inside EVIDENCE

Putting evidence into practice

LSIS LEARNING AND SKILLS IMPROVEMENT SERVICE

Welcome back to *Inside Evidence*. In this issue you'll find more examples of the benefits of using research evidence to improve practice. Topics include recruitment and retention, supporting learners into employment and practical teaching and learning strategies.

Research highlighted here confirms that targeted pre-enrolment support can have a big impact on recruitment and retention. Academic mentoring can also be an effective retention strategy for struggling first-timers in the sector.

Keeping learners motivated is also a high priority for the sector, but no one-size fits all. We report on research which shows that motivation thrives when tutors encourage a 'growth mind-set' in learners – when they help learners to see that success is due to learning, which requires time and effort, rather than notions of innate ability.

A major concern in the current economic climate is how we support learners on their route to employment. Our 'research round-up' features evidence about best practice in helping disadvantaged adults as well as young learners.
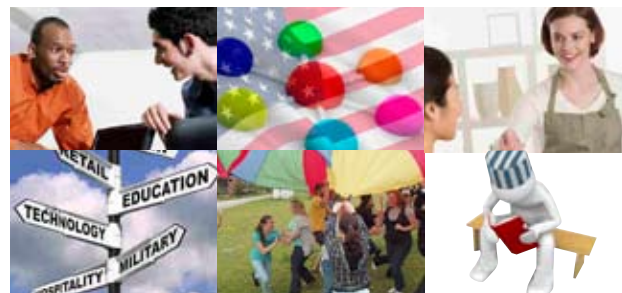
Back in December you may have heard an edition of Radio 4's *Analysis* in which destination data were used as a basis for claims that colleges are 'warehousing' students rather than preparing them effectively for employment – and misleading them about opportunities in the labour market. The programme 'Educating Cinderella' is still available on the BBC website, if you have not already heard it: www.bbc.co.uk

At LSIS, we decided to commission an investigation into the claims made in the programme and the information on which they were based and to examine some of the ways in which colleges are working with young people to develop their employability skills. You'll find some of the results on page 7.

Finally, the examples of practitioner action research we have chosen for this issue offer a glimpse into the ways in which tutors around the country are successfully tackling some of the challenges they have identified in their own settings. You (or your colleagues) may be doing something like this already. But if not, we hope reading these will inspire further investigation. The 'take action' boxes alongside many of the articles offer some starting points. As the research shows, CPD of this kind can make a real difference.

Sheila Kearney, LSIS head of research

In this issue

What's the evidence?

Inside Evidence is published three times a year. All the research we report is first assessed to ensure that the findings are trustworthy, relevant and useable across different contexts. Your views of the articles in this edition will help us work out whether the material really is useful and help others identify ways of building on the evidence. Let us have your thoughts by emailing us at: research@lsis.org.uk

Study skills: the case for mentoring

Many FE colleges encourage their foundation degree learners to select a workplace mentor to support them with their vocational development. Yet, the practitioners in this study discovered that their learners' greatest need was for academic support. This article explores what learners want from their mentors and how providers can meet their expectations in relation to both study skills and personal support.

The learners in this research project were undertaking their foundation degree in early years education. The cohort was diverse as it ranged from part-time learners who were established in their profession, and often ran their own early-years organisations, to full-time learners in their teens who had just completed their vocational qualification at college.

What most had in common was a lack of time (most were working full-time) and a lack of study skills and knowledge of basic academic procedures. Many of them had no experience, for example, of how to select and analyse information, use a library effectively, reference their papers, interpret assignment criteria or did not differentiate between presentations and seminars.

How the mentoring was organised

To help address these challenges and offer the learners in-depth, individual academic support, a system of academic mentoring was set up at the college. Mentors were chosen from existing college staff. They all held a degree-level qualification and had the time available to see learners. Only one of the mentors specialised in early years; the others had different professional backgrounds such as physics or art. Both the mentors and the learners were given information packs which included guidance about the role of the academic mentor.

Throughout the academic year, the researcher monitored the frequency and type of mentor contact, how learners used their mentors and what difficulties they experienced, in order to establish whether mentors helped them to become more confident learners.

Although learners' perceptions of their mentors' impact on their grades and confidence as learners varied, they all said they would want a mentor the following year or would recommend one to others. This and other evidence allowed the researcher to conclude that academic mentoring could be an effective form of learner support at an FE college, but only in circumstances that take account of personal and procedural matters.

