners and learners.
- The use of NOCN quality assurance processes was perceived as potentially contributing to clearer progression opportunities and entitlements because 'gatekeepers', such as FE colleges, understood the OCN accreditation system.
- Providers sometimes put up barriers to learner progression. However where progression arrangements between providers work, using OCN accreditation, there is evidence of rapid progression.

Recommendations

- NOCN should ensure that LEAs are involved in the development of the new NOCN Credit and Qualifications Framework.
- NOCN should work with key stakeholders to develop an understanding through practice of the value and purpose of credit frameworks for learner progression and choice

The policy context – connecting the research to the current reform agenda

The reform agenda - converging with policy

There is no doubt that the publication of this report is timely. As researchers we have at times struggled to keep up with the stream of Government policy papers and initiatives that might be judged relevant to our investigation. We now find ourselves at the beginning of perhaps the most significant reform of 14+ secondary and further education in modern times.

Since we began our research, the question of 'what counts' as learning achievement has exercised an increasingly wide range of stakeholders. Thus the variety of organisations that might be interested in the outcomes of our research has also increased. A broad range of public education and social policy makers now has a clear interest in education reform.

What are these disparate interests and what do they need for reform to work? In an education system so strongly committed to measuring success by recognising achievement (of learners and education providers), what should count as achievement and how should we count it? (**Chapters 2 and 4**). Much less striated and stratified curricula and qualifications, based on demand and designed to suit consumer rather than supplier interests will be developed over the next ten years; but moving from a philosophy of 'we know what is good for you', to 'tell us what you need' requires a major turn around in the culture of the British education establishment. The State still finds it difficult to avoid interfering with the systems of supply (**Chapter 2**) and may continue to do so through target setting, manipulation of funding mechanisms, and the application of other rewards and sanctions. The value of recognition of achievement for learners can always be subverted to the demand for proof from the state that all publicly funded learning is properly quality assured, whether or not (or how) the learner is interested in having their achievements recognised.

Our conclusions and recommendations are offered in this context to policy makers and influencers, regulators and researchers, funders, employers, education providers and practitioners. We have illustrated some of the pertinent policy connections below and referenced relevant chapters and conclusions in our report. There are a significant number of conclusions arising from this research project. These coalesced around the following themes and included recommendations where appropriate:

1. The impact of Government intervention in recognising the learning achievements of adults.
2. Language, meaning and understanding, and the recognition of learning achievements.
3. Building capacity and capability of providers to deliver ACL and meet standards.
4. Quality assurance and development.
5. Recognition of achievement.
6. Learner involvement and learner choice.
7. OCNs and the value of partnership.
8. The value of NOCN credit frameworks for learner choice and progression.

Permeable Public Policy

Public education and social policy has for some time been 'permeable' - that is to say that even before the talk of joined-up government emerged in the mid-nineties, there were many instances where public social and education policy were linked together in practice. Agencies collaborated successfully for family learning, in street work with young adults, and through early experiments in joining up regeneration policy for example³. But since 1997, the Labour

³ Carley, M. *Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal: Britain's new urban challenge* London: Policy Studies Institute 1990
The Rewards of Recognition: the Value of NOCN Accreditation, Quality Assurance and Development for Non-Accredited Learning – Executive Summary

Government has attempted to increase this permeability through the explicit introduction of reforming public education and social policy, each strand acknowledging that new approaches to learning will be required to ensure success. There are three key drivers of this new agenda - the need to increase economic activity and improve economic performance, the reduction of 'opportunity costs', and the improvement of public services.

Reaching excluded or disadvantaged learners has been a priority of widening participation strategies since the Kennedy Report⁴. A reduction in 'opportunity costs' – better health, lower crime rates, better engagement in civil society, Kennedy's 'route to active citizenship' is one of the implicit objectives of LSC's draft Widening Participation Strategy⁵. Increasing involvement in economic activity, Kennedy's view of learning as a 'weapon against poverty', underpins the rationale for the Government's Basic Skills Strategy⁶. (**Chapter 2**)

At one point in our history, imaginative approaches to curriculum design and recognising learners' achievements were reserved for the excluded and the disadvantaged in society, until of course the disadvantaged were fit enough to join the mainstream curriculum and achieve proper qualifications.

