

Learning pathways for adults in Oxfordshire, Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire

Summary report

by the

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Preface

The Learning and Skills Development Agency was commissioned in July 2001 by a consortium linked to the Oxfordshire Learning Partnership, to examine how well learning pathways work for adults. The study began in Oxfordshire and was extended to Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire with the support of the Learning Partnerships in those areas.

The study addressed the concerns of learners, employers, learning providers, and information, advice and guidance (IAG) organisations. These concerns focus on ways to improve learning opportunities and job prospects for people with poor qualifications and low skills, particularly in health and social care; the construction industry; and the tourism, hospitality, catering and leisure sector.

This booklet summarises the findings and recommendations and concludes with a note on the study methods used.

What is meant by 'progression'

Learning pathways for adults should be built on an understanding of what motivates adults to take up learning and how learning will fit around their work and home lives. Adults have complex reasons for wanting to learn and are liable to dip in and out or change direction. Combining learning with earning and family commitments may necessitate breaks en route to a qualification.

Progression is not necessarily upwards in a straight and uninterrupted path, via one type of learning or one training provider. It might involve

- vertical progress from a lower qualification to a higher qualification
- lateral progress – from one course to another at the same level, to broaden knowledge, add a new specialism or make skills more secure
- progress in the same or a different subject
- diagonal progress – from a higher level to a lower level course, to refresh an old skill or try a new one
- progress from informal or unstructured learning to formal learning
- progress from non-vocational learning to vocational learning
- progress from learning into work, or from work into learning, or progress at work, achieved through learning.

Adult learners differ in their ability to negotiate the right route for them and stay 'on course'. Some are able to chart a confident learning path and overcome practical barriers on the way. Others are much more dependent on the quality of guidance, support and stimulus they receive from advisers, tutors, employers and peers.

Important consequences for learning providers follow from this. Encouraging and enabling more adults to progress is unlikely to be a simple case of providing more and better information about the courses already available, though good information plays an important role. Creating the right opportunities in the right place at the right time is also crucial. Greater flexibility in learning provision is needed, with opportunities for learning based in the home, the community and in the workplace as well as in institutions.

Why progression matters

The study arose from concern about emerging signs of economic and social polarisation. There are two dangers. In an area with a highly qualified labour force and a concentration on high skill and high technology employment, people with poor qualifications and skills become trapped in jobs with low pay and poor prospects, often in service sector roles. Social exclusion can result from these conditions.

The second danger is that poor prospects for people at lower skill levels could weaken the competitiveness of the economy. High quality services from private and public sector organisations such as hotels, restaurants and hospitals provide an essential infrastructure for other parts of the economy and sustain a high quality of life in the region.

Learning is an important lever in reducing social polarisation, since it gives people who enter the labour market in low skilled work the prospect of moving on to higher skilled jobs – a step on a ladder rather than a long-term poverty trap. At its best, learning offers the possibility of transforming an individual's life choices and chances. For employers, there is the prospect of a better-trained and more motivated

workforce and, if training is rewarded, a more stable and productive one, helping to make businesses more successful.

For learning to nurture the economy and the social fabric in this way, it needs to be accessible, and visibly so. This means that learners and potential learners, including employees and unemployed people, need to be able to find out what options are available and take advantage of them without great difficulty. People in a position to give advice and information about learning opportunities – practitioners working for public, private and voluntary learning providers and for general and specialist advisory organisations – need a good understanding of local 'learning pathways' or 'progression routes'.

Stepping stones to learning and qualifications

In the three employment sectors examined – health and social care, construction, tourism and hospitality - there appears to be a wide range of opportunities available and a variety of points of access for learners with different levels of qualification and experience. Stepping stones are in place to bridge some of the gaps between lower and higher levels of qualification. Examples include

- community education programmes designed to give access to a range of non-accredited and accredited programmes
- programmes for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities
- basic skills provision, including basic skills in the workplace
- support for learners whose first language is not English
- non-accredited short courses such as those offered through the Tourism Better Business Scheme
- the On-Site Assessment and Training scheme (OSAT) in construction to recognise existing skills and identify the need for top-up training
- a newly launched Foundation degree in tourism and hospitality, designed to be accessible for employees, with several 'stopping off' points
- 'return to learn' courses, taster courses, and short courses to attract less confident learners
- a scheme to accredit health care assistants and create a bridge to a nursing pre-registration course.

