

“It should always be available”:
Recognising Achievement and
Accreditation in the Adult and Community
Learning Fund

Executive Summary

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Project rationale

On behalf of the Department for Education and Skills NIACE commissioned NOCN to examine the role of accreditation in recognising achievement in NIACE managed Adult and Community Learning Fund projects. NIACE recognised that OCN accreditation appeared to play a significant role in many of its DfES funded ACLF projects, although other awarding bodies had also played a part. NIACE was also aware that many projects recognise and record the learning gains of individuals and groups using internal processes.

The primary source of data for this study was information collected by NIACE for the purposes of selecting ACLF project proposals, and monitoring and supporting their development and effectiveness. Analysis of this data was followed by selected visits and interviews with individual project representatives.

NIACE sought indications of the range and spread of accreditation¹ and non-accreditation across the six rounds of funded projects. A steering group was formed, comprising staff from NIACE and NOCN, to oversee and direct the research. A methodology was devised to develop analysis and provide insights into what providers and learners felt about different ways of identifying learning gains. NIACE anticipated that this study would:

- Contribute additional knowledge and insight into the recognition of achievement.
- Be complementary to other research conducted by both NIACE and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA).
- Inform and influence future Adult and Community Learning (ACL) practice and policy.

This study set out to discover the views of ACLF-supported project managers, tutors, learners and others concerning accreditation, and to find out where and how accreditation had, or had not, been used in recognising achievement.

The **AIMS** of the project were agreed by the steering group as:

- The identification of the range and types of accreditation in ACLF projects.
- The identification of how achievement has been recognised, measured and recorded in both accredited and non-accredited learning.
- The identification of the value to learners and practitioners of accredited or non-accredited learning in ACLF projects.

The following **OBJECTIVES** of the project were agreed by the steering group:

- To survey literature to identify the incidence and nature of accreditation in ACL.
- To survey the ACLF files to identify how accreditation was used in ACLF projects.
- To carry out interviews with a small number of both accredited and non-accredited projects to create illustrative case studies.
- To synthesise the findings and offer analysis of the role and value of different methods identified.

¹ Definitions appear on page 3.

Method

The methods used to attempt to identify the range and spread of accreditation and non-accreditation, as well as examine some of the key issues, included a survey of a 100 randomly selected ACLF project files. The desk-based research was completed by selecting 50 of the 100 project files for more detailed examination. The 50 project files reflected the pattern of distribution found in the random selection of 100 project files. These 50 project files were analysed for significant themes and issues. A brief literature search was also conducted.

Of the 50 files, 10 projects were selected for further case study. Visits to the projects were made and interviews held with project coordinators and learners wherever possible. The resulting data was analysed for key messages.

Definitions used for this study

Accreditation (of learning achievement or 'gain'): recognition of learning achievement which leads to the award of a certificate by an external accreditation or awarding body (e.g. An Open College Network, National Open College Network, City and Guilds)

Non-accreditation (of learning achievement or 'gain'): learning which does not lead to recognition of learning achievement by an external accreditation or awarding body

A qualification: A specification accredited into the National Qualifications Framework, which can demonstrate that it meets the appropriate criteria and codes of practice set by the regulatory authorities. It can only be offered by an Awarding Body accredited by the regulatory authorities, or by a Higher Education Institution.

Key messages emerging from the research project

Adult and Community Learning Fund and recognition of achievement

The emergence of ACLF in 1998, in the wake of *The Learning Age*² and *Learning Works*³ offered the possibility of securing funding for community projects that recognised the centrality of learning in fostering 'participation and citizenship' in communities. There was no obligation upon those proposing projects to use accreditation to recognise achievement. Key aims of the Fund were that ACLF projects would be innovative, sustainable and able to build effective learning partnerships.

ACLF projects have contributed to a debate about how learning achievements could and should be valued, recognised and funded, as well as which learning achievements should count⁴, whatever the system of recognition. These issues are central in current debates about adult learning. The ACLF ended in March 2004.

Accreditation or...?

This research found that projects were often influenced by a combination of factors in making a judgement about whether or not accreditation was appropriate for learners.

(i) Protecting learners

Tutors/practitioners often wished to protect groups of new learners from formal means of monitoring and evaluation, which they judged to be off-putting.