Taking account of personal circumstances

The impact of personal circumstances on vocational learners'

attitude to academic studies can include:
- negative emotions related to previous unsuccessful education activities or feelings of uncertainty and insecurity caused by studying outside their usual vocational area
- overemphasising the vocational side of their work rather than broader academic aspects – but although many requested a mentor with an early years background, the mentors who were most praised by learners at the end of the year were not early years specialists
- a preference for 'nice' (or unchallenging) relational styles in their professional settings – they often struggled with 'critical' aspects of their mentor's role, and
- the importance of good relationships and trust, which were identified as crucial by both learners and mentors.

Based on the evidence collected within the project, the researcher suggested that relational as well as academic needs should be taken into account when matching learners to mentors.

Taking account of procedural matters

Procedural matters included:
- lack of contact time. Using email rather than face-to-face meetings appeared to be the natural solution for this problem, and
- lack of professional consensus resulting in differences of opinion over common academic procedures, which seemed to be a particular issue with multi-disciplinary teams. A set of agreed definitions and approaches was assembled after a debate at a staff meeting and was seen as essential for providing consistent support to learners in the future.

Take action

Doing something like this already? If not, could you:
- think about the study skills support learners need, plus their personal needs and preferences, and consider these when matching learners and mentors?
- work with colleagues on a common approach to academic procedures so that learners are presented with similar ways of doing things?

Evidence source
Russell, M. (2009) Towards more confident learners: the use of academic mentors with foundation degree students. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 14 (1), pp.57-74.

Twenty eight learners undertaking a foundation degree in early years at an FE college took part in this research project. The learners were given three sets of questionnaires at educationally significant points throughout the academic year, asking them about their experience of academic mentoring. The researcher, herself a mentor, also carried out observations and informal conversations with mentors and learners, and collected relevant documentation such as field notes and comments from meetings.

Research USA: promoting learner persistence

Disengagement, retention and drop out are major factors for learning and skills providers of all types. They are crucial in the development of learners' life chances. Why is it that some learners quickly give up when they meet difficulties and setbacks in their work, yet others respond by tackling challenges with determination? Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University in California, has, over many years, developed a now seminal theory of what motivates learners to persevere.

The beliefs learners hold about themselves

When Professor Dweck asked learners to complete questionnaires on their beliefs about intelligence, she found that around half the learners had a 'fixed mindset'. They believed that they were born with a fixed amount of intelligence and there was very little, if anything, they could do to improve it. They believed that ability came from talent – "it's all in the genes". When faced with difficulty they gave up and blamed their intelligence for their failures, saying things like: "I never did have a good memory" and "I'm no good at things like this".

But around half the learners had a 'growth mindset'. They believed that ability and success were due to learning and that learning required time and effort. When faced with challenging work, they tried harder, saying things like: "I should slow down and try to figure this out" and "I've almost got it now".

Surprisingly, Dweck found that the decision to give up or to persevere did not depend on the learner's actual level of skill. Many accomplished learners gave up easily and questioned or blamed failure on their intelligence while many less skilled learners tackled difficulties with relish and persistence.

How can we help learners who believe intelligence is fixed?

Dweck recommended encouraging a growth mindset so that all learners view poor performance on a task as something that can be improved by effort and persistence, rather than as a personal, negative reflection on them. She recommended avoiding giving person-oriented praise such as 'you're good at this' because it assumes that success is due to personal attributes and teaches learners to interpret difficulties

in terms of their personal weaknesses. Instead, Dweck recommended process-oriented praise such as, 'you tried really hard' or 'that was a good way to do it' because this focuses on the processes required for success – making an effort and finding effective strategies. She also suggested making use of task-oriented praise, such as, 'it is clear that your assignment was thoroughly researched and it provides quality evidence to support your conclusions'.

Dweck's work on the self-talk used by learners who had a growth mindset led her to recommend that teachers could support learners' persistence by equipping them with problem-solving strategies that were specific to the particular challenge they faced. She also recommended that teachers explicitly taught learners firstly about the need to expend time and effort when learning a skill and secondly that initial failure was a healthy sign that a challenge was worth pursuing.

Carol Dweck's questionnaire

Finding out whether learners have a fixed or growth mindset

Learners were asked whether they agreed or disagreed on a six-point scale with statements such as:
- You have a certain amount of intelligence and you really can't do much to change it
- Your intelligence is something about you that you can change very much
- You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic intelligence

You can try out the questionnaire online here

Take action

Why not talk to learners about this research so they understand the potential of a growth mindset and the limitations of a fixed mindset? You could:
- use strategies such as peer and self-assessment, which show learners how they can improve
- ensure you regularly praise the process a learner used to create something or reach an answer rather than the learner as a person
- use the Dweck questionnaire to identify learners with a fixed mindset who are at risk of giving up

Evidence source
Dweck, C. (2000) *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development*. Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis.