What works well in supporting learners

Asked to comment on 'what works well' in supporting learners' progression, learning providers quoted the following examples:

- easy and affordable access
- responding to learners' needs
- learning from guidance personnel who work for other organisations
- follow-up advice and guidance sessions
- staff on hand to give one-to-one information about progression or referral
- homework rooms with IT facilities
- visits to industry
- guest speakers
- work placements for staff
- working with other providers
- tutorial support, followed by work experience and regular contact with employers about individual part-time students on placement
- extensive collaboration with local industry.

What inhibits progression

Learning pathways are difficult to understand

It is good to have a diversity of opportunity. But this can leave adult learners bewildered and confused. The 'map' is not always well developed or well understood. Options available to one group of learners (e.g. employees) may not be available to others (e.g. unemployed people). Many adult learners, particularly those in disadvantaged groups, will require advice and guidance if they are to locate and take advantage of the provision available. Finding the right kind of advice at the right time may not be straightforward.

Shortcomings in the availability of good information sources, contributing to a lack of awareness of options available

It is difficult for providers and learners to obtain comprehensive information on local opportunities for learning and work-based training. Information covering the full range of options is not readily available in an easily accessible form. Training providers lack the broader picture: their knowledge of learning pathways is sometimes limited to the route they offer themselves. This weakness could affect the quality of advice and guidance given to learners.

Weaknesses in partnerships between providers and weak links with IAG services

Partnerships do exist, but some are less successful than others and informal networking appears to predominate. Evidence suggests that formal partnerships (such as the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships) can be a stimulus for the production of good quality, comprehensive information on opportunities for progression.

Links between learning providers and IAG services appear to be weak: few learning providers use their data on progression to inform IAG services. This suggests a missed opportunity to pass on information that could help potential learners find out about learning pathways.

Lack of co-ordination of lower level provision

Some providers in the health sector have used partnerships to establish progression agreements for learners. Nevertheless, there is evidence of a lack of a co-ordinated approach to lower level provision in adult education, further education and vocationally related non-accredited provision. This can create barriers for learners.

'Supply led' rather than 'demand led' learning provision

Although learning pathways exist, the way in which courses are delivered (principally the timing, location, cost and degree of flexibility) can present barriers for learners, again with particular problems for the most disadvantaged groups. For example, some unemployed people view further education colleges as rather daunting and inflexible, advertising through literature but offering insufficient back-up. By comparison, community-based learning is regarded as more attractive, but there is a view that these opportunities are too few and far between.

Lack of follow-up

Individual learners are not generally followed up after completing a programme: the monitoring of learners' progress tends to finish with the exit interview. This means that providers may not be aware of the destinations of learners and how well their training has prepared them. Without good data, including case studies of learners who have successfully navigated a particular route, learning providers cannot say with certainty that a given pathway is strong and well used in practice or that a particular course is a good foundation for a particular kind of work. Few providers have written progression policies.

Learners who face problems

Providers need to be alert to the challenges faced by particular groups of learners and potential learners. Those liable to experience most difficulty with progression include:

- people with learning difficulties and disabilities, and those with mental health problems
- older workers, e.g. middle-aged people who are unqualified and face enforced job changes through redundancy
- people who wish to train to provide the foundation for a job change. NVQ training requirements can prove inflexible, since it is difficult to obtain the appropriate work-related experience without changing jobs – a 'Catch 22' situation
- people who are partially qualified at the end of a course, and cannot progress further without workplace experience, but may not be allowed to work as a partially qualified person
- people with poor command of the English language or other basic skills needs. IAG staff and workplace basic skills advisers need special skills in diagnosing needs and making effective referrals. Employers may need to be persuaded of the value of basic skills support in the workplace
- asylum seekers held back by an inadequate grasp of English, or lack of recognition for vocational qualifications they already hold
- individuals (whether employed or unemployed) with poor self-esteem, low motivation or low aspirations
- employees on benefit or on low incomes
- unqualified employees whose employers, supervisors or managers do not encourage and support staff training or learning in the workplace and are unable or unwilling to release staff for training
- employees in small- and medium-sized enterprises, where the practicalities of providing training and assessment may be particularly difficult
- lone parents and those caring for children and other dependants

- people without their own transport, both in rural and urban areas. Shortcomings in public transport infrastructure (lack of adequate, reliable and fast transport) puts jobs out of reach and limits progression, when people feel that they can consider only the most local training and work options
- people who are 'time poor', including shift workers and those working long hours or combining several jobs
- people whose job choices conflict with traditional stereotypes, e.g. men wishing to progress into the care sector, or women into construction
- ex-offenders.