Times have changed: imagination, flexibility and responsiveness in learning and recognising learning achievements are now needed for all, the excluded and included alike, and there are a string of policy statements and accompanying initiatives that make significant new demands on systems for recognising and quality assuring learning achievements, (**Chapter 6**).

Economic Activity and Performance

The Government's Skills Strategy⁷, seeks to engage and motivate adults in developing their skills, as well as tackling initial vocational education. The strategy looks for flexible and responsive qualifications that can follow the demands of employers and individuals, committing the Government to the development of a 'credit framework for adults' (p.84). Credit, aligned to a commitment to learner progression, is expected to provide the architecture for vocational qualifications and ultimately a currency of exchange across qualifications and possibly across Awarding Bodies. The Skills Strategy calls for fundamental and radical reform of our learning culture and systems for recognising achievement. 'Raising ambition in the demand for skills' (Executive Summary 11), requires a transformation in the way in which learning opportunities are offered and learning achievements recognised.

It is theoretically possible for accreditation bodies and suppliers of provision to respond to these demands. We found (**chapter 4**) that there was no pedagogic difference between learning achievements that can be recognised by an external accreditation body, and those that might be recognised internally, i.e. by tutors and practitioners themselves. There may, however, be limitations in systems that recognise achievement and accreditation bodies may need to reform their approaches to recognising achievement, to meet the demands of learners and employers. Accreditation bodies will also need to think of new ways of quality assuring systems for recognition of achievement, (**chapter 6**).

Positively, we found it was possible to formally recognise and certificate learning achievements characterised as soft outcomes, as well as certain types of group achievement, (**chapter 6**). These approaches have exciting potential for work-based

⁴ KENNEDY, H *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*, FEFC 1997

⁵ LSC. *Successful Participation for All: Widening Adult Participation Strategy for Consultation*. LSC 2003

⁶ DfEE. *Skills for Life: The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills*, DfEE December 2000

⁷ DfES. *21st Century Skills: Realising our Potential*, 2003

learning, particularly if we are to respond to the demand from learners for formal recognition of their learning achievements, especially where they have no previous qualifications, (chapter 5).

*Success For All*⁸ expects reform to meet the skills needs of employers, produce greater choice for learners and raise standards in teaching and learning. There will be a need to increase the responsiveness of providers to these needs and improve the capability of their staff. Local LSCs will be required to lead Strategic Area Reviews to ensure that there is the right mix of provision in their localities, to identify gaps, and to encourage partnerships between providers. This is intended to ensure that the sector is well placed to meet the 14-19 education reforms set out in *Opportunities and Excellence*⁹. Evaluation reports (chapter 4) suggest the potential of OCN brokered partnerships to develop the capacity of member organisations to approach curriculum development and delivery supportively and effectively, and perhaps most importantly in a sustainable manner. There is evidence that provider organisations use OCNs to support quality development over the longer term. ACL providers struggle to deliver and maintain a successful professional development strategy for their staff (chapter 5). The DfES Standards Unit has a huge task in improving teaching and learning practice in the coming years and will need to consider ways of doing so sustainably. Learning networks, such as OCN have a vital contribution to make to these efforts.

The LSC's Workforce Development strategy¹⁰ concentrates on providing a framework to raise demand, and improve supply of provision. Priorities are set out in detailed implementation plans and include:

- The development of Basic Skills and ESOL provision
- Increased participation in learning in the workplace
- Associated information advice and guidance and support
- Growth of e-learning to stimulate demand
- Increasing capacity and capability in the public and voluntary sectors
- Stimulating demand for learning and qualifications in SMEs
- Increasing take up of qualifications and accreditation across all employers

Workforce development has to be perceived and understood in the context of other Government plans and strategies; is it not confined to vocational training alone. The development of basic skills and wider skills to support employability, personal development and inclusion are of key importance. Nevertheless, vocational education is a crucial component of workforce development. OECD's criticism¹¹ of the British system was that its 'academic orientation' and 'the previous absence of vocational education, has led to the relative weakness of a genuine system of initial vocational education'. Whilst this criticism clearly had profound implications for our compulsory education phase (and 14-19 provision), a growing skills gap and demographic changes indicate that growth in jobs will need to be met by adults. Possible changes in pensions policy and changes in job roles all suggest that many people will have longer working lives, will need to change and develop their skills throughout life and will need wider and more mixed skill sets.

