

Widening adult participation in learning

A systematic review of strategies

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**research
report**

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Executive summary

Background

Widening participation has a key role to play in ensuring that learners of all ages and backgrounds are able to realise their potential, improve their life chances and contribute to economic growth.

The Learning and Skills Council's (LSC's) strategy on widening adult participation emphasised the importance of having the best evidence on which to develop policy on widening participation.¹ Although there is some research evidence on 'what works' it has not been synthesised and therefore we do not always know what we know. To address these gaps in our knowledge, the LSC commissioned a systematic review of academic research on widening participation. This review was conducted using the methodology developed by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre), and hereafter is referred to as the EPPI review.

The EPPI review identifies and analyses relevant UK and international evidence on widening adult participation strategies. It covers a wide range of aspects of the widening participation process, from strategies for successful outreach and engagement, to interventions designed to promote retention, success and progression, including cross-disciplinary interventions and those which may not be primarily education-led.

In so doing, the review identifies from research the strategies which appear to be successful, or which are likely to be successful, in widening adult participation. It also highlights implications for policy-makers, planners and managers in provider organisations.

The LSDA hopes that the review will contribute to the success of the government's policy programmes to improve the quality of further education, and deliver skills for economic growth and social cohesion. It is also hoped that the review will promote action based on an improved understanding of the strategies and approaches that are effective in engaging and retaining adult learners, and in helping them to achieve success in learning.

Key findings

The EPPI review highlighted a number of themes which recur in the strategies that offer 'compelling' evidence of what may be effective in widening adult participation. The research team was aware at the outset of the EPPI review that the volume of robust outcome evaluation studies in this area was likely to be low. The review therefore attempted to include not just evidence shown to be methodologically rigorous enough to meet the high standards set by the EPPI centre, but also evidence which appeared compelling – as judged by the reviewers, based on their knowledge and experience in this area of research – with the intention of offering some useful evidence likely to assist those who plan and organise widening participation interventions.

¹ Learning and Skills Council (2003) *Successful Participation for All: Widening adult participation strategy*. Coventry: Learning and Skills Council.
<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/e3oerofnvcrewrwbwhm6nxh7xaifqgqzrwzzftuguti7xs3xkfpniomddw22sv2sovjintb2I4orw3h/WParticipation.doc>

The recurring themes include:

- making available sufficient, suitable resources including quality support services
- making effective use of resources and good management of interventions
- finding suitable ways to measure learning gains
- listening to learners, responding to feedback, encouraging realistic expectations about what learning programmes offer
- identifying and taking steps to break down barriers to learning
- creating flexible and tailored delivery and support
- using networking and partnership, including the use of intermediary organisations.

These themes have been derived from strategies which have been grouped under three main stages of intervention to widen participation. The review suggests that there is compelling evidence that the following strategies appear to widen participation.

Outreach, targeting and engagement

Evidence from studies suggests that strategies which appear to widen participation at this stage share some of the following elements:

- The presence of initiatives within the community through outreach work, and more specifically, person-to-person recruitment (word of mouth), is more likely to attract potential learners from minority communities.
- Tailored flexible support and provision which is responsive to individual learner needs is more likely to engage hard-to-reach learners. Such support and provision can be created through networking and partnerships between key organisations.
- A sound understanding of the needs of the target group, and clarity about what the provider is able to offer, can pre-empt disengagement. Additionally, funding projects to target the needs of certain hard-to-reach groups can be successful in engaging learners from these groups.
- Catalysts, such as intermediary bodies (eg the Basic Skills Agency and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) or trade unions, can play a key role in engaging new learners, through developing effective partnerships with community-based organisations and employers.

Participation and retention

Strategies which appear to widen participation at this stage have some of the following themes in common:

- A shared understanding between learners, learning providers and employers about what motivates learners, and the key barriers learners face in accessing learning opportunities,

can be used to create responsive learning opportunities and shape learning provision to encourage participation and retention.