Over the course of 30 years, Carol Dweck conducted a wide variety of experiments that involved learners of all ages (from early years to adults) and socio-economic backgrounds, and from different geographical areas. She used questionnaires to measure e.g. learners' confidence, goal choices and implicit theories of intelligence and personality.

Research review: how can leaders facilitate improvements in teaching and learning?

When it comes to how well learners learn, it is most often the actions of the classroom or workshop practitioner that come under the spotlight. But what about middle and senior leaders? Do their actions also have a direct impact on increased achievement? Recent research suggests they do. A literature review carried out on behalf of LSIS set out to identify exactly what is involved.

While one study found the overall effect size of leadership on learner achievement to be 'small but educationally significant' at 0.25, a second, large scale meta-analysis showed that particular behaviours by leaders led to more powerful outcomes. In particular, engaging directly in teachers' professional learning had an effect size of 0.84 – 'a large and educationally significant impact'.

Effect sizes explained	
Effect size	**Interpretation**
<0.2	No effect or a weak effect
0.2-0.4	Small but educationally significant effect
0.4-0.6	A moderate educationally significant impact
>0.6	A large educationally significant impact

The leadership practices that make the difference

The review found four leadership characteristics and activities were key:
- developing people
- managing the teaching and learning programme
- setting directions, and
- establishing effective relationships.

Developing people

The most important thing that leaders did to support learning in their institutions (effect size 0.84), according to the review, was to involve themselves in the professional learning and development of their staff. One study suggested that 'developing excellent teaching and maintaining that excellence usually involved a great deal of talking about teaching' which involved:
- keeping abreast of current education, research and theory
- exposing staff to those ideas and systematically engaging them in discussion, and
- encouraging staff to read about effective practice.

Distributing leadership – in this review meaning involving staff in decision-making – was also linked to improving learner achievement. In the words of one of study, this was because "staff accept that they are accountable for the quality of their work".

Managing the teaching programme

Direct involvement in teaching and learning by leaders was central to ensuring enhanced achievement for learners. One study calculated the effect size to be 0.42 (i.e. moderately significant). It included:
- making regular classroom visits
- providing formative and summative feedback to teachers
- having direct oversight of the curriculum
- collecting and analysing learner feedback
- ensuring teachers were resourced with adequate equipment and materials, and
- understanding both the current practice of individual staff and departments as well as their planned trajectory for the future.

Setting directions

Holding strong ideals and being clear about the direction an organisation is moving in were found to be linked to learner outcomes and had an effect size of 0.25 (i.e. a small but significant effect). Translating the vision into a strategy and specific goals was important too. Effective leaders also made their expectations clear to staff by setting out action plans and using targets to make sure planned changes occurred swiftly to minimise disruption for learners.

Relationships

Central to relationship building was establishing and keeping open effective lines of communication. This meant leaders:
- were easily accessible to staff
- developed effective means for teachers to communicate with one another, and
- maintained open and effective lines of communication with all staff in the organisation.

Take action

If you are in a leadership role, to what extent do you:
- engage directly in teaching and learning-focused CPD with groups of practitioners, for example, by modelling, team teaching and joint planning?
- broaden your sources of intelligence about colleagues' development needs and the quality of professional relationships (for example, observing classes as the basis for professional discussions with staff).

Evidence source
What do institution leaders do that is effective in facilitating quality improvements in teaching and learning. A literature review conducted by the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education on behalf of LSIS. View here

The reviewers initially identified 205 abstracts which they narrowed down through a set of inclusion/exclusion criteria to six robust studies that provided detail on what constituted effective leadership for teaching and learning.

Identifying good practice: English and modern foreign languages

*S*tandards of work in English and modern foreign languages AS and A-level classes are generally good – that's the verdict of a recent Ofsted research report. The best English written work was lively and demonstrated clear engagement with arguments and texts. The best modern foreign languages teaching successfully developed the four skill areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Here we explore what factors contributed to these achievements.

Improving learners' grasp of vocabulary

One A-level English language course commended by the inspectors equipped learners early on with the technical terminology they needed to understand and discuss the building blocks of language – phonemes, graphemes and morphemes etc. Strategies used included giving the learners quizzes and word activities such as speaking alliteratively. Some colleges expected learners to keep and update their own glossary of linguistic terms.