The National Health Service University¹² (NHSU) wants to establish a credit system at all levels from entry to graduate level to recognise the achievements of NHSU learners across the curriculum¹³ and is currently seeking support to set up its systems so that it can open for business. The largest employer in the UK, the impact of the NHSU on the way we think

⁸ DfES *Success For All: Reforming Further Education and Training - Our Vision for the Future* DfES November 2002

⁹ DfES. *14-19 Opportunity and Excellence* DfES 2003

¹⁰ LSC. *National Policy/Framework to 2005* LSC 2003

¹¹ [ref. to follow](#)

¹² "NHSU is a new kind of kind of corporate university. It focuses solely on training and education for the NHS. Due to launch in autumn of 2003, it is being set up by the Government to support the modernisation of the NHS. NHSU will provide practical learning for everyone at every level working for or with the health service from staff to patients, carers and volunteers. This way we will grow the skills needed for modern healthcare." <http://www.nhsuniversity.nhs.uk>

¹³ NHSU *contracts and tenders* extract from NHSU advertisement THES p.99 May 22nd 2003

about and characterise workforce development and work based learning may be profound. NHSU will invest significant resources in learning provision over the coming years. The NHSU will need an imaginative quality assurance and development strategy, one that supports its ambitions for the transformation of the NHS (**chapter 6**). NHSU, just by virtue of its size¹⁴ will have a very prominent part to play in reforming education for adults and will face the same drive to provide proof of quality of provision that can override the subtlety of learners' aspirations and achievements, (**chapters 5 and 6**). We found that this pressure can apply as much to non-accredited as accredited learning provision, (**chapters 4 and 5**).

Reducing opportunity costs

Since May 2002, the Regional Co-ordination Unit (RCU) and Government Offices for the Regions (GOs) have been part of the newly formed department, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). The ODPM has taken on new responsibilities for housing, planning, regeneration and regional and local services. Among their responsibilities are over forty Area Based Initiatives (ABIs)¹⁵

ABIs such as Sure Start, The Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, Health and Education Action Zones all make clear in their strategy statements that learning has to be at the heart of local strategies for success. Government invests in ABIs, creates an overall framework for development and delivery, but seeks local (i.e. not national) solutions to old problems, and exhorts those responsible for making step changes to come up with new solutions:

*" The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal requires a change in the way we work in and engage with communities in deprived areas. Residents, policy makers, practitioners, professionals and organisations all have a role in neighbourhood renewal, but many may not realise what is being asked of them. New skills and knowledge for neighbourhood renewal are needed if such widespread involvement is to succeed."*¹⁶

The 'what works' philosophy set out in *The Learning Curve* (ibid.) commits itself to building upon the success of local approaches to learning and where possible sharing those successful approaches across communities. It is important then that 'what counts' as achievement is not at odds with 'what works' and meets demand. There are many important conclusions from our research for those engaged in neighbourhood change. We found (**chapter 4 and 6**) that not all outcomes of learning are learning outcomes. There may be economic and social benefits, which need to be recorded and recognised in a different way. The primary focus of public social policy may be economic and social regeneration. 'Traditional' accreditation and non-accredited approaches to recognising individual achievements will not register these gains, especially where they are achieved over a long period (beyond 'the course'). In valuing achievement, there is a need to recognise collective achievement and reward it, and to develop an approach that captures wider benefits of learning over time, (**chapter 6**).

Fit for purpose assessment, qualifications, quality assurance and quality development

The qualification industry regulators, lead by QCA, are currently set to become more responsive to the demand for a more inclusive National Qualifications Framework (NQF). A

¹⁴ With potentially 1.2 million learners, the NHSU may become the largest university in the world.

¹⁵ Area Based Initiatives (ABIs) are publicly funded initiatives targeted on areas of social or economic disadvantage, which aim to improve the quality of life of residents and/or their future life chances and those of their children. They have one or more of the following features:

- Aimed at particular geographical areas, or intended to have a greater impact in some areas or regions than others;
- Managed through regional, sub-regional or local partnerships;
- Intended to support a number of objectives locally which are the responsibility of more than one Department;
- Put forward as pilots or pathfinders for programmes that will ultimately be rolled out nationally.