What learners say

Discussion with learners revealed:

- the success of a pro-active, well-targeted information service in generating demand for learning (a registered childminders' newsletter)
- robust partnerships (e.g. in the childcare sector), as well as top-down legislative requirements, can make a big difference in enabling adults to find out about and access training
- potential learners may need expert information about qualifications, to help them make decisions. IAG staff may not be in a position to give this
- adults have differing preferences with regard to the provision of information and advice (e.g. targeted, paper-based information versus bespoke, face to face guidance and counselling). These variations reflect adults' abilities to seek out information for themselves, and how sure they are about their chosen learning or employment path
- for some, getting help to interpret information may be the key issue. This means easily accessible, tailor-made advice and guidance services
- the accreditation of prior learning (APL) can help avoid a 'training overload' on busy workers. For unemployed people, recognition of existing skills would make a difference to their prospects
- the influence of financial considerations on decisions to train. In addition to fees for courses and examinations, learners face the cost of textbooks and journals for training and continued updating
- childcare problems are repeatedly cited as a barrier to progression. This is not only a question of cost: the flexibility and timing of childcare provision and the ages at which children are accepted are also critical
- the importance of learning pathways that make easy connections between work and learning
- the critical role that employers can play, in motivating and assisting employees to take up learning opportunities, and tackling complacency in the workplace about the value of training and qualifications

- the attraction for adults of learning in 'chunks' that can be accumulated over time
- adult learners may have outdated perceptions of learning and may need to be reassured that it need not be 'like school'.

What employers say

- There is a strong emphasis on **in-company structures to provide staff development and job-related training opportunities**, rather than relying mainly on local providers. Recruitment from local training providers appears to be limited. Some employers prefer to 'grow their own staff' as well as recruiting from the local labour market.
- **Flexibility of local (college) training provision** may be an issue: some employers have a preference for day release, and believe (rightly or wrongly) that colleges prefer block release for planning reasons.
- **Statutory requirements and other regulations are an important factor driving the provision of learning opportunities**: in health and social care, for example, there is an emphasis on qualifications for both professional and support staff. The need for training to use specialist equipment and to obtain certification for safety purposes plays an important role.
- **Resources for training are tight** and tend, as one might expect, to emphasise immediate job-related requirements (e.g. using a new piece of equipment on a construction site or in a care home). Value for money is an important consideration in decisions about training.
- Due to resource constraints, **some employers may restrict training** to a 'core' of full-time and part-time staff, excluding others such as agency workers and hourly paid staff, who constitute a substantial and important part of the workforce (e.g. in the hospitality industry).
- Partly as a consequence of tight resources for training, and partly in response to the needs of the job environment, **people with low skills, no experience or poor basic skills are either not recruited at all, or may find that their learning needs are not met on the job**
- An expectation in some cases (in construction and the hotel and catering trade) that **staff should be 'self starters' who 'put themselves forward' for training** (over and above essential company requirements), may disadvantage people who need extra help but have little self-confidence.
- Some employers believe that in view of the character of their workforce (often part-time and sometimes transient), **a large investment in training is either unnecessary or would not be welcomed** by staff.
- In addition to the tight labour market affecting recruitment in all three employment sectors, a **negative public image** particularly of the hotel and catering sector and the construction industry is thought to act as a significant deterrent.

These messages suggest that **there are market opportunities for learning providers** – given adequate resources – to develop new provision or adapt existing provision to meet the learning needs of adult employees.

Employers' emphasis on recruiting people with a certain 'threshold' of skills and attributes points to unmet demand for learning provision that assists people who are disadvantaged in the labour market, to develop '**job readiness**', preferably with a guarantee of a specific job into which they can progress.

The variability in employer support for employee development indicates that there is scope for learning providers to strengthen their **efforts to work with employers** as a key route to making contact with adults who do not put themselves forward for training.

What advisers say

There is a plethora of learning opportunities, but adults' chances of finding the most suitable learning pathway depends greatly on the quality of information and the level of advice they are able to access. It is therefore vital that information, advice and guidance services should be strong and visible.

The term 'information, advice and guidance' denotes **a continuum of services**, with 'information' being lighter-touch and the least intensive service, and guidance being the most in-depth, thorough and client-specific. Clients will vary in their interest in, and knowledge of the learning pathways open to them. Those considering employment are keen to know about the chances of finding work after training, and how much they will be paid. They may want information and advice in bite-sized chunks rather than all at once and will want to return later. If advisers do not have the requisite information to hand, they will often refer clients to the course tutor in question, or obtain more specialised information themselves.

Many unemployed clients are likely to require a broad range of support, with an emphasis on intensive and 'bespoke' work. At the same time, **resources** (including suitably qualified staff) **for the 'guidance' aspect of IAG services** appear to be in short supply. It is thought that the shortage of guidance workers is creating long waiting lists for basic skills clients, for example.