Enrichment activities and study visits

In English teaching and learning, for example, some colleges invited poets to run workshops which helped the learners to develop a broad range of creative and critical skills. Other colleges ran successful debating societies which boosted learners' confidence and their speaking and listening skills. Other activities which brought learning to life were trips to 'Hardy country' and to Ypres for learners of First World War poetry. Modern foreign language learners particularly valued study trips helping them to improve their language fluency, independence and autonomy. Work experience opportunities, such as administrative, tourist or retail work helped develop A-level learners' everyday language skills that aren't easily taught in the classroom.

Using a good range of activities to engage learners

One effective lesson identified by the report involved the analysis of Nissim Ezekiel's poem 'Night of the Scorpion'. This lesson engaged learners and stimulated their thinking through a range of group work activities including:
- presenting the poem through performance
- creating art work to reflect the major aspects of the text
- a dramatic enactment of the poem's events
- a traditional critical analysis, and
- group presentations of the learners' interpretations of the poem.

At the end of the lesson the learners worked as a class, combining all their "...images, performances and analysis". According to the inspectors this combination of activities enhanced learners' ability to get inside the poem.

Imaginative use of resources to develop skills

The Ofsted inspectors saw many different kinds of resources in use, often in imaginative ways. For example, in an International Baccalaureate class, learners were asked to construct a typical revenge plot using props such as bottles, a skull and a mask. In modern foreign language classes, learners were observed using video conferencing to speak to their peers in France which enabled them to hear colloquial language and learn about the latest issues that were important for French learners.

Use of information technology to support and enhance learning

A large number of colleges used sites such as YouTube effectively to promote understanding and discussion of current cultural and linguistic issues. In an A2 French lesson for example, the teacher used a video clip of French fair trade to introduce new vocabulary in preparation for written work.

Assessment to enhance learning

Requiring learners to review their own learning helped clarify their understanding, and what they needed to work on further. In an adult learners' mixed level Spanish lesson, the learners held up a red or white card to show whether they understood the correct use of present tense reflexive verbs. The teacher then asked them to write on their cards what they felt confident with, and what they would like to focus on a little more. The teacher then used the cards to plan the next lesson.

Take action

Is there scope for building on current use of these strategies? Could you:
- increase the extent to which learners combine different experiences?
- identify specific activities during a team meeting that support learning well? You may like to include students in the discussion – do they agree? Can you identify what makes these activities helpful?

Evidence source
Ofsted (2009) Identifying good practice: a survey of college provision in English language and literature, and modern foreign languages. London: Ofsted. Available here

Inspectors visited 18 colleges where provision in English and/ or modern foreign languages had been judged to be good or outstanding at their most recent inspection. During each visit, the inspectors observed lessons, scrutinised learners' work, curriculum teams' plans, schemes of work and self-assessment reports and held meetings with learners, tutors and managers.

Research round-up: support on the path to employment

Careers advice for all

The government's planned universal adult advancement and careers service is due to be rolled out this year. Being universal, the new service will include help for adults who encounter particular difficulties in getting on in the labour market, perhaps to do with disability, age, or other factors that can make it harder to find or keep a job.

A recent study set out to explore current best practice in helping adults who are disadvantaged in various ways. The researchers found a number of factors led to success. These included:

- Encouraging progression – helping clients to move forward (and in some cases, also preventing regression). This involved proceeding in small steps, understanding when the client was ready for the next step, asking clients to make a commitment to change, challenging the client where necessary, following them up to remind and encourage, and helping them to help themselves.
- Support with basic skills – the additional support needed by service users included developing some skills that underpin all others, especially English language skills, literacy, numeracy, and computer skills.
- Working with employers – agencies explaining how employing the target group could benefit employees, arranging work experience and volunteering opportunities, and brokering actual jobs.
- Gathering evidence of impact – maintaining records of 'hard' outcomes, such as employment or enrolments, but also 'soft' outcomes too.

Evidence source
Hawthorn, R. & Alloway, J. (2009) *Smoothing the path: advice about learning and work for disadvantaged adults*. CfBT Education Trust. Available here

The findings are based on a study of 12 agencies that provided careers advice to adults with one or more disadvantages such as learning difficulties, mental illness, older adults and ex-offenders.

Lessons learned from past youth employment and training programmes

At the end of 2008, 14 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds in England were not participating in recognised education or training. Of these, four per cent were in jobs without training (JWT), three per cent in employer funded training (EFT) – which is not recognised as high quality training – and seven per cent were not in education, employment or training (NEET). This was the context for a recent historical review of youth employment and training programmes which identified a number of lessons learned.

The importance of individual support

Provision of individual support was a crucial factor in the design of successful employment and training programmes. Individual support covered information, advice and guidance, one-to-one support, and individual plans.

