

**Support for Success  
Quality Improvement Programme**



Learning+Skills Council



**boosting  
your retention rates**  
lessons for preventing  
early drop-out

Jackie Sadler  
and Vikki Smith

Published by the Learning and Skills Development Agency

www.LSDA.org.uk

Feedback should be sent to:

Information Services

Learning and Skills Development Agency

Regent Arcade House

19–25 Argyll Street

London W1F 7LS.

Tel 020 7297 9144

Fax 020 7297 9242

enquiries@LSDA.org.uk

Registered with the Charity Commissioners

Copyeditor: Karin Fancett

Designers: Pat Kahn and Dave Shaw

Cover illustrator: Joel Quartey

Printer: Blackmore Ltd, Shaftesbury, Dorset

1608/04/04/3500

ISBN 1 85338 953 6

© Learning and Skills Development Agency 2004

You are welcome to copy this publication for internal use within your organisation. Otherwise, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, electrical, chemical, optical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the copyright owner.

### **Further information**

For further information about the issues discussed in this publication please contact:

Vikki Smith

Development Adviser

Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme

Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Tel 020 7297 9091

vsmith@LSDA.org.uk

**This publication is funded by the Learning and Skills Council as part of a contracted support and development programme.**

## Contents

About the authors	
Acknowledgements	
Summary of key issues	
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The context : a compelling argument</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The research methodology</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The case studies</b>	<b>7</b>
Choosing the right programme	7
Initial assessment	10
Reviewing learner information and documentation	12
Motivating learners	16
Improving support in the workplace	17
Workplace mentors and buddies	18
Harnessing support from external agencies	20
Identifying and supporting 'at risk' learners	20
<b>Lessons learnt</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>The way forward</b>	<b>33</b>
References	37
<b>Appendix 1</b> Case study organisations contributing to this report	<b>39</b>
<b>Appendix 2</b> Learner self-appraisal forms	<b>41</b>

## About the authors

Jackie Sadler has experience in careers work and teaching / lecturing in schools, adult education and higher education, including working with pupils and adult learners in France. Much of her work has been focused on quality improvement and in the 1990s she was closely involved in the development of the initial national quality standards for guidance. She has worked on many research projects in further education, particularly in relation to careers education and guidance, and from 2000 to 2003 ran the Effective Practice network for student guidance. Since 1999, she has supported providers to develop strategies to enhance their retention and achievement. She has a particular interest in how effective guidance, recruitment and induction can contribute to improved performance.

Vikki Smith is a development adviser within the Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme. The focus of her work is the management of a series of action research projects, whereby providers introduce a new dimension to their provision with a view to improving learner retention and achievement. Vikki has 9 years' teaching experience in England, Australia and Ethiopia. She gained her PhD in post-compulsory education and training in 1997. Vikki has developed a strong interest in educational philosophy. She has worked as a researcher with the then National Council for Vocational Qualifications on the GNVQ Scrutiny Programme, as an analyst for the Value for Money Unit at the Department for Education and Skills, and, more recently, as a research fellow in work-based learning.

## Acknowledgements

This publication forms part of a suite of publications to come out of the action research projects commissioned by the Learning and Skills Development Agency during 2002/03.

It aims to share the lessons learnt from a small group of projects that explored different approaches to working collaboratively within a work-based learning context, with a view to advising providers on improving learner outcomes. It is one of four publications, the others responding to alternative dimensions and concerns in work-based learning.

- *Practical ways of improving success in Modern Apprenticeships* (Maynard and Smith 2004).
- *Rethinking the process: strategies for integrating on- and off-the-job training* (Natrins and Smith 2004).
- *Pushing back the boundaries: working with employers and other partners* (Smith 2004).

Each publication pulls together the strategies tested and provides a signal to others in the sector of the possibility of improving learner outcomes.

Our thanks go to all those contributing to the projects, specifically:

- the team of LSDA Associates who supported the projects
- the providers involved with the action research projects exploring ways of 'preventing early drop-out' in 2002/03
- Emily Hider, Coordinator, Support for Success
- Robin Wardle, Administrator, Support for Success.

## Summary of key issues

When seeking to boost retention of learners on programmes there are a number of general points that serve providers well. These include :

- the involvement of the learner in the whole process
- the importance of learner and learning support in retaining learners
- a clear link between on- and off-the-job training as well as an effective working relationship between the stakeholders
- adequate research into the causes of early drop-out as this is important for choosing the most appropriate and effective strategies
- timely collection from leavers of reasons for withdrawal, preferably when they leave the programme.

A number of target strategies can be adopted ; where one or more of these is pursued the likelihood of success increases.

### Programme choice

- Introductory courses and comprehensive induction processes, including a realistic experience of the workplace can be effective in enabling staff and prospective learners to assess their suitability for their chosen vocational area and commitment to completing the programme, which in turn can reduce early drop-out.

### Initial assessment

- A robust initial assessment process is vital in combating early drop-out.
- Recruitment and initial assessment procedures need to be documented and followed consistently by staff. These should be monitored regularly.
- Initial assessment needs to take account of the learner's preferences and the outcomes of this need to be understood and owned by the learner.
- An effective initial assessment process should identify learning support needs.

### **'At risk' learners**

- The identification of 'at risk' factors and risk banding can assist providers in prioritising support.
- 'At risk' factors affecting drop-out will vary from one group to another, one occupational area to another and one programme to another – analysis of the reasons for withdrawal will clarify these.
- Feedback from staff in the workplace on their learner's needs and progress is important in deciding on the frequency of visits.
- Providers need to be proactive and identify potential problems and take corrective action quickly – a 'cause for concern' form is an invaluable tool to highlight issues early on.
- Individual strategies are needed to meet each learner's needs.
- Learners need to feel that they belong; this encourages commitment and increases the likelihood that they will stay on programme and achieve.
- Staff working with learners who are at risk need a non-judgemental approach and to develop good counselling skills.

### **Reviewing publicity, information and learner documentation**

- Where learners are leaving because a programme is not meeting their expectations, it is useful to gather learners' perspectives on the publicity and literature being used and to seek their input as to how it can be improved.
- Documentation for learners must be user-friendly.
- Information should be provided in bite-sized chunks in a timely way, with attention to the amount of complex information that can be absorbed at any one time.

### **Motivating learners**

- Strategies to increase learner motivation need to be linked to trends in drop-out and implemented early enough in the programme to make a difference.
- Learners need to feel that they are making progress; celebrating early success can be very motivating, particularly for those learners with little previous attainment.

## Support in the workplace

It is worth identifying those workplaces with a poor record of achievement and retention – providers need to work with these employers to identify factors affecting withdrawal and help them improve their record.

When assessing potential work placements, providers should be cautious about taking on employers whose principles and values are different from theirs.

Additional visits to the workplace in the early stages have proved successful in keeping learners on programmes.

Interventions need to be closely monitored and evaluated to assess whether or not they are making a difference.

## Mentoring and 'buddying'

Ensuring learners have access to someone they can relate to and with whom they can discuss their concerns is important in keeping them on a programme.

Great care is needed in the choice of mentor ; those involved need to be able to connect with the young person.

If an external agency is providing this service, it too needs to understand the type of learners it is trying to assist.

## The way forward

The experience of the case studies clearly demonstrates that critical success factors in preventing early drop-out include :

- ensuring that learners are placed on the correct programme
- ensuring that learners understand what the training programme involves and that they are adequately briefed about the work placement
- diagnosing the support needed individually and making arrangements to put this in place quickly
- providing increased access to staff and additional support – particularly entry into the work placement
- more intensive monitoring of progress and learner satisfaction early on – and prompt intervention where necessary
- engaging employers to clarify their role and how they can support the process
- keeping the momentum going and ensuring early achievement.



## Introduction

A significant proportion of young workers drop out and fail to complete their NVQ units / NVQs: 53% for Level 2 and 47% for Level 3 (Thornhill 2001). The burgeoning focus on Modern Apprenticeship (MA) achievement, increasing with the advent of technical certificates, is likely to exacerbate this problem. Like key skills, technical certificates bring with them an additional dimension to the MA framework – a dimension that learners, employers and indeed providers are learning to respond to and cope with. Given this context, a positive and supportive learner experience during the first stages of a work-based learning (WBL) programme is vital to retaining the learner and central to establishing a climate that promotes learner achievement. Research undertaken into retention on WBL programmes in recent years has raised some common concerns. Thornhill's (2001) study on NVQ programmes identified that the drop-out rates vary little between occupational areas and frameworks, that drop out tends to peak at 2–3 months and that 25% of those who leave do so within the first 3 months. The main reasons cited for non-completion by learners themselves were:

- changing employer or occupation for one with better prospects
- insufficient employer involvement and support
- inadequate quality, consistency and frequency of trainer and assessor support.