One way to improve progression into the three key employment sectors would be to develop **more specialised advice**, focusing on the learning and employment pathways in these industries. However, the IAG service itself does not have sufficient capacity to offer this service.

Discussion with IAG staff points to an **over-reliance on course information** from learning providers, where this is available. At the same time, IAG staff are concerned about the **quality and clarity** of some of the information provided. Course leaflets and prospectuses may not always cover the learning or employment pathways or destinations a given course can lead to. When information about progression is included, it tends to focus on learning options rather than entry to (local) work.

IAG workers are aware of the **lack of suitable pointers from courses to jobs** but feel that this cannot be remedied without access to good quality, well-interpreted, up to date, local labour market information – whether across the board or focused on specific areas of local skill shortage. **Good local LMI** is important for adult clients whose training choices may be influenced from the outset by expectations of finding work locally. Sector Skills Councils have a role to play, in view of their responsibilities relating to workforce development planning.

Recommendations

Collaboration between organisations will be crucial to success. Looking for ways to strengthen collaboration with the objective of improving learning pathways will be a key task for the three Learning Partnerships, as well as for individual providers.

The recommendations are grouped according to the organisation most closely affected:

- Learning providers – recommendations 1-10
- Information, advice and guidance providers – recommendations 11-19
- MKOB LSC, other local strategic organisations and partnerships – recommendations 20-33.

Priorities

The Project Steering Group agrees that the following 6 recommendations should be given priority:

Recommendation 1: Action by learning providers to improve collaboration and joint working, particularly

- work to document local learning pathways, identify gaps in provision and support, and resolve progression problems through partnership

Recommendation 6: Action by learning providers to improve information, particularly

- the preparation of case studies showing destination patterns of 'real' adults
- the inclusion of progression data in course prospectuses

Recommendation 18: Action by information, advice and guidance providers to give feedback to employers and programme planners, particularly: working with learning providers to

- develop a higher profile for IAG services
- increase feedback from learning providers to IAG services
- improve learning pathways
- report IAG concerns on a regular basis to programme planners

Recommendation 20: Action by MKOB LSC, local strategic organisations and partnerships to ensure good strategic oversight of learning pathways, particularly:

- overseeing the effectiveness of local learning pathways in key employment sectors

Recommendation 24: Action by MKOB LSC, local strategic organisations and partnerships to improve information for progression, particularly

- developing a database of local learning/training provision

Recommendation 32: Action by Learning Partnerships

- to increase and strengthen collaboration between providers
- to take forward some of the specific proposals set out in the recommendations, where these call for collaborative work.

Learning providers

Improving collaboration and joint working

1. Collaboration between learning providers to document local learning pathways, identify gaps in provision and support, and where possible to resolve progression problems through partnership.

The most effective approach may be one based on specific industrial sectors (e.g. hospitality and catering), with a local remit and national support (perhaps via Sector Skills Councils). Collaboration should include cross-sector work (e.g. adult and continuing education – further education – higher education). Action might be led by the Learning Partnerships, or by the Widening Participation Partnerships, where those exist. See also Recommendation 32.

2. Joint working by programme planners and IAG staff to ensure that an adequate range of support services for adults is in place (including basic skills, flexible childcare arrangements, aids and adaptations), and that support can be 'packaged' to meet individual needs. This may have funding implications for LSC.
3. Good briefing and training of front-line staff to give prospective learners accurate information, and refer on when appropriate.
4. Collaboration on the use of premises and facilities. This could include working with schools to create additional community-based venues for learning, and working with colleges and private training providers to ensure good use of expensive training facilities, e.g. at weekends and during vacations.
5. Stronger formal partnerships as well as increased networking between providers, across the public-private-voluntary sector boundaries.

Better information

6. Including progression data in course prospectuses and providing case studies showing the destination patterns of 'real' adults. By demonstrating the possibilities for progression, case studies could motivate and inspire adults to take up learning opportunities. They are not, however, a substitute for advice based on reliable destination data.
7. Using 'course templates' to improve the quality of course leaflets/prospectuses (including comprehensiveness, clarity and consistency). The IAG partnership might take the lead here.

8. Learndirect has a key role to play in compiling information on courses, but information held by this organisation can only be as reliable and up to date as providers allow .
9. There is scope to improve the availability of information on the internet. Although this medium will not suit all learners, our research shows that it is valued as a source of information on training by some.