The importance of financial support

Financial support was an effective mechanism for engaging young people in education and training. The young people preferred wages to training allowances because they felt that earning money meant they were undertaking realistic jobs, while employers who were paying a wage rather than a training allowance felt obliged to give 16-17 year old employees genuine, productive tasks to do. But the main lesson from history is that wage payments to 16-17 year olds on programmes were too low relative to the market wage rate. As a result, many employers were either unable to keep young people on programmes or recruit them in the first place, or were criticised for exploiting young, cheap labour.

The importance of programme flexibility

Flexibility was introduced in several ways. For example:

- training start dates were flexible – individuals were able to start programmes when they required a place, rather than when the previous cohort had completed the course, which meant that there was no chance of willing individuals having to wait for places or falling out of the system, and
- programme activities were flexible – individuals could participate in a range of activities and choose those parts that most interested them.

The importance of engaging employers in the right way

In the past, financial incentives were often paid to employers to recruit new young staff, but this proved to be an ineffective mechanism for increasing employer demand for them. Programmes have also engaged employers as training providers, but the training provided was often criticised for being poor or inconsistent. A small number of previous programmes have engaged employers in programme design – an approach that was successful in stimulating employer demand.

Evidence source
Kewin, J., Tucker, M., Neat, S. & Corney, M. (2009) *Lessons from history: Increasing the number of 16 and 17 year olds in education and training*. CfBT Education Trust. Available here

This study reviewed 18 historical youth unemployment and training programmes implemented between 1972 and 1997.

Debate: does the sector ignore employment links and mislead learners?

Last December BBC radio listeners heard on Analysis that the further education sector was encouraging young people to take up courses by falsely extolling their employment prospects. A book, *Learning to Fail* by Fran Abrams, repeated these claims. To throw some light on this picture LSIS commissioned Mick Fletcher, an independent researcher, to investigate. Here we present some of the findings and edited excerpts from his report.

Abrams' book claims that:
'…only a very small proportion of 16-19 year olds went from further education colleges into work. Seven out of 10 who completed a college course, the figures showed, went on to do another course afterwards. Just one in 13 actually got a job – any job – after leaving, and one in 12 became unemployed. For this to be the case in what was supposedly the vocational sharp-end of the British education system seemed, quite frankly, shocking.'

According to Fletcher, the BBC got these figures from two sources, provided by LSC. The first was a count of all students on a number of databases; the second was a large sample survey. The employment destination data came from this second set of figures – the sample survey. The usual approach to working out the total number of students progressing to employment would be to scale the sample figures up to the size of the actual student cohort. Instead, the two sets of numbers had been added together. This had the result, Fletcher concluded, of seriously understating the numbers of students progressing into work.

The true picture

Fletcher acknowledges that establishing the true picture is difficult. According to his research, around 40 per cent of FE leavers in 2007/08 continued their studies. Around 35 per cent of young FE leavers went into employment and 25 per cent were, at the time of the survey, unemployed. He accepts that the latter figure is unsatisfactory, but suggests more analysis is needed "to see for how long the 25 per cent were out of work, whether they were disproportionately concentrated on particular courses or indeed how many were simply taking a gap year".

Destination data is one of a suite of measures used to judge college performance. LSC's Framework for Excellence, gives a grading based on the number of 'positive' destinations: 85 per cent and above is outstanding, 72.5 per cent is good and so on. To avoid colleges getting a falsely good grade on the basis of a small number of learners' destinations, they have to exceed a 'quality threshold', a minimum number of learners' destinations reported. When the LSC published the results of the first national assessment of college performance in 2009, 446 out of 449 colleges were scored as satisfactory or better. (Full details of the LSC methodology can be found in the Framework for Excellence Outputs Guide 2008-9).

Why should destinations data be treated with caution?

Higher education institutions have been collecting destination data for decades and their experience shows some of the difficulties. Fletcher quotes a study by researchers at the University of Lancaster which finds that statistics about graduates' first jobs are not a reliable guide when comparing outcomes from different subjects and that an accurate picture can only be gained from highly aggregated data, not subject level data. This "must be even more true of FE leavers who enter a more unsettled or 'flexible' labour market".

Given this volatility of the labour market and the differences in local conditions, the advice colleges provide for potential students is crucial. *Learning to Fail* claims they are being misled. But Fletcher found evidence that monitoring learner destinations is a concern for most colleges as is preparing young people for work. The range of activities is vast and includes work placements, internships, volunteering, mentoring and practice interviews. But is variable and some providers could still have something to learn, he suggests.