Thornhill 2001, p2

The pace of learning was also a key factor: learners need to feel that they are making progress. This introduces a number of elements that the training provider and employer need to consider: how to ensure learners are motivated but not pressured, how to gauge the right mix of learning strategies matched to learners' preferred learning styles, and how to get the level and pitch right for each individual learner.

A study into the reasons for non-completion on MAs (DfEE 2000a) also found that the most common reason for moving on was for a job with better pay or prospects – however, there were a number of key characteristics shared by those who did not complete. In particular, 45% of early leavers indicated that they did not know enough about the MA programme when they started:

*Most non-completers did not fully understand what the MA would involve when they started the training or how long it will take. It is clearly vital that these elements are understood, since misunderstandings about the nature, volume and duration of training were all reasons contributing to non-completion.*

Lack of engagement by the employer in the programme and the paucity of information given to trainees by some employers were also factors affecting a number of those who had left. A quarter had not discussed with their employer what the MA involved.

The findings indicated that where there were high levels of early drop-out from their programmes, WBL providers needed to review:

- their recruitment and selection processes
- what information was provided to their trainees and how
- the support provided in the first 3 months of the programme, and whether this is differentiated by individual needs
- employer involvement in the programmes, specifically clarification of responsibilities and strategies to increase their commitment to successful outcomes.

In response to this set of circumstances, the then Raising Quality and Achievement Programme (now the Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme) commissioned a small number of WBL action research projects to develop strategies to improve the retention and achievement of their learners. A quarter of these identified early drop-out from their programmes as a concern and focused on interventions to address this. A range of strategies and interventions were implemented, including ensuring that learners were fully aware of what their programme involved and that they were assigned to the correct level of programme. Projects emphasised and focused on, for example, initial assessment, advice and guidance, and raising awareness / student perceptions of what is involved.

## The context : a compelling argument

The action research projects took place in a climate of increasing concern at levels of retention and achievement in the WBL sector. The introduction of the Common Inspection Framework in April 2001 and its application to the WBL sector started to focus attention on retention and achievement rates, particularly where these were contributing to an overall decline in inspection grades (ALI 2002; Hughes 2002). At the time of the Chief Inspector's Report in 2002 (ALI 2002), this focus of attention highlighted some disparity in retention and achievement rates across the sector as a whole, and it still remains an area of concern.

In 2002 the statistics showed a decline in WBL grades with only 40% of WBL providers deemed adequate. This was attributed to myriad reasons :

*Almost all of the worst providers failed to retain their trainees and to equip them with their desired qualifications; almost all were inadequate in assessing and training in key skills; nearly three-quarters were bad at the initial assessment of trainees' learning needs and at assessing their progress accurately.*

(ALI 2002)

Poor retention rates identified either through self-assessment or through feedback following inspection prompted a number of providers to begin to consider what interventions could make a difference. This was in tandem with the consistent highlighting of weaknesses in initial assessment by the Training Standards Council (TSC), then the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

*An individual learning plan cannot be prepared, with any hope of its being pertinent, without the most careful interview and, probably, well-chosen testing. This is the fourth consecutive year in which this point has been made in my annual report. Initial assessment nevertheless often remains inadequate.*

(ALI 2002)

Initial assessment was cited in inspection reports five times more frequently as a weakness than a strength. It is this backdrop that has served as a catalyst to providers to enhance their initial assessment processes.

Another concern was that students in WBL were included in retention rates as soon as they were registered on a programme. (This was unlike the FE sector where there was in effect a 'period of grace' whereby students who left before the first census date were excluded from the early drop-out statistics.) This concern, combined with the growing awareness of benchmarking and use of data, has further served to encourage providers to investigate how they could ensure that learners were placed on the right programme at the correct level from the outset.

A further difficulty facing WBL providers has been finding valid data with which to draw meaningful comparisons with their own statistics, and with which they could benchmark. The advent of the LSC Survey of Leavers, made available through the Work-based Young People Trainee Database and published by the DfES as a statistical release (DfEE 2001), enables providers to make comparisons between their performance and national benchmarks with regard to retention, to identify strengths and weaknesses and to plan for improvements. Significantly, where this data highlights peaks in early drop-out, providers can begin to explore and rectify such concerns.

Historically an added complication has been the lack of foundation level provision in WBL, which has been cited as a reason for the inappropriate placement of learners. This is beginning to be addressed by the introduction of the Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes :

*The fact that a comprehensive ladder of work-based awards now exists, from the new E2E through Foundation and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships to foundation degree, eliminates any excuse for placing young people on programmes on which they have little prospect of succeeding...* (ALI 2003a)

This background aptly illustrates the difficulties facing the WBL sector. Providers are being challenged to respond and redress many concerns at any one time ; retention of learners and keeping them on programme being one such issue. The action research projects detailed in the following sections demonstrate how some providers are attempting to respond to these very issues.

A host of alternative LSDA publications have also sought to address issues of retention and will provide further guidance and clarification. Examples include Martinez (2001), Barker (2003), Martinez and Hughes (2003), Smith and Hughes (2003) and LSC (2004).

## The research methodology

In the summer of 2002, 78 development projects were commissioned by the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme with an onus on improving learner outcomes in WBL. With an emphasis on action research, all of the projects sought to make a change to current practice and as a result improve, for example, retention or achievement rates. These projects reported on their activities in the summer of 2003.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) identify action research as an intervention in the real world and an examination of the impact of the change made. The rationale for employing an action research approach is that it 'directly addresses the persistent failure of research in the social sciences to make a difference in terms of bringing about action improvements in practice' (Somekh 1995, p340).

The basis for the projects is to explore the unity between educational research and practice, and to provide an action research framework that is able to support and encourage many development activities (eg critical reflection, professional / learner development, curriculum development and institutional change). As such, projects introduced new dimensions to their provision and explored changes to current practice in an explicit attempt to raise retention and / or achievement in WBL. The quality of an organisation's performance (or part thereof) was the motivator, with practitioners analysing a particular set of circumstances with a view to improving practice.

In this guise action research has the potential to generate genuine and sustained improvements, as it requires those conducting the action research to reflect on and assess their practice, to explore and test new ideas / methods / materials and to evaluate how effective the interventions were. Ideally, the outcomes and impact of the action research are shared with colleagues, and decisions are then taken as to which innovations are adopted institution / organisation-wide. The notion of sharing what has been done and the improvements secured promotes a participatory process and aims to end the dislocation of research from practice.

To further promote the sharing of experiences, practices and learning across the sector, each project is written up as a case study and these are available on the Support for Success website ([www.s4s.org.uk](http://www.s4s.org.uk)).

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

- working together
- integrating on- and off-the-job training
- preventing early drop-out
- promoting achievement and progression.

The projects focusing on 'preventing early drop-out' across the WBL sector are featured within this publication. There are three sister publications (Maynard and Smith 2004; Natrins and Smith 2004; Smith 2004) addressing the remaining themes.

## The case studies

The case studies detailed here sought to prevent, in one way or another, early drop-out from a learning programme. What became evident from a review of the case studies, however, was that the work was rarely, if ever, undertaken in isolation: concern at low levels of retention and achievement often encouraged providers to make a number of changes in an attempt to effect an improvement. A number of projects implemented two or three strategies, either from the beginning of the project or as a result of the collection and analysis of data as the project progressed. Most commonly, this linked interventions concerned with the point at which the majority of early leavers dropped out and explorations into reasons for withdrawal. What must be noted is that for some the timescale hindered a full collection and analysis of the data. Taken together, however, the body of evidence does indicate that certain strategies are likely to reduce early drop-out from programmes.

## Choosing the right programme

Many providers are aware of the importance to retention of ensuring that learners have a realistic view of what it is like to work within their proposed vocational area before they are accepted formally onto the programme. Some, for example, have set up workplace tasters, and others use images from the work environment in the initial assessment process to help explain aspects of the work of which prospective learners may be less aware. The input of former trainees can also be valuable in offering a balanced perspective on the work and identifying any difficulties that arose for them (and, more importantly, how these were overcome / coped with).

## The care sector

In response to the need to match students to courses, one private training organisation, offering NVOs and Foundation and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships (F/AMAs), established an introductory course for those who expressed an interest in the care sector. The company was receiving expressions of interest from applicants with few GCSEs. If accepted onto a programme, this group needed a period of intensive support before it was ready to enter mainstream training.