- The suitability of the design of a learning programme, its delivery method, and the nature of support offered, to the needs of the learners can help to enhance learner participation and retention. The characteristics of the staff delivering the programme (especially their experience and knowledge of the target community) also play an important part.
- The provision of funding which can be used flexibly to support additional costs incurred by learning providers can help to set up and sustain innovative learning provision for hard-to-reach groups.
- Sustained attendance in a learning programme appears to depend on the appropriate level of support available to learners, in accordance with their needs, during the early stages after enrolment, and the efforts made by the providers to link the learning programme to outcomes desired by the learner.

Achievement and progression

Strategies which appear to widen participation during this stage have some of the following features in common:

- Tailoring learning programmes which address learners' desired outcomes, skilled trainers, clarity about the expectations of the learners and the extent to which they can be met by the learning programme, together with appropriate and sensitive assessment of progress, can help learners to achieve accreditation, progress to suitable employment or other learning programmes.
- A high level of learner support – especially to those from hard-to-reach groups – can aid participation.
- Skilled and experienced staff in the provider organisation, effective networking and collaboration between learning providers and local agencies to improve learning pathways and support progression, can all contribute to positive outcomes for learners.
- Embedding or tailoring basic skills training to the needs of employers and employees in workforce development programmes can lead not just to improvements in learners' self-confidence and self-image, but also to improving the quality of their work, and their economic position.
- Well-targeted information, advice and guidance (IAG) services have a useful role to play in the planning of learning provision and progression, both in the community and workplace settings, and in identifying smaller steps which learners can take to gain confidence and achieve substantial and measurable progress.

The strategies described above come from studies which offer what might be described as compelling evidence rather than reliable proof of effectiveness in widening participation. In a number of cases, well-executed studies fell short of the EPPI-centre's reporting requirements, which favour more detailed descriptions of method. These studies may have been examples of 'near-market' research, which gave priority to the reporting of conclusions and implications for policy or practice, rather than detailed methodology. There are also rigorous criteria governing what can be considered an evaluation for the purposes of an EPPI review. In some cases, evaluation was not the primary purpose of the study and, thus, some may have been marked down because they do not provide sufficient evidence of impact.

The authors of this report believe that a number of the studies do, however, offer compelling evidence of effective strategies to widen participation, even though they may not meet the robust reporting requirements of the EPPI review process, and have identified them as such in this report.

The EPPI review has also been instrumental in helping us to identify some of the gaps that exist in our knowledge base, regarding the strategies that have been reliably proven to widen participation in learning by adults with traditionally low participation. Some key questions which need to be addressed via a robust evidence base include:

- What works in motivating adult learners to engage and participate in learning?
- What works in sustaining attendance in a learning programme – the role support plays and what is ‘appropriate’ support?
- What works in creating and sustaining a partnership approach to widening participation in the learning and skills sector; and what types of partnerships work best in different contexts?

Implications

National and local LSCs may wish to consider:

- how best to work with providers to increase the flexibility and tailoring of provision and support
- how to adequately fund and resource interventions to widen adult participation
- how to ensure the effective management of interventions to widen participation
- how best to incorporate widening adult participation strategies into workforce development programmes and to tailor them to the needs of employees and the workplace
- the importance of piloting interventions to widen adult participation, coupled with evaluation strategies that enable impact to be measured with confidence.

Learning providers may wish to consider:

- how providers can increase flexibility and tailoring of provision and support, including provision tailored to workplace requirements
- steps that need to be taken to ensure the effective management of interventions to widen participation.

The **research community** may wish to consider how to:

- ensure that research methods, recording and reporting arrangements are robust enough to yield evaluation evidence suitable for informing policy and practice
- address the gaps in the research evidence on widening participation; this information might then be used to help inform decisions on future research priorities in relation to widening participation.

Introduction

The LSC's Annual Statement of Priorities² for 2005/06 argues that too many individuals still do not have the basic skills that they need for work or to achieve the quality of life that they want. In transforming learning and skills, the LSC sees itself as having a duty to support social inclusion as well as economic competitiveness.

Therefore, widening participation has a key role to play in ensuring that learners of all ages and backgrounds are able to realise their potential, improve their life chances and contribute to economic growth.