Developing employability skills

Colleges often do much more than provide advice. They take responsibility for providing learners with 'employability skills' such as self management, team working, communication and literacy, numeracy and information technology. Fletcher argues that because these are transferable skills it is both unnecessary and impractical to seek a precise alignment between the courses students take and the available local jobs:
'As many college staff will confirm, hairdressing students make excellent call centre operatives; a course in drama can develop the transferable interpersonal skills so valued by retail employers; and while there are few jobs available in forensic science those who take it acquire high level skills in hard quantitative subjects that are always in high demand'.

Likewise, he cites international studies which consistently report that planning vocational course provision on the basis of an imperfect understanding of the labour market is unwise as well as unnecessary.

Overall, Fletcher found that the data analysis quoted by Fran Abrams and the BBC had serious flaws and that the true numbers of young people leaving FE who go directly into employment was more than four times the level they quoted. He also comments that the charge that FE colleges "are wholly disconnected from the world of work is not substantiated by the facts".

Fletcher concludes that destination data can only give a partial picture of the outcomes from learning. It would, he suggests, be useful to balance the first destination data with some reverse tracer studies – surveys starting with adults settled in stable employment and charting the routes by which they got there.

Evidence Source
Fletcher, M. (2010) *A step towards work or just stuck in a warehouse? Does FE help young people into employment?* Available here
Radio 4's *Analysis* programme 'Educating Cinderella' is still available on the BBC website here

Practitioner-led research: 'keeping them warm' – turning college interview offers into enrolments

At New College Nottingham, one tutor's initiative led to a college-wide project to support its new learners. Yvonne Richards, head of school, Entry and Foundation at New College wanted to build up new learners' confidence and self-esteem before they started college to make the transition from school to college easier and less daunting for everyone involved. It also significantly increased the rate of conversion from interview to enrolment.

What did the initiative involve?

Yvonne helped to develop a 'keeping them warm' programme which lasted for two days prior to the new term starting in September. It involved learners studying for an Exploring Enterprise Award, which contained generic elements useful to all learners, including team working, plus specific objectives for their chosen curriculum area. Involving learners in the planning and preparation of the programme was a key part of the scheme, so a focus group of learners was involved in its development.

Student mentors were also introduced to the programme. Known as 'buddies', these students were trained in communication skills, mentoring and professionalism. Their role was to help the new learners by getting involved in the activities and games during ice-breaker sessions. More importantly, perhaps, they were able to offer a student perspective to the new learners who could talk to them about college life. This proved to be a popular aspect to the programme, as the new learners could ask the buddies things that they felt uncomfortable discussing with tutors.

Yvonne explains, "It was important to ensure that buddies were matched to their respective learner in terms of ethnicity or gender to make sure all new learners would feel comfortable talking to that person". The programme contained a number of activities which had to be carefully thought out depending on the type of learner involved. "We were keen to ensure that the activities were fun, but not childish, as we were concerned that learners would feel patronised and therefore gain the wrong impression of what it was like to be a college student".

The impact of the programme

All 468 learners who attended the programme achieved the qualification and were genuinely positive about the experience. One commented for example, "It was fun playing the games and we really had a laugh. It made me feel a lot more confident about coming in September because I knew my way around". And learners who had attended the programme were far more likely to enrol for their programme in September than those who hadn't

(86 per cent compared to 53 per cent). The effect of this on the organisation was that the cross college conversion factor from interview to enrolment for 08/09 was 77 per cent, compared with 55 per cent for 07/08.

Staff members also felt that they benefited from building effective relationships with the learners and having some knowledge of them as individuals before enrolment.

The buddies also gained from the experience. They commented, for example, "I now look at people in a different way and judge people individually…I feel more confident dealing with group discussion and this has helped during my first year at university". The performance of the buddies in this programme was so effective that the college is now keen for them to be involved in other duties, such as acting as tour guides during open evenings, and acting as mentors for students who may be at risk of dropping out of college.

Playing games such as this during the programme made the learners feel more confident

Take action

Many providers run pre-enrolment and induction support programmes. If you liked Yvonne's approach, why not:

- find out from your learners if anything came out of the blue for them when they began your course? Was there anything they felt unprepared for or which made them feel uneasy? They might have some ideas on how you can design pre-course and induction to ensure a smoother entry.
- develop new ice-breaker activities with your learners – you might involve some more experienced learners to run ice-breakers with new cohorts.

National Improvement Strategy: improving learner success rates

Learner success rates (the extent to which learners successfully complete their programmes and progress to a positive destination) are seen as key indicators of provider effectiveness. High quality teaching and learning experiences are, of course, vital for success but what more can be done? According to a recent review of evidence in support of the National Improvement Strategy (NIS), activities such as monitoring, providing support for learners and working out how to enhance learner (and staff) motivation were important too.