Those interested in the care sector, but deemed not yet ready for the FMA, were given the opportunity to sample training in the sector without a long-term commitment. This rolling, modularised programme was offered for 3 days per week over a period of 15 weeks. During this time both basic and key skills needs were addressed, and an introduction to the sector was provided. Being in-house, the programme also offered an extended period in which to monitor progress and identify support needs. Key modules were First Aid and Health and Safety. Learners had individual learning plans which focused on basic and key skills as well as vocational development – and which were reviewed every 4 weeks. It was found necessary to review the programme continuously to identify issues as they emerged and put measures in place to address them.

The company found that :

- for this programme, it needed to amend the review documentation and procedures produced for its MAs
- poor punctuality and attendance had to be addressed firmly and consistently through fines and requiring learners to make up the hours lost
- the programme needed to be more interactive (it was restructured accordingly)
- since the programme was not accredited, progress made by learners needed to be documented (learners were therefore given a 'leave notice', which charted changes in attitudes and confidence as well as achievements ; the rationale behind this was that it could then be shown to an employer or training provider).

The company considers it essential to continue with the high level of support for learners during the transition period from preparatory to mainstream training. As a result of these developments 45 (of 69) learners completed the initial programme, 21 of whom progressed onto the FMA: a better result than the company had expected. A further 18 progressed into further education or into another occupational area within WBL. By reducing the number of those entering into the FMA and NVQ training who were undecided about the care sector or who needed considerable extra support, the company was able to improve its retention and achievement rates. It has since entered into a dialogue with local schools about how the programme could be improved to meet the needs of their learners.



## The hairdressing sector

Another company, this time providing WBL in hairdressing, was finding that the drop-out rate was higher within the first 12 weeks than later on in the foundation Level 2 programmes. It was felt that applicants who expressed an initial interest in hairdressing often did not understand what was involved or comprehend what was required of them. The quality team decided to address this issue by exploring the learners' commitment to hairdressing as a career. A 'Trial Programme' was designed, lasting 6 to 8 weeks. The rationale was that as a result of the trial period the learner would be better able to make a judgement as to whether the programme was what they wanted and achievable.

The Trial Programme generated a range of information about a learner's progress, which was collected and analysed. This included self-assessment questionnaires completed by learners every 2 weeks, designed to get them to think about their commitment and the appropriateness of the course they were going to embark on. The series of three forms can be found in Appendix 2.

The quality team reviewed data on learner progress and commitment monthly and discussed this with the learner. This closer monitoring enabled issues to be addressed quickly (eg punctuality, ability to work with colleagues, wages, the stamina required to work in salons, travel) before they started on the main programme.

Initial analysis is positive: retention for 2002/03 was 84% compared with 40% at the same period in the previous year. For the learner, it enables them to be more confident in their choice before making the commitment to becoming a hairdresser. These findings support those suggested by the Adult Learning Inspectorate: 'Trial periods have been particularly successful in retailing and hairdressing' (ALI 2003b).

## Cross-curriculum

Induction was another strategy employed to delay registration to a programme, thereby increasing the likelihood that learners would be retained. One college extended and enriched their induction processes. This was multifaceted, lasted 3 days and involved:

- interviews, which provided a brief overview of the course as well as an initial assessment of the prospective learner
- a review of what was being delivered in an attempt to combat the peak of early leavers in the first 3 months of the programme

- key skills, health and safety and an introduction to the NVQ, but not a work placement.

The college found that trainees were still leaving because the course was not what they anticipated, and often the work placement was very different to what they had imagined. By the end of the project the induction process had been expanded to 2 weeks, and consisted of:

- an initial assessment
- an investigation of their preferred learning styles
- clarification of what their framework will consist of
- a taste of their vocational area
- an investigation of health and safety
- an introduction to key skills
- an introduction to the technical certificate
- a week within the work placement to see if it was what they expected.

At the time of reporting of the projects (summer 2003) the new-style induction seemed to be working well, but it was too early to judge whether or not it would affect retention. An interesting factor to emerge was that, in spite of being told at interview, prior to induction the new trainees had not grasped the idea that the course would consist of more than the NVQ. Induction was therefore useful in explaining clearly what the framework consisted of. Work experience gave learners a chance to see if they would like the vocation they had chosen. Prospective trainees were not signed up to a programme until the end of the 2 weeks.

## Initial assessment

The link between initial assessment and improving learner outcomes is well documented: for example, 'More than half of the providers cited as carrying out good initial assessment also showed signs of good or improving achievement and retention rates' (ALI 2003c).

To secure such an improvement requires that initial assessment be:

*a staged process that helps the learner cross the threshold of the most appropriate post-16 provision. The outcomes from this process inform:*

- *early judgements about the learner;*
- *the focus and level of learning;*
- *the skills that will be developed and the needs that will be met.*

(Green 2003, p11)

A number of projects sought to address weaknesses in their initial assessment process, identified either through individual inspection or self-assessment reports.

One provider working with individuals with learning difficulties was using assessment forms in the practical work areas. These provided information on the person's skill levels, recognition abilities, personal hygiene, presentation, time-keeping and other characteristics. These combined assessments enabled staff to diagnose more quickly areas for additional support and the nature of that support. All staff were involved in the process because the learners were encouraged to try one day in each of the work areas. The assessments were structured to identify the learner's strengths and weaknesses and the level of support required. They also identified whether the learner enjoyed their experience in each of the work areas and if they had any preference for a particular type of work, thus ensuring that they were subsequently placed in a suitable area.

Another company offering MA and NVQ programmes in care reviewed its initial assessment process to try to address the main reasons for withdrawal from a programme. The process already included standard assessments and records such as the basic skills test, employer reference and record of achievement.

Additional tools were devised including:

- a skill scan to enable learners to identify and value their skills and experience, and to identify their training needs
- a simple health-screening tool, including any history of back health, episodes of sickness, mental ill-health and their response to stress
- a version of the SWOT analysis to identify learner preferences, how learners learn and any barriers to learning; this was used as a basis for discussion and to identify support needs and preferred learning styles
- a quiz to determine learners' 'interpersonal intelligence' (ie the ability to relate to others) – a necessity in care and childcare work.

The information generated out of these tools was then used to inform the individual learning plan.

A note of caution here: undertaking a battery of tests can be an intimidating experience for many learners. It can also be particularly frustrating where they are asked to take the same tests twice.

The examples noted here barely begin to touch on the wealth of information available on initial assessment. A more detailed account of reviewing and enhancing the initial assessment process can be found in the LSDA publication *Improving initial assessment in work-based learning* (Green 2003).

## Reviewing learner information and documentation

Learner documentation needs to be reviewed regularly to ensure its currency and that it is user-friendly, covers the necessary information (but not that which is not required) and takes account of changes to the programme. It also needs to reinforce key points communicated to learners (eg as part of the application or induction processes).

Avoiding duplication is important here also: collect information once (not several times in different guises) and use that data to the fullest. For one provider, a learner questionnaire completed by learners at interview was originally designed to evaluate the quality of information received by interviewees prior to and during the interview. It has also proved to be useful to interviewers as a means of ensuring that they have conveyed the required information during the interview. They use it to check that the applicant has received the correct information to allow them to make an informed decision on their choice of programme.

Several providers enhanced the literature to maximise its impact and value. This included, for example, initial publicity about the programme, information given at interview and as part of initial assessment as well as information provided as learners entered the workplace.

One provider reviewed its publicity to ensure that it provided an accurate view of what was offered, thereby enabling applicants to make better judgements about whether or not the programme(s) in question suited them. Current learners were consulted about the content and design of posters and leaflets and their ideas were incorporated into the design of the literature. All interviewees were asked to complete a questionnaire about the quality/coverage of information they received prior to and during their interview. The interviewers used the completed questionnaires to identify the applicant's information needs (see Figure 1).

## Figure 1 Interview questionnaire

**Please complete this before your interview.**

---

Name

---

**Please tick the appropriate box or boxes**

How did you hear about the [training company]?

- |                                 |                                     |   |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friend | <input type="checkbox"/> Connexions | <input type="checkbox"/> Leaflet          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> School | <input type="checkbox"/> Poster     | <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper advert |

---

What information have you seen about learning programmes at [training company]?

- |   |   |                                  |
|---|---|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poster               | <input type="checkbox"/> Programme Information Sheet  | <input type="checkbox"/> Website |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leaflet              | <input type="checkbox"/> Learning Provider Prospectus |                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other – please state | -----   |                                  |

---

Have you received guidance from Connexions?

- |                              |                             |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

---

At this stage are you sure about the learning programme you want to do?

- |                              |                             |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

---

Has the information you have received so far been enough to help your decision making?

- |                              |                             |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

---

If you answered 'No' to the last question, tick the boxes where you feel you need more information.