The Learning and Skills Council's (LSC's) strategy on widening adult participation emphasised the importance of having the best evidence upon which to develop policy on widening participation.³

A robust evidence base emerges from high quality research. But, while there is a substantial body of literature on initiatives to address barriers to participating in adult learning, the quality of this research varies, as does the extent to which one can safely generalise from some of its conclusions. Locally-based studies tend to be variable and are not consistent with one another, limiting their use when developing a national strategy. Moreover, some of the research applies primarily to the FE college sector, rather than to provision across the whole post-16 sector.

Additionally, although there is some research evidence on 'what works', it has not been synthesised; therefore, we do not always know what we know. To address these gaps in our knowledge, the LSC commissioned a systematic review of academic research on widening participation. The systematic review was conducted using a review methodology developed by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) based at the Institute of Education. This review was conducted by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in conjunction with the EPPI-Centre. Although a number of reviews of research literature in the area of widening participation have been conducted previously, none has adopted the rigour of the EPPI-Centre methodology. This review is hereafter referred to as the EPPI review.

In 2001, as part of an ongoing programme of work, the LSDA organised an international research seminar on widening participation. In preparation for that seminar, the LSDA commissioned an independent review of literature on international evidence and practice in attracting new learners. The review was conducted by the Institute for Employment Studies.⁴ The EPPI systematic review has taken account of what the LSDA learned from this earlier international work, and has been designed to contribute to improving knowledge about the most effective means of widening participation, based on trustworthy evidence.

The EPPI review identifies and analyses relevant UK and international evidence on widening adult participation strategies. It covers a wide range of aspects of the widening participation

² Learning and Skills Council (2004) *The skills we need: Our Annual Statement of Priorities*.

[Hhttp://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/eni3yxqaj7aw2mbnat6xtwi3k4z4wk5ub6tomb6qbmjviu23bzi3bjchi4p3hemrbq32rgiofqmyad/ASPFinal.pdf](http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/eni3yxqaj7aw2mbnat6xtwi3k4z4wk5ub6tomb6qbmjviu23bzi3bjchi4p3hemrbq32rgiofqmyad/ASPFinal.pdf)

³ Learning and Skills Council (2003) *Successful Participation for All: Widening adult participation strategy*. Coventry: Learning and Skills Council.

[Hhttp://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/e3oerofnvcwrbwhm6nxh7xaifqgqzrvzzftuguti7xs3xkfpniomddw22sv2sovjintb2l4orw3h/WParticipation.doc](http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/e3oerofnvcwrbwhm6nxh7xaifqgqzrvzzftuguti7xs3xkfpniomddw22sv2sovjintb2l4orw3h/WParticipation.doc)

⁴ Hillage J, Aston J (2001) *Attracting New Learners: A Literature Review*. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA)

process, from strategies for successful outreach and engagement, to interventions designed to promote retention, success and progression, including cross-disciplinary interventions and those which may not be primarily education-led.

In so doing, the EPPI review has attempted to identify from research the strategies which have proven successful, or which are likely to be successful, in widening adult participation. It also highlights implications for policy-makers, planners and managers.

The purpose of this report is to report on, and discuss, the findings and conclusions of the EPPI review on widening adult participation, in the context of action by the LSC to implement its widening adult participation strategy. It also discusses the findings and conclusions of the EPPI review in relation to other, earlier research reviews by the LSDA.

This report may be of interest to:

- national and local LSCs, as planners and funders of widening participation initiatives and research, including the LSC's Widening Adult Participation Action Fund
- learning providers with a role in widening adult participation
- researchers working in the field of widening adult participation.

The full review documents on which this report is based can be found at:
<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/EPPIWeb/home.aspx?&page=/reel/reviews.htm>

Policy context

Successful Participation for All describes the LSC's approach to widening participation for adults.⁵ It proposes action in four cross-cutting areas:

- supporting learner interests
- promoting demand for learner opportunities
- developing a supply of diverse learning opportunities
- creating a learning environment for adults.

A key locus of the LSC's strategy for widening participation is encouraging action at the local level, where the LSC believes that the true impact of efforts to widen participation will be seen. In support of the implementation of the widening participation strategy, the LSC has created a Widening Adult Participation Action Fund. The fund will support the following types of work:

- projects designed to discover what works in widening participation, with a particular focus on teaching, learning and learner progression
- developing, evaluating and embedding approaches to widening participation
- identifying and disseminating effective practice.