(ii) Accreditation may limit the learning experience

Accreditation was perceived by some learners and their tutors to be limited to 'a course', or they held a view that formal assessment procedures might be too restrictive, diversionary, or difficult for learners to manage. They felt what was needed was a less threatening, more learner-focussed approach to recognising learning gain, whether or not that recognition lead to accreditation. Some tutors and learners appeared to feel that accredited programmes restricted the choice of learning activities.

The study identified that there were other approaches to assessment that 'go with the grain' of learner experience, which assessed achievements that learners felt were important, in a way (and in a place and time) that celebrated learners' newly acquired capabilities. Both prescriptive and responsive approaches to accreditation appear in this research report.

² Launched in *The Learning Age: a renaissance for new Britain*, DfEE, 1998

³ Kennedy, H. *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*, FEFC, 1997

⁴ *ibid.* Kennedy, H. *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*, FEFC, 1997
"It should always be available": recognising achievement and accreditation in the adult and community learning fund. Executive Summary.

(iii) All learners follow the same route

Another perception held by some tutors was that accreditation drives all learners down the same path, at the same speed, at the same time. This may be due to the way some tutors and learners interpreted awarding body requirements. The subtleties of success for an individual or project may be lost if the accreditation process fails to capture smaller incremental and less obvious successes. But we found that not all accreditation had to be offered at the same level, or had to follow a prescribed route, and learners could achieve at different rates over time. We would suggest that systems of accreditation are better challenged than avoided, in seeking confirmation of value for learners.

Recognition for whose achievement?

The concern of Turner and Watters (*ibid.*), to ensure that non-accredited learning achievements have 'recognition and confirmation of value', appears to be a legitimate one, but for whom: the learner, or the funder? Tyers and Aston expressed a view in relation to accreditation that 'some form of monitoring information is necessary to ensure that resources are being allocated appropriately'⁵. However, in such a situation, provider achievements are the subject of scrutiny, not the learners'. There may be a tension between these different demands for recognition of achievement, as all stakeholders have an interest in knowing how (and if) progress is being made, but perhaps not always for the same reason.

Our study revealed the different demands on stakeholders to prove the value of their provision or learning experience. Learners appeared to have clear views about the value, or otherwise, of external recognition of their achievements. Project managers, positioned between learners and paymasters, were pulled in different directions by the demand for confirmation or recognition of achievement.

Interviews with ACLF project managers revealed that whether or not learning led to accreditation, there was pressure on projects to demonstrate progress and achievement for the organisation, as much as for individual learners, emanating perhaps from our audit-driven 'performance tables' culture.

The demand for recognition of achievement from the learner is not necessarily at odds with the demand for quality assurance and value for money from the funder. There can be a conflict and tension however, when the 'what and how' of the measurement of achievement skews the learner's experience of recognition, or merely omits recognition of those achievements the learner considers most important.

The tension between these different drivers for accreditation emerged in case study interviews. The research found that it is possible to recognise achievements in a way that responds to learners' priorities and, at the same time, offer external quality assurance of the provision of that learning.

⁵ Tyers C. and Aston J. *Impact on the Adult and Community Learning Fund*, The Institute for Employment Studies, 2002.

"It should always be available": recognising achievement and accreditation in the adult and community learning fund. Executive Summary.

Recognising soft outcomes

We found that the focus of accreditation need not be solely on the acquisition of 'hard' skills and knowledge. Some ACLF projects in the study showed that it was possible to recognise those 'soft outcomes' related to personal growth and development associated with participation in learning experiences. Our study also showed it was possible to recognise learning achievements that emerged from community or collective activity, where learning was viewed as instrumental to success, but was not its main purpose. How much the decision to offer accreditation for the achievement of 'soft outcomes' is influenced by the relative value placed on such achievements by the funder, is a point for further debate.

Accreditation and decision-making

There was little evidence of provider consultation with learners over accreditation. Provider decisions were not necessarily justified or explained. Decisions appeared to be made at an early stage with little room for further negotiation with learners. The study revealed that in some instances a project's predictions about what learners wanted was different from what learners indicated they would like. Decisions about the type of accreditation offer made by projects appeared in some instances to be strongly influenced by college partners or franchise arrangements.