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Learning Allowance   | <input type="checkbox"/> Awarding Bodies                | <input type="checkbox"/> Help with travel<br>and child-care costs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Placements           | <input type="checkbox"/> Qualifications                 |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day-release          | <input type="checkbox"/> Content of learning programmes | <input type="checkbox"/> What other support is available          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other – please state | -----   |   |

**STOP HERE and complete the rest after your interview.**

---

Now that you have been interviewed, do you feel you have received enough information to help you?

- |                              |                             |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

---

If you answered 'No' to the last question, what you would like to know more about?

---

Do you know what course you want to do?

- |                              |                             |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

---

**Thank you for your help!**

**Please give this to the person who has interviewed you.**

At another company, analysis of the retention and achievement data prompted the staff to totally revamp the induction and the early support mechanisms, and to measure what impact these changes had on retention and achievement. The company was delivering FMAs and AMAs in a variety of vocational areas, and discovered that the majority of their learners left within the first 3 months. By 2002/03 their systems had been in place for a few years and did not take into account the introduction of Key Skills 2000 and testing, nor the extra pressure that was involved for the learner, employer and assessor. The induction at that time was completed on the job.

Staff reviewed the materials used, explored how induction was delivered, the number of visits made and how (if at all) the employer was involved. The result of this investigation was an induction system delivered off the job.

The consequence of this evaluation was that the individual learning plan was totally changed. It was divided into three distinct sections. The first section held information regarding :

- employer details
- provider details
- initial assessment results
- methods used and details of support required
- employment, career and progression objectives
- support arrangements
- mentoring arrangements.

The second part provided an overview of the framework and included :

- details of training delivery, including induction and basic skills training
- NVQ units and training involved
- key skills units and training involved
- technical certificates (if applicable) and training involved
- any additional training
- planned attendance at workshops
- planned test dates
- details of progress reviews.

The third part recorded any agreed changes to the plan.

The rationale behind this approach was based on staff perception that the learner did not need the whole document : it was too large with too much information. Part two held the most important information for the learner : they were provided with a copy of this, allowing them to focus on what they needed to complete, how and when.

Learner feedback and the realisation that only well-informed learners could make the right choice about their training prompted another provider to improve the information exchange between learner and their staff. Specific information was created for every course the provider ran. On application / enquiry an information pack on the framework system and information about learner services were provided.

Successful applicants received a more comprehensive induction pack, which not only held all necessary forms but also provided them with information about all aspects of their training programme. During induction they received information about the company, the LSC, NVQs and how they work, health and safety policy, equal opportunities policy, grievance and complaints procedures, accident reporting procedure, NVQ portfolio building, unit accreditation and appeals procedure and key skills.

The member of staff doing the induction worked with the learner to maximise understanding of the information given. Feedback from learners on this process indicated that while the approach was working in general terms, particular attention needed to be given to those who had not adequately understood some of the information given.

The 'Learner Handbook' was revised in consultation with the learners, with a view to incorporating a more learner-friendly approach. It now covers the provider's mission statement, policies on equal opportunities, bullying and anti-harassment and health and safety, and disciplinary, grievance and appeals procedures as well as information about the qualifications and unit accreditation.

These strategies demonstrate the different approaches that can be adopted to ensure learners have to hand the information they are likely to need at any stage of the learning programme. Having access to and understanding this material will increase awareness of systems and procedures but will also serve to engender a sense of belonging and ownership.

## Motivating learners

Poorly motivated learners, for whom the goal of achieving an NVQ or FMA may seem a long way off, may also be more inclined to leave programmes early. Learners suffering from low self-esteem and lack of aspiration can benefit from participation in activities that increase their motivation and understanding of progression routes and career options. For example, one project approached the Army to illustrate to learners the range of careers open to them once they had achieved their FMA or AMA.

For another provider the strategy adopted aimed to increase progression from foundation level. Many of their learners were involved in petty crime, and making an alternative lifestyle appealing to these learners posed a considerable challenge. The provider therefore worked on a range of approaches to motivate learners and raise their aspirations.

The staff found that using pictorial displays appealed to those learners relating better to visual learning styles. Photos of previous learners who had progressed into employment or training were displayed and promoted as role models. Learners who had progressed had always been encouraged to return and let staff know how they were getting on – but now their return was encouraged more actively so that their experience could be used in a more focused way to encourage existing learners to stay on programme.

The organisation also worked with a range of external agencies (eg a local theatre group, Connexions) delivering workshops that aimed to stimulate debate about progressing on from the programme and how this could be achieved. This included discussion around topics such as:

- what they defined as success and how they could achieve this
- how positive steps could be made from negative experiences
- where they wanted to be in 5 years' time
- the benefits of particular outcomes
- how learners could achieve preferred options – and stay in these.

Placing greater emphasis on entering mainstream WBL (the NVQ route) as an option highlighted at an early stage in the learners' programme started to address their lack of understanding of the range of pathways available, and gave them a tangible goal to aim for.



## Improving support in the workplace

The first weeks of the work placement provide another point at which learners are likely to leave their programme. Increased support in the workplace was a recurrent theme among the projects. In many cases this was achieved through staff providing greater support to the learner and being much more proactive in finding out whether there were any problems. Providers typically increased the frequency of reviews in the first 3 months and sometimes longer, and made contact more often. They also sought to engage employers, increasing their understanding of the requirements of the programmes and the need for framework completion, promoting retention as a joint venture.

One provider aimed to increase employer engagement by enhancing the information provided to them but also clarifying each party's responsibilities. The provider realised that employers needed much more information on initial contact. An employer's handbook was produced detailing, for example, an introduction to apprenticeships and how the programmes are funded. It explains NVQs and key skills and the associated training, and provides information relating to the operation of the programme (ie covering assessor visits, off-the-job training, quarterly reviews, health and safety, hours of work, insurance etc).

The first meeting between the employer and assessor is used to identify elements of the training to be provided by each party and to complete the individual learning plan. The importance of the learner being given adequate time to complete the apprenticeship is stressed, as is the need for the provider to be able to access him / her on and off the shop floor. By the end of this initial meeting it is clear who is responsible for the various aspects of the programme. Joint planning was found to give greater coherence to the programme for the learners, as the on-the-job and off-the-job elements of the training dovetailed together. As a result the company noticed a marked improvement in the amount of support the learners and the assessors / tutors received from employers once they understood the complexities of the apprenticeship framework.

Poor retention, identified by inspection as a weakness, prompted an organisation operating nine training centres across a region to respond. Analysis of learner data indicated a peak in drop-out in the early stages of the work placement. The organisation decided to increase the level of support provided in the first 5 weeks of joining the programme. This involved visiting the workplace and implementing a new procedure, the 'Trainee Charter', which detailed the minimum level of support to be delivered. This involved a telephone call on the first day to check that there were no problems and visits within the second and fifth weeks in placement.

As well as supporting the learner in the workplace, staff were helped to develop their expertise in employer engagement and initial assessment. Between 2001/02 and 2002/03 the company managed to improve its overall retention rate by 6%.

## Workplace mentors and buddies

The benefits of mentoring in the workplace can include :

- more active engagement of the employer in developing the learner
- improved performance and progress through their programme
- where the mentor is vocationally knowledgeable and experienced the possibility of the role becoming that of coach as well as mentor (DfEE 2000b).

Insights into the different models of mentoring and buddying can be found in the ALI report *Successful learning at work: good practice in on-the-job learning and assessment* (ALI 2003b).

In relation to early drop-out, having workplace mentors in place when learners joined the company was seen as a way of :

- increasing support for learners at a key point where they might be more at risk of leaving
- ensuring there was somebody in a 'befriender' role on site, not responsible for assessing them, whom the learners could approach if a problem arose.

A provider offering training in retail and business administration identified significant differences in the drop-out rates between two of its sites. In analysing when the drop-out was occurring, it became clear that a significant number of their learners (29%) were leaving during the first few weeks of work experience. Some research was carried out with existing learners by inviting them to a lunchtime review where they were asked to discuss a number of questions (without the tutors there in case their presence influenced the responses) and report back their findings as a group.

The questions included :

- whether, by the end of induction, they knew what their learning needs were and what support was available to them
- if they knew who they could approach for help with a problem (including at the workplace) and whether they would do so

- what support they had received from the provider and employer that had helped them to succeed.