The overall strategy offers a set of strategies which will contribute to the achievement of the Council's annual statement of priorities⁶ for 2005/06. The Widening Adult Participation strategy will also contribute to the achievement of a number of other policy developments in the post-16 sector, including the Success for All programme and the National Skills Strategy, described below.

Success for All

Success for All, the government's strategy for reforming the quality of learning and skills provision, supports the achievement of wider participation. It seeks to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to improve learner achievement, retention and overall success rates in the context of widening participation.⁷

⁵ Learning and Skills Council (2003) *Successful Participation for All: Widening adult participation strategy*. Coventry: Learning and Skills Council.

[Hhttp://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/e3oerofnvcrewrbwhm6nxh7xaifgqzrwzzftuguti7xs3xkfpniomddw22sv2sovjintb2l4orw3h/WParticipation.doc](http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/e3oerofnvcrewrbwhm6nxh7xaifgqzrwzzftuguti7xs3xkfpniomddw22sv2sovjintb2l4orw3h/WParticipation.doc)H

⁶ Learning and Skills Council (2004) *The skills we need: Our Annual Statement of Priorities*.

[Hhttp://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/eni3yxqaj7aw2mbnat6xtwj3k4z4wk5ub6tomb6qbmjviu23bzj3bjchi4p3hemrbq32rgiofqmvad/ASPFinal.pdf](http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/eni3yxqaj7aw2mbnat6xtwj3k4z4wk5ub6tomb6qbmjviu23bzj3bjchi4p3hemrbq32rgiofqmvad/ASPFinal.pdf)H

⁷ Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Success for All: Reforming Further Education and Training*. London, Department for Education and Skills.

[H http://www.successforall.gov.uk/downloads/ourvisionforthefuture-76-109.pdf](http://www.successforall.gov.uk/downloads/ourvisionforthefuture-76-109.pdf)H

National Skills Strategy

The government's National Skills Strategy is designed to improve the skills of individuals and the workforce more generally.⁸ The Skills Strategy acknowledges that to raise skills, more adults need to be motivated and supported to re-engage with learning – particularly those who have not yet achieved a National Framework Level 2 qualification.

It proposes a range of policy initiatives and interventions designed to encourage adults to learn, including financial incentives and support, better information, advice and guidance and improved choice of opportunities. These include an entitlement to free tuition to achieve a full Level 2 qualification, adult learning grants for those on low incomes and improved information, advice and guidance services. For employers with low-skilled employees, there are employer training programmes, which offer free training for employees and financial support for employers to help alleviate the costs of releasing staff for training.

The EPPI review of widening participation may contribute to the success of each of these programmes of action by offering information on strategies and approaches to engaging, and retaining adult learners, and helping them achieve success with their learning.

⁸ Department for Education and Skills (2003) *21st Century Skills: Realising our potential. Individuals, Employers, Nation*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO, Cm 5810).

Background to the EPPI review

This section provides some background information on the EPPI review process and how the review was conducted.

The EPPI review process has been designed to enable a systematic and rigorous review of academic and other research into widening participation. The LSC commissioned the EPPI review with the aims of:

- identifying effective strategies for widening adult participation
- contributing to the development of an objective, comprehensive and authoritative basis for action by local LSCs to extend good practice
- supporting the LSC's national strategy for widening adult participation by providing a sound basis for improvements in practice at local LSC level
- contributing to the LSC's programmes of action research and quality improvement on widening adult participation.

Research questions

The scope of the review was decided by the review team, in the light of knowledge that literature on the subject was unlikely to yield a substantial body of robust evaluation evidence. The research questions were therefore formulated to embrace not only evidence derived from studies that meet the high standards set by the EPPI-Centre for evaluations, but also studies that, while not meeting these standards, nevertheless offer useful and 'compelling' evidence likely to assist those who plan and organise widening participation interventions. These two standards are reflected in the questions set out below.