Factors that contributed to high quality teaching and learning included:
- planning activities that take account of learners' needs, wants, aspirations, barriers and capacities
- checking learners' understanding and providing feedback on the learning undertaken, and
- learners as well as tutors evaluating teaching and learning activities.

Monitoring achievements

The research identified by the review shows the importance of having all learners' achievements systematically and accurately recorded on a centralised database. Tutors who are encouraged to monitor the data routinely often find they understand its value and use in both improving and demonstrating standards. A traffic light system for spotting disparities (between ethnic groups and gender for example) and addressing them quickly often helped improve achievement and success. Having clear, measurable, attainable, yet challenging targets for learners was often helpful too. The research points to the value of reviewing learners' progress frequently during review meetings specifically designed for the purpose. When achievements are recorded in ways that show how they relate to the learner's overall progress, such reviews have been shown to motivate learners. Feedback is very important too so that learners can be encouraged to reflect on their own progress and experiences.

Providing support for learners

Many learners receive little academic support from family or friends, so the quality of the support they receive from providers is important. But learners have frequently reported feeling they need to ask for help before they get any. Some are more willing to do this than others. Yet providing support is important even before enrolment. This review of evidence highlights the importance of getting prospective learners on to courses that are right for them, so the quality and accessibility of pre-enrolment information is critical. Other forms of support that have been found to help include buddy schemes that have enabled learners to integrate into college life more effectively during the first few weeks. (You may find it helpful to read the article on page 9 of this issue which describes how one tutor supported learners from interview to enrolment).

Enhancing motivation

Different learners are motivated to study by different factors – no one size fits all. In some studies, learners showed they valued employment opportunities. Their commitment was enhanced when they were helped to understand the opportunities open to them if they completed their courses and to see how their courses were related to their aspirations. But others, such as unemployed learners improving their basic skills, saw employment as a longer term goal and valued the wider benefits of learning instead. For such learners, 1:1 attention and support, a relaxed and friendly learning environment, learning at the right pace and a safe place to ask questions were particularly valued. Young learners studying levels 1 and 2 on the other hand, appreciated tutors having time to explain work, being treated as adults, and tutors boosting their confidence.

For all learners, e-learning has been found to create a sense of engagement, excitement and involvement and to promote retention through improving communication between learners and tutors.

Motivation of the teaching staff themselves also emerged, not surprisingly as, an important element in strategies to improve learner success. There is plenty of evidence that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) can be highly motivational for staff. Effective approaches to CPD include action research, the observation of teaching and learning, and coaching and mentoring.

Take action

Is your monitoring activity as linked to improving learner motivation as it could be? Could you:
- conduct regular reviews with your learners to help motivate them and monitor their achievements?
- take a more active role in recording learners' achievements on a centralised database and use the data to both demonstrate and improve success rates?
- carry out your own research to explore issues raised by this article, such as learner support mechanisms or what motivates your learners?

Evidence source
Review of evidence in support of the National Improvement Strategy Theme 8: Success rate disparities for different learner groups.

The researchers produced 'catalogues' of themed research evidence relevant to the learning and skills sector in England. Materials from other sectors and countries were not included. All the materials selected were quality assured.

Offender learning: overcoming the obstacles

Many studies have shown the positive impact of prisoner education on reducing re-offending. A recently published report takes this research further: it highlights the benefits of prisoners participating in education and shows some of the difficulties that need to be overcome by the prisoners and the system itself. Prisoners were surveyed to find out their experiences of education both within the prison system and before sentencing – as well as their hopes and ambitions upon release. So what are the benefits and what difficulties do prisoners face?

Many of the prisoners who took part in the survey had few or no qualifications before entering prison. On the face of it then, a significant proportion of the prison population could usefully spend time acquiring some qualifications and skills and enjoying the benefits of learning. But, the survey found, a relatively large minority (70 out of the 468 respondents) had not engaged in any form of education while in prison. Nearly a quarter of these stated they had not been allowed to start a course and 17 per cent had received inadequate advice about courses available.

Why prisoners valued learning

Those prisoners who had participated in education while in prison reported several reasons for doing so. The most popular was 'to occupy my time usefully' (73 per cent), suggesting that the majority valued the opportunity for learning. Moreover, the impact of that learning appeared to be fairly substantial with three-quarters of respondents gaining a qualification, accreditation or certificate and over half indicating that their experiences of education had boosted their self-esteem.