The results indicated that even the most confident learners felt lonely for the first few weeks on work placement and that many did not have a specific person at work whom they felt they could turn to for help. The organisation decided to :

- *arrange a workshop for their delivery team*, led by a staff member with 3 years of mentoring experience, to improve staff understanding of mentoring approaches and supporting workplace staff. The result of this was a common understanding of how support to employers' staff could be improved. The workshop also raised questions about how information could be provided more effectively to employers' staff.
- *identify workplace contacts* who were prepared to take on the role of mentor for 'at risk' learners. These people were briefed, where possible before the learners started their work experience. This mentor was also encouraged to seek help from the provider, for example when learners started to arrive late or did not attend or in identifying additional tasks for learners who were progressing quickly and were in danger of becoming bored. The provider was therefore alerted to potential difficulties early on.
- *introduce additional workplace visits* for those at risk of leaving. Weekly visits were established from the outset, and undertaken by the assessor or placement officer. Visits lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, with the mentor attending 90% of these meetings. The results were recorded on a site visit form, a copy of which was retained by the learner and mentor. Weekly visits were reduced to fortnightly visits as the learners gained in confidence and familiarity with the workplace.

Feedback gleaned by another provider, while investigating the reasons why apprentices left within the first 3 months of joining their programme, identified that the school / work transition seemed very daunting. The passage from the discipline and support at school to the 'work situation' and the responsibilities that held was too great for some. Unfamiliar with the provider's staff at the beginning of their programme, learners were too embarrassed to ask what they perceived were 'silly questions', so it was easier to leave. The company decided that trainees needed to have some sort of 'buddy' to help them through the difficult early months. Employers were asked to identify a peer in the workplace to support the apprentice and act as their mentor for the first 3 months. Buddies were asked to check regularly with learners that everything was all right and there were no problems. They also helped them learn new tasks, checked their understanding and offered support with early NVQ / key skills work.

Both parties were also given the mobile telephone number of the marketing manager, available to them until 8pm every evening, to give support and answer any questions they might have. Since the changes were introduced, apprentices have reported feeling secure and supported, increasing the likelihood of them remaining on programme.

## **Harnessing support from external agencies**

As well as tapping into others in the workplace or within the provider itself, support can also be elicited from external agencies to help keep learners on programme and achieve their programme aims.

One company was fortunate to have Connexions Personal Advisers (PAs) on site. The provider introduced a Connexions PA system to help their young learners to recognise and resolve issues with relationships or personal behaviour. The provider also ran a club with Connexions, with the aim of raising aspirations. The system is viewed as a success and has helped a number of young people in WBL to realise their potential.

Another provider piloted the use of an external agency – in this case a drug council – to provide a mentoring service for its learners. This was introduced to learners during the induction process with an ‘easy to read’ promotional leaflet to reinforce the messages from the session. Learners who were identified as being at risk were encouraged to use the service. The organisation found this approach to mentoring to be very successful, with learners who were likely to drop-out continuing on the programme.

## **Identifying and supporting ‘at risk’ learners**

### **Engaging staff**

Increasing staff understanding of reasons for withdrawal and engaging them proactively in working to reduce this are key to improving retention rates. In recognition of this a college changed its approach to working with its trainers. Previously there had been a reliance on correspondence with the trainers by memo and group meetings of the trainers. An important objective for the WBL manager was to work closely with each trainer to monitor any learner ‘in danger’ of early drop-out and where possible to put strategies in place to aid retention. The analyses of reasons for early drop-out were also examined.

*The top priority became to ensure each trainer felt ownership of every trainee, and understood the importance of retention and achievement. By instilling a sense of pride and ownership in each area, the trainers would then focus on the retention of each trainee.*

Fortnightly meetings were introduced with the manager and trainers, where retention became a regular agenda item. A master spreadsheet was used to record systematically the progress made by each trainee for each element of their framework. Actions were reviewed fortnightly. 'At risk' trainees and necessary actions were identified, and reasons for withdrawal reported on. Trainers have become much more focused on the retention and achievement of their trainees.

### **Processes for identifying 'at risk' learners**

Many providers have developed a process and associated documentation to identify learners at risk of leaving early. Some of this documentation enables risk-banding, which allows interventions to be prioritised. These forms (see Figure 2 on page 22) can be used as a tool to identify 'at risk' factors in recruitment or in the initial assessment process. The insights they generate into individual needs are important for staff and need to be shared with all those working with learners.

Others use 'cause for concern' forms as an aid to monitoring learner progress once in the workplace. These can be completed after each visit, reflecting the changing status of the trainee. Some use a traffic light coding system: red, amber and green to denote the extent to which there are important difficulties which need to be addressed.

Consistent recording and monitoring of issues can help to identify trends and highlight changes that need to be made to the programme. Figure 3 (page 23) is an example of a cause for concern form.

## Figure 2 Identifying 'at risk' learners

At interview, this 'getting to know you' checklist is used to record indicators of potential risk and to indicate learners who may benefit from more support early on the programme.

Name :

Centre :	Programme :	Start date :
<b>Interview questions</b>	<b>Risk indicators : enter H high or L low</b>	<b>High/low</b>
How long have you been interested in a career in this industry? Did you ask to do a course related to this industry?	Check motivation – drifting into industry or pressure to do 'something' or first choice of career	
How long does it take you to get to work each day?	Ascertain if distance and cost are disincentives	
Have you attended any courses before? If so which one and for how long?	Assess track record, interest levels and commitment	
Have you worked in any other full time employment since leaving school? If yes how many jobs and for how long?	Can indicate either lack of clear direction or confirmation of vocational interest – assess previous history and commitment	
What did you enjoy least at school?	Check if strengths / interests are mirrored in chosen programme	
Do you have a career aim in mind?	Look for confirmation or absence of vocational interest	
Do you have any friends who work here?	Ascertain level of induction and a buddy support required	
Is there any sort of extra support for learning you think you might need from us / your employer? Learning difficulty or disability, study support, literacy / numeracy	Gauge match between level of support likely to chosen programme	
Do you have any reservations at the moment about your course or work, and if so how could we help you?	Check interest is that of learner not due to external pressure eg parents	

**Figure 2 continued****Please complete this for each interviewee**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Endorsed for ALN/ASN              | <input type="checkbox"/> Referred from 'Alternative Curriculum' |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expected to get D or less at GCSE | <input type="checkbox"/> Referred from Lifeskills / E2E         |

---

 Motivation / behavioural issues
 

---



---

 Home / care issues
 

---



---

 Health issues
 

---



---

 Notes and issues to pick up at reviews :
 

---

**Figure 3 A cause for concern form**

Learner name :	Referred by :	Date :
----------------	---------------	--------

---

 Cause for concern :
 

---



---

 Work / action to undertake :
 

---

Referred to :	Project leader signature :	Date :
---------------	----------------------------	--------

---

A charity with a commitment to provide opportunities to learners at risk of being disenfranchised because of social or learning needs elected to introduce a more realistic assessment of learner needs with a view to improving their retention. The provider's 2001 Training Standards Council inspection had identified weaknesses in retention and it needed to address the problem of learners leaving the programme prior to completion. An improvement in achievement in hospitality programmes had been attributed to staff responding promptly to indications that learners might leave the programme. The same approach was adopted for learners in care and motor vehicle programmes who were in danger of leaving early. This approach involved:

- a weekly report of issues arising from learner reviews (which could identify trends)
- notification by assessors / trainers of any problems they were encountering with learners in their sector, especially relating to attendance
- a procedure for recording and tracking information consistently on a 'cause for concern' form (see Figure 3 on page 23), which could also be used as a tool to analyse findings
- an intervention mechanism, which ensured absent learners were followed up consistently.

The provider subsequently reviewed the provision of their underpinning learning and entered into a service level agreement with the local college. This new arrangement has reduced the time taken for learners to pass the knowledge elements and increased unit achievements. The recruitment process has been reviewed and several assessment stages included before learners engage on programmes. Initial assessment tools have been revised to produce a more realistic picture of the knowledge, understanding and capabilities of the prospective learner. At the end of the project there was evidence of a reduction in the early leaver rates from 40% to 18% in care, and from 18% to 5% in motor vehicle programmes.

'At risk' strategies are not without their problems. Providers need to be mindful that learners may be reluctant to disclose problems to an employer, trainer or assessor. They may also need space and time to raise issues of concern. The pressures of training and the workplace may also mean that time is not always available for general chats and discussions. One project found that early in a programme was an ideal time for learners to discuss any problems they had:



*We have also introduced a procedure in which all learners have a coffee and chat within three weeks of commencing on their course, with a member of staff, not their trainer, in order to ascertain if there are any problems, issues, or queries. These are conducted away from the employer's premises. We have found the discussions are working well as new learners are being absorbed into their group quicker.*

A group approach to addressing difficulties that arise can also offer the opportunity to draw upon a range of expertise.