At the time of writing, there were over forty ABIs listed at <http://www.rcu.gov.uk/abi>

¹⁶ ODPM *The Learning Curve* – developing skills and knowledge for neighbourhood renewal DfES 2002

new flexibility and inclusiveness will be needed to meet demand for new qualifications (in a move away from a supply driven system of education and qualifications). The five yearly review of QCA by the DfES¹⁷ is at the time of writing producing its first results. The review came up with 33 recommendations. Recommendation 17 states, "QCA and DfES should look at the scope for greater quality assurance of awarding bodies and less involvement by QCA in the detail of individual qualifications"

If QCA is going to be able to manage a more inclusive NQF it will have to place more trust in the quality assurance systems of Awarding Bodies to deliver highly quality valid and reliable qualifications. It will need to do this to avoid criticism of creating a logjam of qualifications proposals at QCA, but more importantly, such an approach could enable inclusion of achievements within the NQF that currently lay outside it, and create room for innovation, vital for transformation of the education system, (**chapters 4,5 and 6**).

There are welcome signs of convergence in education policy emerging from the demands made upon funders and regulators for reform. The recommendation to QCA to adopt a more arm's length relationship with individual qualification proposals resonates with the LSC's position on recognising and validating non-accredited learning¹⁸. LSC is conducting action research into recognising and recording achievement in non-accredited learning, seeking to identify ways (by 2005) of recognising progress and validating provision that does not lead to external recognition of achievement, as well as creating a mechanism for funding such learning.

There is no doubt that it is difficult to secure reliable means of funding learning that may produce unanticipated outcomes and that benefits the community as much as the individual. An integrated formula for funding all provision for adults by the LSC is expected to be in place by 2004 as part of the Government's Skill Strategy. Again, what counts for funding purposes is inextricably linked to what counts as achievement.

In **chapter 6** we look at the main features of the NOCN process of quality assurance and development and compare them with the key elements described in the LSC's position paper (ibid.). There is significant synergy between LSC's proposed quality assurance requirements for ACL providers and the potential of NOCN's quality development process to assure, validate and develop the quality of ACL provision. In **chapter 5** we discovered that LEAs believed that most providers are struggling to come up with internal quality assurance and development systems that can be applied to non-accredited courses and would benefit from input and support from NOCN.

The NOCN quality development process could also be used to quality assure qualifications in the NQF. Defining 'fit for purpose' assessment may mean at last jettisoning one of the best known clichés in recognising achievement - that there is only one way to secure valid and reliable assessment and that is through examination offered at the 'end' of the learning experience. Learning recognised outside the NQF (for example by OCNs) may find a place in a new order of 'what counts' as achievement. A qualification system that allows progressive and cumulative acquisition of 'Credit' for learning achievements is now the subject of investigation by QCA and LSC¹⁹.

At the other end of the spectrum, Entry to Employment (E2E)²⁰ will fund (through the LSC's work-based learning route) learning which does not lead to qualifications, or even external recognition by an accreditation body. NOCN, as a member of the Network for Recognising Young People's Achievement, is working with LSC to develop new ways of assessing informal and non-formal learning through E2E.

¹⁷ ref

¹⁸ LSC. *Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-accredited Learning*. LSC Position Paper 2003

¹⁹ remit to QCA and LSC from David Milliband, Minister for Schools and Colleges February 2003

²⁰ "E2E has been developed to meet the vocational needs of young people at risk of dropping out and to equip them with the knowledge and skills required to move further into education, training or employment" Ian Ferguson, Chairman of the Modern Apprenticeship Board for the LSC. Launch of pathfinder projects to support Entry to Employment (E2E) (12/7/02)

Out of the classroom, where learning per se is not even a primary purpose for the individual, the group or the project, and when learning becomes more than a chronological course of study, recognition of what has been achieved can be very elusive. The concerns examined in the research investigated (**chapter 4**) are about how to recognise and reward progress and achievement without damaging the learning experience. This task becomes all the more complex when the learning achieved could not have been predicted at the outset, where the achievements are personal, where the achievements may not show benefit for some time, or where they are familial or communal. Examples of how OCN accreditation works to recognise achievements that often go unrecognised are found in **chapter 4**. OCN approaches to developing the capacity of organisations working with excluded learners to deliver and quality assure ACL are explored in **chapter 6**. Will these achievement sets begin to count within the revised inclusive NQF?