Some organisations were able to use NVOs and supplement them with OCN accreditation, in order to make a more flexible offer to learners.

Learners involved in the study expressed the view that accreditation should always be available, but it should be left to learners to decide whether or not to take up accreditation. Older learners interviewed shared this view. A range of opportunities to gain qualifications, accreditation or recognition of own learning goals was felt by learners to be important. Some ACLF projects were able to offer the kind of accreditation that learners said they wanted, and were able to do so in an innovative and exemplary manner.

Conclusions and Recommendations

These conclusions and recommendations are offered to those engaged in funding, developing, managing and participating in community projects.

This will include those responsible for determining and managing the successor to the Adult and Community Learning Fund, as well as a range of other support programmes designed to achieve similar objectives in each of the UK countries.

We concluded that project managers, tutors/practitioners were not always free or able to offer the kind of accreditation that learners on ACLF projects would have wanted. The reasons for this we believe were complex and interrelated. ACLF projects may in some instances have lacked the capacity to deliver conventional 'learning programmes' or meet awarding body assessment and quality assurance requirements. We found that learning achievements on ACLF projects were not always easy to capture and assess; the nature of such achievements may be unpredictable, and not easily recorded or authenticated. Accreditation of such achievements would be a challenge for even the most experienced education

provider. Some ACLF projects were able to meet this challenge, involving learners in all levels of decision-making, employing experienced staff, confident in their knowledge and experience of accreditation, and well supported by 'mainstream' education provider partners and the awarding bodies. Such projects should be recognised as exemplars to all.

Despite being subject to regulation, awarding body systems do need to adapt more closely to the demands of providers and learners. Streamlining accreditation processes and the introduction of a credit framework for recognising all achievements are hopefully on their way, and will help. However significant awarding body time and resources were needed where 'tailor-made' accredited programmes were developed for ACLF projects.

Recommendations	
Accreditation and decision-making	Accreditation should always be available, but it should be left to learners to decide whether or not to take it up.
Further research	<p>Further research should examine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ways in which adult learners' active involvement in decision-making about learning and accreditation impacts on participation and progression. • the range of influences affecting accreditation decisions in adult learning, and any impact on curriculum and consequences for adult participation and progression. • successful approaches to recognising learning achievements that emerge from community or collective activity, especially where learning is not considered the primary project objective • the value to adult learners of accrediting 'soft outcomes' related to personal growth and development and any impact on personal and or educational progression.
Awarding body systems	<p>Awarding bodies should examine ways of streamlining and improving their accreditation processes, and reducing bureaucracy.</p> <p>Awarding bodies should examine successful ACLF examples of recognising small steps of achievement, which can be used to contribute towards the formal award of credit.</p>
Access to Credit Frameworks	Community projects should have access to emerging credit frameworks for recognising achievement and be able to influence their shape, content and application in community settings.
Capacity building	<p>Strategies for involving the voluntary and community sectors more centrally in planning learning provision need to address the lack of capacity in the VCS to design and deliver suitable accredited learning programmes.</p> <p>Steps should be taken to improve the capacity of VCS projects to design learning programmes, undertake assessment and quality assurance, and improve the quality of accredited learning provision.</p>

Further Information

The Executive Summary and the Final Report are downloadable at the following website addresses:

www.niace.org.uk/funds/aclf/reports.htm

www.dfes.gsi.gov.uk

www.nocn.ac.uk

To receive a copy of the Final Report please contact the ACLF Team, NIACE, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester, LE1 7GE. Telephone: 0116 204 4200 Email: sarah.wright@niace.org.uk

For information about NIACE supported projects or areas of interest, visit the NIACE website www.niace.org.uk/aclf or contact Sarah Wright (ACLF Administrator) on 0116 204 4218 or sarah.wright@niace.org.uk

The NIACE website gives information about current funding opportunities for adult learning. The DfES website has information about ACLF and other adult education activities at

www.dfes.gov.uk or www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/aclf

The Local Learning and Skills Councils can advise community-based projects on funding. In many cases, LSCs can provide funding for local initiatives where these fit with LSC objectives. You can visit the Learning and Skills Council website at www.lsc.gov.uk or contact the helpline on 0870 900 6800 or email info@lsc.gov.uk