One provider offering FMAs and AMAs in hairdressing tried to maximise retention and achievement by:

- engaging the employer more fully
- acknowledging learners' achievements
- setting clear targets for unit completion to take learners through the programme and give a sense of progress.

This was not sufficient. Personal or workplace problems could arise at any time, all of which needed to be addressed quickly to prevent learners from leaving. The provider therefore decided to set up:

- a process for identifying potential difficulties (eg in a review session or through a telephone call)
- documentation for recording any issues (the form used is Figure 4 below)
- an 'early leaver intervention group' to deal with each case weekly and to identify appropriate and effective action.

**Figure 4 Early leaver tracking form**

Learner name		Date of first indication of leaving
Brief details		Log updated
Dates learner visited / interviewed	Units completed to date	
Comments	Date discussed with MD	Outcome & date – off / on programme
Tutor	Signature	Date

The early leaver intervention group was tasked with identifying those learners at greatest risk of withdrawal and allocating the most appropriate staff member to support them. Actions and SMART targets were agreed by the group, and the situation was closely monitored through a weekly progress report back to the group. The effectiveness of the intervention was monitored and evaluated and changes made where necessary. The provider found this approach to be an effective and efficient way of decreasing drop-out.

New systems and databases can also be set up to track learners and provide information on learner progress and needs. A management information system was developed for one project ; this monitored early leavers and provided an analysis of leavers' data both for the organisation and LSC purposes. Information on starters and leavers was shared during the monthly staff meeting. Where possible problems with individual learners appeared to be developing, the management was fully informed and worked with the individual's assessor / trainer to give the learner the required support. The management information system was used to set and monitor targets for staff on progression and achievement for individual learners. Clear, achievable actions were agreed and monitored at subsequent staff meetings.

## Lessons learnt

### General pointers

Providers found that the involvement of learners was invaluable: in giving feedback, in suggesting alternative actions to improve retention and in helping to design new literature.

Trainers and assessors need to understand the importance of early retention and identifying learners likely to leave early in sufficient time to take preventative action – this may require staff training.

Where several staff may be involved in delivering WBL, the work needs to be adequately coordinated. Everyone needs to work together, understand each other's role and fulfil their own responsibilities, so that learners do not fall between systems, procedures and / or relationships.

Under taking adequate research into the causes of early drop-out is important for choosing the most appropriate and effective strategies. Segmenting the data in a range of ways can give valuable insights (ie by type of learner, workplace, assessor, site).

Reasons for withdrawal need to be collected from leavers in a timely way, preferably when they leave the programme. While providers may have procedures in place for collecting information on early withdrawal from those who decide to leave and notify them, cases where the learner just disappears prove more challenging. Projects found that following early leavers up after they had left tended to be unproductive: mobile telephone numbers had changed and there was little response to messages left. As one provider noted:

*We have learnt to be more systematic and analytical about collecting information about learners' needs and using it more strategically to ensure appropriate support is in place.*

*If a learner leaves without notice, as soon as no contact can be gained an interview form is despatched. It will be made clear to the learner that this form is to acknowledge the learner has left and gather useful information on the strengths and weaknesses of the company and training programme. We have found that this works well by contacting the learners as soon as possible after they have left their training programme. Leaving interviews provide far more information of a better quality than questionnaires and are essential to improving support.*

Providers are likely to find that a combination of strategies is the most effective way to meet all learners' needs – for example a mix of additional visits, workplace mentoring and enhancing the support skills of staff enabled one provider to retain six of its seven 'at risk' learners.

Most aspects of strategies used to improve retention and reduce early drop-out were readily transferable to other similar providers.

## Programme choice

Introductory courses and comprehensive induction processes, including a realistic experience of the workplace, can be effective in enabling staff and prospective learners to assess their suitability for their chosen vocational area and commitment to completing the programme, which in turn can reduce early drop-out.

## Initial assessment

All learners need to undertake initial assessment, including those recruited directly by companies. Providers need to work with employers so that all understand the initial assessment process being undertaken, and to avoid unnecessary repetition. The findings from any assessment need to be shared with all parties, including the employer, so that they can help the learner on their strengths and respond to any weaknesses.

There was evidence that a robust initial assessment can help reduce early drop-out.

Recruitment and initial assessment procedures need to be documented and followed consistently by staff. These should be monitored regularly.

The testing used needs to be appropriate for the learner.

Initial assessment needs to take account of the learner's preferences and the outcomes of this need to be understood and owned by the learner. A placement in the wrong work area can have a very detrimental effect on a new learner, as can a placement where the learner has been unrealistic about his or her own abilities and is aiming for skill levels that are unachievable or inappropriate.

An effective initial assessment process should identify learning support needs. Providers need to ensure that their learners can access adequate support quickly. Several staff may be involved in the process. A clear flowchart may be found to be useful in clarifying who is involved at each stage of the process and where information needs to be sent.

## 'At risk' learners

The identification of 'at risk' factors and risk-banding can assist providers in prioritising support. The process needs to be flexible enough to enable learners to move from one category to another as circumstances change.

While existing documentation used by other providers (or for example by other departments / areas of work) may offer ideas for suggesting 'at risk' criteria, factors affecting drop-out are likely to vary from one group to another, one occupational area to another and one programme to another. As a starting point, an analysis of the reasons for withdrawal from previous cohorts will provide useful data.

Obtaining the views of workplace staff on their learners' needs and progress achieved is important (together with information from visits made by the provider's staff / assessors) in deciding on the frequency of visits and monitoring of progress.

Providers need to be proactive, and identify potential problems and take corrective action quickly. A 'cause for concern' / 'expression of concern' form is an invaluable tool to highlight issues early on.

Individual strategies are needed to meet each learner's needs. In many cases there is value in putting staff time into more intensive support early on, which can be withdrawn gradually as the learner gains in confidence.

Learners need to feel that they belong: this encourages commitment and increases the likelihood that they will stay on programme and achieve.

Additional visits and extra contact time are often required to address difficulties effectively.

Staff working with learners who are at risk need a non-judgemental approach and to develop good counselling skills in order to give the right level of support. They need to be sensitive enough to pick up any hints that there could be something not quite right.

A 'working group' approach to addressing learners' problems works well as the group :

- has a range of experience to draw upon to identify the most appropriate strategy
- is able to choose the most appropriate person to implement the agreed intervention and work towards a resolution
- can support staff members having to address difficult issues.

## Reviewing publicity, information and learner documentation

Learners often have to assimilate a large amount of information about their programme at an early stage ; this information should be accessible and user-friendly.

Where learners are leaving because a programme is not meeting their expectations, it is useful to gather learners' perspectives on the publicity and literature being used and any changes which should be made to ensure that it :

- offers a more realistic picture
- includes the information needed by the applicant.

Reviewing documentation for learners to ensure that it is user-friendly with information clearly laid out can assist in increasing learner understanding. The apprentices should only keep the part that is relevant to them, so making the volume more manageable.

Information should be provided in bite-sized chunks in a timely way, with attention to the amount of complex information that can be absorbed at any one time. Where necessary :

- understanding and recollection should be checked subsequently
- key messages should be reinforced.

## Motivating learners

Strategies to increase learner motivation need to be linked to trends in drop-out and implemented early enough in the programme to make a difference.

Learners need to feel that they are making progress. Celebrating early success can be very motivating, particularly for those learners with little previous attainment.

It is useful to review the training programme to:

- ensure it is flexible enough for learners to feel that they are making progress
- include challenging and interesting activities at an early enough stage to encourage learners to continue (taking account of any peaks in drop-out).

## Support in the workplace

It is worth identifying those workplaces with a poor record of achievement and retention. Providers need to work with these employers to identify factors affecting withdrawal and help them improve their record. Providers may find it useful to identify those learners placed with these employees as potentially 'at risk'.

When assessing potential work placements, providers should be cautious about taking on employers whose principles and values are different from theirs.

Informing employers about all aspects of the apprenticeships and the importance of their input improves support to the learners / assessors / tutors in the majority of cases as they feel more involved and empowered. However, the complexity of the apprenticeship can make this a time-consuming process for all involved.

Where providers produce an employers' handbook this may remain with the main contact and not be known about or consulted by all those involved in supporting the learner. Providers may need to consider how they can supplement this with information directed specifically at supervisors, covering, for example, training and support arrangements.

Additional visits to the workplace in the early stages have proved successful in keeping learners on programmes. This extra support can be gradually withdrawn as the learner settles into the workplace.

If a learner is not making progress and is unhappy, the provider should investigate the learner's situation at the workplace.

Interventions need to be closely monitored and evaluated to assess whether or not they are making a difference.

Where learners are on work placement, off-the-job training where offered by the provider gives an opportunity to identify anything amiss. Briefing staff on what to look out for can also increase the likelihood of problems being picked up quickly.