The Government's Skills Strategy (ibid.) commits the Government to 'increase transparency and simplicity' citing 'the assessment system supporting qualifications' and 'fragmented sources of funding' as areas for improvement. Imaginative approaches to recognition of achievement require a sympathetic and workable funding methodology. LSC is currently consulting on funding adult learning²¹ and cites the example of Access to Higher Education courses, the majority of which are unit-based credit frameworks validated by OCNs under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), as a potential model for learning programme design and approval (para. 64).

The consultation paper recognises that 'a national credit framework' would need a system of funding that reflected 'the flexible and incremental nature of engagement in learning' (para. 90). Resolution of the funding question is needed to fully exploit the benefits of unit-based credit frameworks reviewed in **chapters 4 and 6**.

Meaning and understanding in the language of recognition of achievement and accreditation

The use and usage of the language of accreditation has widened as the circle of interest in these matters has grown. For example, different interpretations of the terms 'qualifications', 'awards', 'accredited and non-accredited learning' may have led to less subtle distinctions being made between each category than actually exists in practice. Inconsistency in use of language in the field inhibits proper public debate and discussion of issues and ideas relating to recognition of achievement. There is no doubt of an urgent need to develop common terms and definitions among those who use them freely and regularly, (**see chapter 3**).

In conclusion

Connection and synergy between the different strands of social and education policy will require the transformation of the education establishment's role in determining and providing learning opportunities. Funding methodologies, for accredited and non-accredited learning, are still largely suited to the classroom, with a tutor or teacher in control of the class and curriculum. The challenge from other strands of public social policy to the education establishment goes well beyond questions of accreditation and non-accreditation. The ebb and flow of government influence, (on funding, and curriculum) in further education should not be underestimated, nor the consequent influence on our thinking. But a number of new contributors are being drawn into policy discussions on learning, recognition of achievement and accreditation, and they come from different government departments, different organisations and different learning cultures. Their influence is welcome.

²¹ LSC. *Funding Adult Learning: Technical Document* LSC 2003

The last word may be with the learners

The Common European Principles for Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning²², sets out draft principles and criteria for consideration by the expert group (ibid.), 'including individual rights to validation'. (For 'validation' read 'recognition' and 'competences', 'achievement')

"Individuals enjoy the right to have their competences, whether they have been acquired inside or outside the formal education and training system, validated."

We found that most learners surveyed felt that they should have formal recognition of their learning achievements, especially if they had no previous qualifications (**chapter 5**). We will know we have had real reform of 14+ secondary and further education when we see learners gain and begin to exercise these rights.

²² EC DG *Common European Principles for Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning* Paper presented to the seminar of Objectives Group H. EC Directorate-general for Education and Culture May 2003

Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who helped support the research project, including, members of the steering group, and NIACE staff in particular, LEFEA and LEAs, OCNs and NOCN staff, and all those ACL programme managers, practitioners and learners who responded to questionnaires, and interviews. Thank you to the LGA for providing financial support. Thanks also to staff at LSC and QCA for their informal but valuable contributions.

The Writers

Finbar Lillis is National Development and Qualifications Officer for NOCN. He has worked in education for over 20 years, in the private, public and voluntary sectors both in the UK and abroad.

After six years in training and development in industry, Finbar managed multi-purpose projects with disadvantaged communities in the English midlands and Yorkshire for ten years. From 1996 to 2000 he was a Development Worker for West and North Yorkshire Open College Network. Since 2000 he has worked for NOCN on new qualifications and other national developments, including proposing, working on, and overseeing NOCN research projects.

Marianne Sparrow is the Excellence Challenge Co-ordinator in Derby North East Education Action Zone. Marianne works in three secondary schools to raise educational achievement and to promote Higher Education. She spent two years working at Derby University in the Centre for Access as the University Widening Participation Officer. Marianne worked for eight years in the Careers Service working as an Adult Learning Advisor, ten years in Further Education as a Counsellor and later as a Manager and five years lecturing in HE in Organisational Behaviour.