The research questions for the review were as follows:

- Which strategies have been reliably proven to raise, or not to raise, participation in learning by adults with traditionally low participation?
- Which strategies do, or do not, offer compelling evidence that they raise participation in learning by adults with traditionally low participation?
- With reference to strategies that provide evidence of raising participation in learning by adults with traditionally low participation, how and why do these strategies work?

Scope of the review

The review focuses exclusively on adults aged 19 and over, who are not participating in learning. The target group for the review included:

- those who have not yet achieved a National Framework Level 2 qualification or international equivalent
- those who belong to disadvantaged groups (such as the homeless, and minority ethnic groups that fare less well in education and the labour market)

- those who live in a disadvantaged area (for example, as defined by postcode)
- those not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- those on a low income
- those with basic skills needs
- people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- unemployed adults including, for example, older unskilled and low-skilled men
- lone parents
- travellers
- asylum seekers and refugees
- older learners (aged 55 and over).

The review setting extended across the whole learning and skills sector, including:

- further education (FE) colleges, including sixth form colleges
- adult and community settings, including voluntary sector provision
- workplaces
- private providers
- higher education (HE) in FE – linkages between FE and HE, such as Access to HE programmes
- other LSC and non-LSC funded settings, such as libraries, prisons, homeless hostels, etc.

Literature published from 1992 onwards was reviewed. This date was chosen to enable the review to capture work relating to the impact of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, the Kennedy Report (1997) and the Learning and Skills Act 2001.

Literature on a broad range of types and levels of interventions was included:

- targeting/outreach work – including information, advice and guidance (IAG), community development and community learning strategies, learning ‘brokerage’, engaging families
- recruitment/engagement – including assessment and guidance and the identification of learners’ needs
- retention – including curriculum development, designing motivating programmes, effective teaching and learning, flexible delivery, courses specifically for adults (not mixed with younger learners), methods including e-learning, encouraging learner feedback, pre-course preparation, appropriate workload and help with time management
- achievement – ways to promote success through accreditation and qualifications (including credit transfer), skills acquisition or other methods, including non-accredited learning

- progression – ways to enable learners to move on to further learning or employment, or to achieve other personal goals or improved quality of life such as volunteering, community involvement, etc
- staff and organisational development to support and further these activities
- policy and planning – at local, regional and national levels, and including cross-sector and community-led approaches such as neighbourhood renewal, and key agencies such as the LSC, Regional Development Agencies, Local Strategic Partnerships and Learning Partnerships
- learner and learning support – including financial, childcare (both provision of and financial support for), and counselling.

Key terms used in the review

A key part of the review process is the development of a search strategy and screening process, to identify which studies are worthy of more in-depth review. Four key terms were identified to help with the search and screening process, namely:

- widening participation
- participation in learning
- successful strategies (or interventions) for widening participation
- successful outcomes for learners.

Each of these terms is discussed below.

Widening participation

The review examined literature that fitted with the definition set out in the LSC's widening participation strategy, which is:

Widening participation is a process where education and training providers successfully adapt their programmes and ways of working to meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals and groups whose experiences or circumstances inhibit participation. It involves:

- *attracting and engaging learners*
- *identifying appropriate programmes*
- *appropriate support for learners during their programmes and*
- *securing achievement.*⁹

⁹ Learning and Skills Council (2003) *Successful Participation for All: Widening adult participation strategy*. Coventry: Learning and Skills Council.
<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/e3oerofnvcwrbwhm6nxh7xaifgqzrwzzftuguti7xs3xkfpniomddw22sv2sovjintb2l4orw3h/WParticipation.doc>

Participation in learning

Participation in learning can include a range of learning 'types'. The review examined literature concerned with learning that was:

- formal
- informal
- accredited
- non-accredited
- on-the-job training.

Successful interventions

These were defined as interventions that led to the successful recruitment, retention, achievement or progression of adults from the target groups described above, who would not normally engage in learning, or who had not been involved in learning for some time.

Successful outcomes (for learners)

These were defined in the review as being:

- participating in learning, or continuing to participate
- gaining qualifications
- obtaining jobs (or jobs with better prospects)
- other learner-identified objectives
- skills acquisition
- personal developmental gains
- other social and community benefits.