Sixty per cent of respondents claimed that their participation in education had made them 'want to learn more' and 69 per cent

identified the helpfulness of prison education staff in helping them select and complete courses. Half the respondents wanted to continue training after release and around a third wanted to carry on with academic study.

Barriers to learning

Yet there were still many who felt that support from prison officers was lacking. This suggests a need for greater communication and cooperation between prison and educational staff, but also points to the main, but obvious, barrier in education within prisons: security. There is only so much a prison system can allow in terms of access to materials and support for those undertaking study. There is also the problem of being moved half way through a course and not being able to finish due to lack of funding, or availability at the new prison. Another problem for prisoners is access to the internet and word processing facilities, now a fundamental part of education. This lack of access was a stumbling block for many respondents. Sixty-two per cent indicated they would like improved access to these facilities to make learning easier, especially for those engaged in distance learning.

In concluding the report, Dr Peter Honey, trustee of the Prisoners Education Trust paid tribute to the tenacity of prisoners who keep going despite practical difficulties. But he also pointed out that the tendency to put the blame on things 'beyond your control', is all too easy. He argued, "We must do everything we can to make learning seem an attractive option to more prisoners. The motivation to learn will surely follow".

Take action

If you work in a custodial setting, have you ever invited an ex-offender who improved their work-related skills while serving their sentence to talk to your current and potential students about what they gained from the course and how it has helped them to find and progress in their job? Your head of education, training and employment might be able to help you identify someone suitable.

Evidence source
Brain Cells: Listening to prisoner learners – A joint project by Prisoners Education Trust, Inside Time and RBE Consultancy Ltd (2009). Available here. The survey questions can be accessed here

A survey containing 36 questions was published in October 2008 in Inside Time, a monthly newspaper for prisoners. It was completed by 468 prisoners, 80 per cent of whom had left full time education prior to their 18th birthday and 52 per cent had been unemployed in the 12 months leading up to sentencing. Responses were voluntary, and prisoners were not supervised when completing the questionnaire.

A window into some practitioner-led projects

Practitioners from provider organisations around the country are busy gathering evidence to improve aspects of their practice, as part of the Research Development Fellowship scheme provided by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the University of Sunderland Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT), in association with the Institute for Learning (IfL).

Here, three of these Research Development Fellows talk about their experiences.

Linda Croudace, from TDR Training in Gateshead, looked at students' abilities in listening and note taking in preparation for university.

'Most did not enjoy note-taking, and there was a tendency among teaching staff to just give them what they needed. But, if you are not actually taking proper notes, then you are not properly engaging with the subject. It is this lack of engagement which could lead to problems on entering university or the work place, where listening skills become essential tools for engaging with subjects.

Having the research grant meant I could give up time in my day job to concentrate on my research. The support offered by the Fellowship programme, particularly at the residential meetings, gave a focus to the project that might not have happened otherwise'.

Andy Smith, a senior tutor at Blackpool and Fylde College, researched how informal learning develops using online virtual environments.

'I set up an informal area for students on a virtual learning environment to monitor who used it, what they used it for and how they interacted with it. I found the students used the environment as a question and answer area, where they could talk informally amongst themselves, asking for quick fixes etc. Having an informal learning area embedded on courses helps tutors get an insight into what their students are thinking, what they are using, and if there are any problems/issues.

The Fellowship has provided me with very good support. I liked the action research side to it – it allowed me to think about why things were or were not happening'.

Pam Garside, head of School for Initial Teacher Training at West Suffolk College, looked at the supervision of mentors in the learning and skills sector, collecting evidence across four colleges.

'What emerged was that teacher educators were best placed to take on the role of supervisor.

I would like next to develop an online distance learning CPD package, quality assured by the University for teacher educators to gain some recognition and qualification in supervising mentors, which would also be recognised by IfL and their CPD records.

The Fellowship has allowed me to really concentrate and focus on my research. The strict timeline maintained by the programme was very good at keeping the research on track'.

Inside Track

Carol Dweck's website

We featured Carol Dweck's research on what motivates learners to persevere on page 3. You can hear her theory being discussed at: www.youtube.com

For a summary of her work, see the General Teaching Council's Research for Teachers website: www.gtce.org.uk

Teacher case studies of research

The campaign for learning website houses a number of teacher case studies of research which explore a range of questions, including:

• What makes learners resilient in their learning?

• Can practical activities help learners with their numeracy skills?

Here's a quick link to the site:

www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk

Prisoners education trust

How does learning in prison change lives? On this website, prisoners and ex prisoners speak for themselves through a series of case studies: www.prisonerseducation.org.uk You can also read about the learning and skills projects helping prisoners and offenders build a new life:

www.prisonerseducation.org.uk