## Mentoring and 'buddying'

Providers found that ensuring learners have access to someone they can relate to and with whom they can discuss their concerns was important in keeping them on a programme. This person could be a member of their own staff, a colleague in the workplace – or a 'mentor'.

Great care is needed in the choice of mentor: those involved need to be able to connect with the learner.

If an external agency is providing this service, staff likewise need to understand the type of learners they are trying to assist – their lifestyle or culture for example.

A 'buddying' system may not work where the learners do not have the maturity to befriend another person over a prolonged period of time and forget or become bored with the responsibility. The level of support learners need is a key factor in determining the most appropriate approach.



## The way forward

The experience of the case studies clearly demonstrates that critical success factors in preventing early drop-out include :

- ensuring that learners are placed on the correct programme
- ensuring that learners understand what the training programme involves and that they are adequately briefed about the work placement
- diagnosing the support needed for each individual and making arrangements to put this in place quickly (see Figure 5 on page 34)
- providing increased access to staff and additional support – particularly entry into the work placement
- more intensive monitoring of progress and learner satisfaction early on – and prompt intervention where necessary
- engaging employers to clarify their role and how they can support the process
- keeping the momentum going and ensuring early achievement.

The messages from the projects bear testament to the uncertainties and fears experienced by many young people in periods of transition, particularly when entering the workplace for the first time. There are also parallels with the findings from studies in further education (Martinez and Munday 1998) indicating that students are more likely to drop out if they find it difficult to make friends or settle in at the beginning of their course.

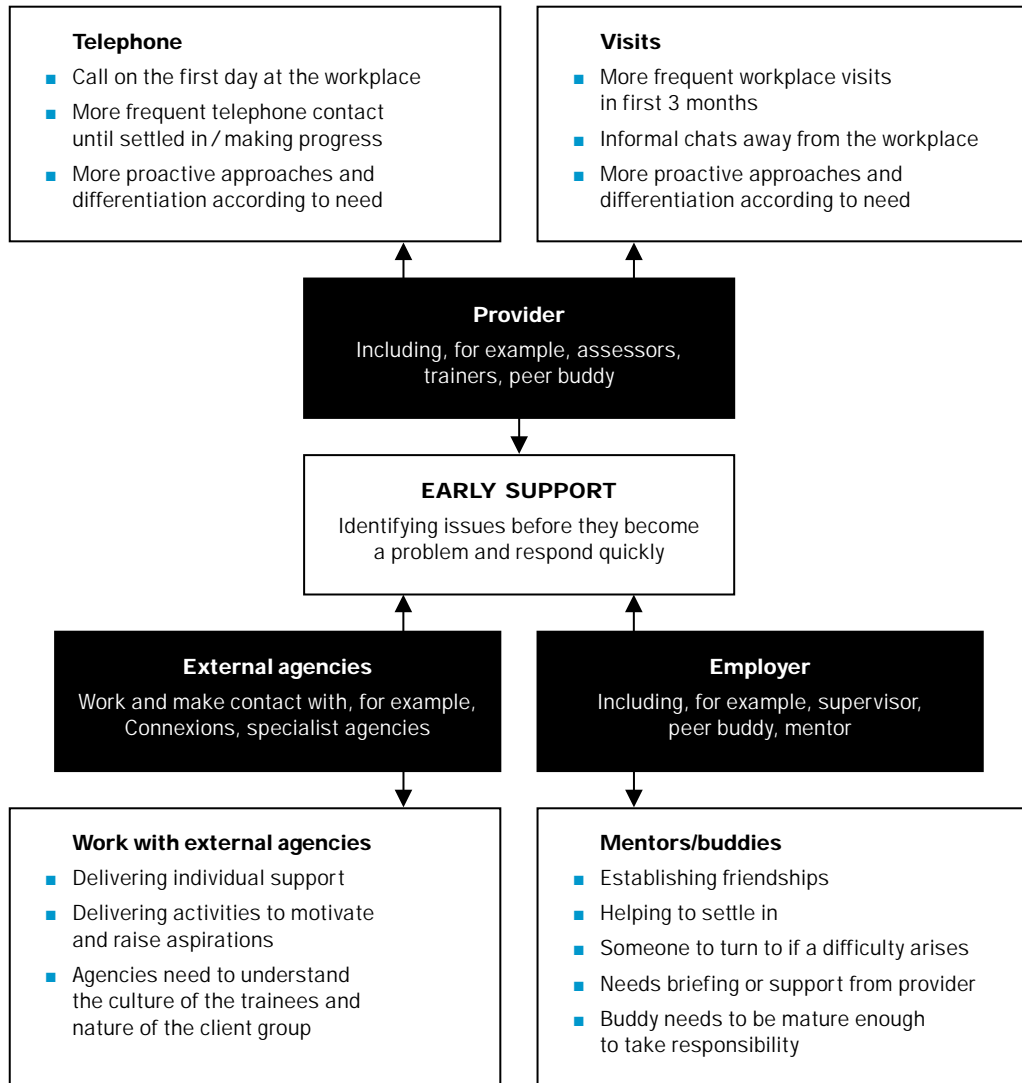
Much of the project work focused in some way on providing increased individualised support during a point of transition – whether it be :

- prior to signing onto a programme or entering into the workplace
- delivered by the provider, employer, mentor or specialist agency
- provided in the workplace, the provider's premises or elsewhere.

As one project holder commented :

*Increased support for apprentices was appreciated and regularly commented on. We feel that this is likely to be a key factor in any area where retention is a problem.*

**Figure 5 Providing additional support in the early stages of a programme**



Where strategies did not seem to be having an immediate impact in the first year of implementation, providers might undertake additional research to ascertain whether other changes needed to be made – and that the solution chosen was indeed addressing the problems identified. There was also a recognition, evidenced through monitoring, that implementation of new approaches could be patchy – and that procedures often needed longer than the timescale of the project to become properly embedded in organisational practice.

Providers have formulated plans to continue the work after the life of the project.

*The following points have recently been discussed and added to our company development plan:*

- *further awareness of the at risk strategy to involve all teams, ensuring good practice is disseminated across all our training programmes*
- *further development needs to take place for recording information about at risk learners throughout the life of their programme and how this can impact on retention rates*
- *reviewing whether at risk learners should be allocated to specific staff or whether better results can be achieved if all staff are involved.*

In his annual report (ALI 2003a) the ALI Chief Inspector observed that a third of providers did not use management information systems to identify trends in retention and achievement. Involvement in the project work did encourage providers to really look at their data in some depth. This prompted some to improve their approach to the collection and use of management information systems. Collecting feedback on reasons for withdrawal as, or immediately after, learners leave the programme, or segmenting quantitative retention data in different ways to identify the main factors affecting drop-out, were both changes being introduced as a result of the learning from the action research process.

A continuing area of difficulty relates to retention of information. Learners are having problems in retaining information regarding their programmes. They have difficulty understanding the frameworks and exactly what they have to do to complete. The main problem is the vast amount of complicated information an apprentice has to digest. Providers need to think creatively about how key messages can be reinforced (eg through presenting information in different ways, introducing drip feed approaches, quizzes to test retention, using CD-ROMs).

The past year has witnessed the raising of standards in the WBL sector. In 2001/02, 60% of WBL providers were deemed inadequate; this fell to 40% in the following year (ALI 2003a). Good retention and achievement rates were cited in the Chief Inspector's report as one of the features of strong providers – similarly poor retention and achievement were cited as a characteristic of weak(er) providers. Areas of weakness identified in the WBL sector report likely to affect early drop-out included:

- continuing inadequacy of initial assessment and of the use of results to inform learning plans
- lack of effective coordination of off-the-job and on-the-job training
- weaknesses in assessment practice and of reviews, including a lack of employer involvement in the latter. These processes are very important to give the learner a sense of progress, a key success criteria in retention.

There is still work to be done.