Developing a more responsive, learner-centred approach

10. There is scope for increased provision of
 - 'taster' courses (linked to vocational options, not just recreational courses)
 - modularised courses
 - bespoke training and support packages (e.g. basic skills + IT + management + occupationally specific training)
 - more accessible/flexible timetables (weekends and evenings)
 - community sites for learning
 - customised work-based/on-site learning opportunities, including the development of higher level programmes for supervisors and managers
 - new or adapted courses to meet the needs of employees, to enhance in-company training provision or fill gaps
 - courses designed to develop 'job readiness', linked to progression agreements with employers (e.g. the guarantee of a work placement on completion of training).

Information, advice and guidance providers

Collecting and providing information for clients

11. Access to more comprehensive, local information on learning opportunities, specialist support facilities and routes to jobs – above all, *geared to adults' needs* rather than those of young people.
12. A pro-active approach to seeking information about progression and destinations, to inform prospective learners at the outset.
13. More involvement with employers – e.g. through employer visits – though some caution needs to be exercised in order not to burden employers unduly – shared information about employers and employment opportunities might address this.
14. Staff development opportunities to familiarise IAG workers with conditions in priority local employment sectors. This might help to meet the need for specialist advice.
15. Tracking of adult clients in order to be better informed about progression patterns. This could be achieved through studying a sample of clients in a single sector. See also Recommendation 6.

Feedback to employers and programme planners

16. Mechanisms for the IAG partnerships to communicate with employers/employer representatives about e.g. the level of interest in specific occupations and the level of training need identified.

17. Formal reporting to the Learning Partnerships about unmet needs and gaps in IAG or learning provision, to identify major concerns that should be drawn to the attention of learning providers.
18. Developing a higher profile with learning providers, to ensure that they give feedback to, and work with, IAG services to improve learning pathways. More regular reporting of concerns to programme planners.

Reaching new clients

19. A pro-active approach to advice and guidance, recognising that perhaps only a minority of people actively seek help to improve their skills. This could mean increased contact with low-skilled employees in the workplace, e.g. through the Basic Skills at Work service.

MKOB LSC, local strategic organisations and partnerships

Strategic oversight of learning pathways

20. Overseeing the effectiveness of local learning pathways in key employment sectors.
21. Promoting collaboration between strategic partners: e.g. between local Learning and Skills Councils and NHS Workforce Development Confederations, to develop and fund plans for learning provision in the health sector.
22. Encouraging increased provision of learning opportunities for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities, to improve employability.

Funding

23. Improving access to funds to enable adults over the age of 25, including employees, to undergo training. Financial support is needed to cover the incidental expenses of training as well as fees.

Better information

24. Developing (possibly in collaboration with Learndirect) a database of local learning/training provision, hosted on a website and regularly updated – for use by advisers and adult clients. See also Recommendations 8 and 11.
25. Improving local LMI and data about employers – perhaps achieved through pooling existing resources held by a range of different local organisations (LSC, Employment Services, local authority economic development departments, CfBT etc).

Working with employers

26. Encouraging employers to invest in and support work-based learning, including basic skills in the workplace, day release and work experience opportunities.
27. Helping to resolve the shortage of work-based assessors.

28. Encouraging the development of sector-specific employer groups that offer a 'gateway' to the industry, e.g. by helping to improve training providers' access to employers in key industry sectors.

29. Helping to improve the image of key employment sectors.

Working with learners

30. Encouraging wider availability of 'accreditation of prior learning' including on-site assessment of employees' skills (to identify the need for 'top up' training or further qualifications).

31. Exploiting accreditation opportunities offered by Open College Networks.

Using partnerships to bring about change

32. Many of the recommendations set out above depend on the commitment of providers to work together and on effective networks that encourage collaboration. The three Learning Partnerships can contribute in two ways:

- by working to increase and strengthen collaboration between providers. In the longer term, this can help to break down barriers for learners and reduce the complexity they face in making decisions about progression
- by taking forward some of the specific proposals set out above, where these call for collaborative work. Action can be facilitated by the Learning Partnerships, or undertaken as discrete projects by sub-groups of the Partnerships.

33. In view of its mission and the positions held by its Trustees, One City Oxford can play a role in keeping learning pathways on the agenda for Oxford. It can exert influence by communicating the importance of progression in learning to the City's image and prosperity.

Note on study methods

The study relied mainly on qualitative information from small-scale consultations and interviews, supplemented by questionnaires. The findings reflect the views of those who took part. The aim was to assess and illustrate progression problems, not to conduct a comprehensive mapping of provision. Study methods included:

- 5 consultation workshops with public, private and voluntary learning providers
- meetings and telephone consultations with 17 information, advice and guidance (IAG) staff
- questionnaires completed by learning providers and IAG staff
- 2 focus groups with learners
- face to face and telephone interviews with human resource and training managers from 10 companies
- 2 meetings involving a total of 14 unemployed people.