## References

- ALI (2002). *Annual report of the Chief Inspector 2001–02*. Adult Learning Inspectorate. At [www.ali.gov.uk/ciar0102/info.htm](http://www.ali.gov.uk/ciar0102/info.htm), accessed 20 January 2004.
- ALI (2003a). *ALI Chief Inspector's annual report 2002–03*. Adult Learning Inspectorate. At [www.ali.gov.uk/ciar0203/ria/entry/01.htm](http://www.ali.gov.uk/ciar0203/ria/entry/01.htm), accessed 12 January 2004.
- ALI (2003b). *Successful learning at work: good practice in on-the-job learning and assessment*. Adult Learning Inspectorate. At [www.ali.gov.uk/survey2/htm/03/03.01.htm](http://www.ali.gov.uk/survey2/htm/03/03.01.htm), accessed 20 January 2004.
- ALI (2003c). *Starting points: initial assessment in adult learning*. Adult Learning Inspectorate. At [www.ali.gov.uk/survey/htm/03/03.01.htm](http://www.ali.gov.uk/survey/htm/03/03.01.htm), accessed 20 January 2004.
- Barker P (2003). *Learner guidance and support: the models used and how staff view their effects on retention*. Learning and Skills Development Agency. At [www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/RPM426dRF1.pdf](http://www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/RPM426dRF1.pdf), accessed 23 January 2004.
- Cohen L, Manion L, Morrison K (2000). *Research methods in education*, 5th ed. London, New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- DfEE (2000a). *Mentoring for work based training*. QPID Study Report No. 81. Department for Education and Employment. At [www.dfes.gov.uk/studynet/study81.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/studynet/study81.pdf), accessed 23 January 2004.
- DfEE (2000b). *Modern Apprenticeships – exploring the reasons for non-completion in five sectors*. Research Brief 217. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- DfEE (2001). *TEC/CCTE delivered government supported training: work-based training for young people and work-based learning for adults: volumes and outcomes*. SFR 10/2001. Department for Education and Employment. At [www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000241/sfr10-2001.doc](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000241/sfr10-2001.doc), accessed 10 February 2004.
- Green M (2003). *Improving initial assessment in work-based learning*. Learning and Skills Development Agency. At [www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/ISBN1853388408.pdf](http://www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/ISBN1853388408.pdf), accessed 23 January 2003.

Hughes M (2002). *Making the grade: a report on standards in work-based learning for young people*. Learning and Skills Development Agency. At [www.LSDA.org.uk/files/PDF/R1318.pdf](http://www.LSDA.org.uk/files/PDF/R1318.pdf), accessed 12 January 2004.

LSC (2004). *Coherent information, advice and guidance (IAG) services for adults*. Learning and Skills Council. At [www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/ek2wjdbhwmhldppodo7be5uom5z2re3ecrx7mi57tdlcs3qoyyb3ci4lactlxwbfiihqwxnjmc3c/IAGStrategy30d.pdf](http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/ek2wjdbhwmhldppodo7be5uom5z2re3ecrx7mi57tdlcs3qoyyb3ci4lactlxwbfiihqwxnjmc3c/IAGStrategy30d.pdf), accessed 20 January 2004.

Martinez P (2001). *Improving student retention and achievement: what do we know and what do we need to find out?* Learning and Skills Development Agency. At [www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/A1195.pdf](http://www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/A1195.pdf), accessed 23 January 2004.

Martinez P, Hughes M (2003). *Improving retention and achievement in work based training*. Learning and Skills Development Agency. At [www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/RPM460RF1.pdf](http://www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/RPM460RF1.pdf), accessed 23 January 2004.

Martinez P, Munday F (1998). *9,000 voices: student persistence and drop-out in further education*. Further Education Development Agency. At [www.LSDA.org.uk/files/PDF/ISSN14607034-3.pdf](http://www.LSDA.org.uk/files/PDF/ISSN14607034-3.pdf), accessed 23 January 2004.

Maynard J, Smith V (2004). *Practical ways of improving success in Modern Apprenticeships*. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

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

Smith V (2004). *Pushing back the boundaries: stakeholder involvement in work-based learning*. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Smith V, Hughes M (2003). *Making the difference: provider support for learner retention and achievement in work-based learning*. Learning and Skills Development Agency. At [www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/1392.pdf](http://www.LSDA.org.uk/files/pdf/1392.pdf), accessed 23 January 2004.

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

Thornhill P (2001). *A study into reasons for younger worker drop-out from full NVQs /NVQ units*. DfES Research Brief No. 298, Department for Education and Skills. At [www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB298.doc](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB298.doc), accessed 20 January 2004.

## Appendix 1 Case study organisations contributing to this report

The case studies undertaken as part of these action research projects can be found on the Support for Success website:

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=page&page=home&id=3](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=page&page=home&id=3)

Links are provided below for the projects that informed this publication:

Alder Training Ltd

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=447](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=447)

Barnardo's

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=462](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=462)

Barnardo's Palmersville Training

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=450](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=450)

Bridgwater College

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=465](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=465)

Cannock Chase Technical College

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=453](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=453)

Chamber Training (Humber) Ltd

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=454](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=454)

CMS Vocational Training Ltd

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=456](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=456)

CTS Training

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=459](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=459)

Durham Training Academy

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=463](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=463)

Headjogs

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=470](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=470)

Independent Training Services

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=472](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=472)

M.E.A.T. (Ipswich) Ltd

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=479](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=479)

North East Chamber of Commerce, Trade and Industry

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=483](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=483)

North West Training Council

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=484](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=484)

Plymouth College of Further Education

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=486](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=486)

Rapido Training

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=490](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=490)

Skill Training Ltd

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=496](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=496)

YMCA Training

[www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=510](http://www.s4s.org.uk/index.php?mod=research&page=details&id=510)



## Appendix 2 Learner self-appraisal forms

### Self-appraisal trial programme : week 2

We have developed a detailed tracking and achievement record with the aim of helping you (the learner) review and discuss your progress. It will allow you to identify what you need to do to take on more responsibility for your learning. You will need to look at your attendance, hours of independent study and your relationship with your employer.

Your views are vital to help us improve our service to you.  
All of the information is confidential.

**Please complete this questionnaire and return it to your assessor.**

---

Your name : \_\_\_\_\_ Course : \_\_\_\_\_ Date : \_\_\_\_\_

---

Is the course work easy to understand?

- Yes                                      Comments  
 No  
 n/a
- 

Have we been helpful and friendly?

- Yes, helpful                               Yes, friendly                              Comments  
 No, not helpful                               No, not friendly  
 n/a     n/a
- 

Do you feel comfortable with the other learners you are training with?

- Yes    Comments  
 No  
 n/a
- 

Do you find you have enough support for off-the-job training / learning?

- Yes    Comments  
 No  
 Don't know
- 

Is your journey to and from work straightforward?

- Yes    Comments  
 No
- 

Are you finding time for any home study?

- Yes    If no, please state reasons  
 No    Other comments
- 

**If there is anything else you would like to suggest or discuss please use this space :**

---

**Thank you for completing the 1st of 3 questionnaires you will be receiving for your self-appraisal. Please hand this in to your assessor.**

## Self-appraisal trial programme : week 4

**This is the second of three forms you will be asked to complete during your self-appraisal. Please complete this questionnaire and return it to your assessor.**

Your views are vital to help us improve our service to you.  
All of the information is confidential.

---

Your name : Course : Date :

---

Name of assessor : Placement :

---

Do you find your placement easy to get to?

- Yes Comments  
 No  
 n/a

---

How are you finding you work placement duties ?

---

Do you have good attendance at work ? ie are you often late or off sick?

- Yes Comments  
 No  
 n/a

---

Does the pay you receive motivate you to continue on the training programme ?

- Yes Comments  
 No  
 n/a

---

How do you get on with your colleagues at work ?

---

Do you feel you have support with your development at work?

- Yes If no, please state reasons  
 No Other comments

---

**If there is anything else you would like to suggest or discuss please use this space :**

---

**Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please hand it in to your assessor.**

## Self-appraisal trial programme : week 6

**This is the third of three forms you will be asked to complete during your self-appraisal. Please complete this questionnaire and return it to your assessor.**

Your views are vital to help us improve our service to you.  
All of the information is confidential.

---

Your name : \_\_\_\_\_ Course : \_\_\_\_\_ Date : \_\_\_\_\_

---

Name of assessor : \_\_\_\_\_ Placement : \_\_\_\_\_

---

Has your attitude changed to your learning? (please explain your answer)

- Yes                      Comments  
 No  
 Don't know

---

Have your thoughts changed towards your working involvement with your employer?  
(please explain your answer)

- Yes                      Comments  
 No  
 Don't know

---

Has the 6 weeks trial course met your expectations? ie participation on the programme?  
(please explain your answer)

- Yes                      Comments  
 No  
 Don't know

---

Do you understand the commitment required to achieving a qualification?  
(please explain your answer)

- Yes                      Comments  
 No  
 Don't know

---

Have you found any difficulties or barriers in participating in your training?

- Yes                      Comments  
 No  
 Don't know

---

**If there is anything else you would like to suggest or discuss please use this space :**

---

**Thank you once again for your time in completing these questionnaires.  
They will help us to assist you in addressing the service of training we offer you.  
Your assessor will provide you with feedback from the questionnaires you completed.**