Preliminary steps

The review began by establishing a clear process for involving users, including policy-makers and planners who, via an advisory group, helped to decide the scope and develop the conceptual framework of the review.

Researchers identified as many studies as possible from 1992 onwards that might answer one or more of the review questions. To help identify potentially useful studies, the research team agreed criteria for including and for excluding studies. Therefore, the review excludes:

- interventions, programmes and policies aimed at adults who are:
 - already well-qualified (above NQF Level 3 or equivalent)
 - not disadvantaged in terms of education and access to the labour market
- studies that do not report on whether a strategy has been successful or unsuccessful in widening participation in learning by adults

- studies that do not report an intervention, programme or policy about:
 - reaching and engaging reluctant learners and those who experience barriers to learning
 - helping and supporting learners to succeed
 - enabling progression to further study or employment
- studies not concerned with adults not in formal or informal learning
- studies that do not report an intervention, programme or policy about:
 - adults who have not yet achieved a full NQF Level 2 qualification or equivalent
 - adults who live in an economically disadvantaged area or neighbourhood (eg as classified by the Index of Deprivation; areas eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal funding; areas of high unemployment and low income)
 - adults who have not been involved in learning since leaving school
 - adults belonging to specific educationally and economically disadvantaged groups
- studies that are descriptions, ie that exclude any analytical or evaluative component or exploration of relationships between variables, showing whether the interventions, programmes or policies are successful in widening participation in learning; the review group decided to further amend this criteria to also exclude exploration of relationships studies, so that only evaluations (either naturally occurring, or researcher-manipulated) were included in the map
- those interventions, programmes or policies not specifically aimed at widening participation in learning among educationally and economically disadvantaged adults, even if this is an incidental by-product.

The key-wording process

Once the search terms and inclusion and exclusion criteria had been agreed, potentially relevant studies were identified by systematic searches of electronic databases and websites.

A total of 82 studies met the criteria for inclusion. Studies meeting the review's inclusion and exclusion criteria were assigned descriptive keywords, to produce a descriptive map of research activity. The descriptive map of research activity was used to identify the most suitable sub-set of studies for answering the review questions. A full list of the 82 key-worded studies can be found in the references.

More details of the key-wording process can be found in the appendix to this report.

In-depth review

The decision was then taken to narrow the field to a manageable set of studies for the in-depth review. Exclusion criteria, based on the review-specific keywords, were applied to ensure that the sub-set of studies which remained made up a group which were relevant to the review topic, covered a wide range of topics and contained robust evidence.

The studies were then reviewed by a group of researchers, and information on methodology, findings and conclusions was extracted. Findings were then synthesised by grouping studies according to the three main dimensions of widening adult participation: outreach targeting and engagement, participation and retention, and achievement and progression.

More details of the in-depth review process are set out in the appendix. The 17 studies reviewed in-depth are as follows:

Studies included in the in-depth review

BMRB International Ltd (2001) *Further Investigation of a Disadvantaged Group on Pre-Vocational Training.*

Coats M (1999) *Lifelong learning policy and practice: the impact of accreditation on education and training provision for adult women in the UK.*

Field J, Spencer D, Tight M, Blaxter L, Byrd P, Merrill, B (2001) *Evaluation of the Adult and Community Learning Fund.*

Grief S and Taylor C (2002) *Final Report: Evaluation of the basic skills and ESOL in local communities projects.*

H A Associates (2002) *Evaluation of Pioneer and Pathfinder UK Online Centres: Follow-up study.*

Hawaii University and College of Manoa (1992) *Skills Enhancement Literacy Project of Hawaii (II). Final Project Performance Report.*

McRoberts R, Leitch R (1998) *Targeting social need in a divided society: an evaluation of a community-based adult education initiative.*

Paris KA (1992) *Evaluation of the Third Year of Implementation of the Wisconsin Workplace Partnership Training Program. March 1, 1991 through August 31, 1992.*

Robinson C, Hughes P (1999) *Creating a Sense of Place: Indigenous peoples in vocational education and training.*

Scheer RL (1993) *READS Program. National Workplace Literacy Program. Final Report.*

Shaw N (2002) *Evaluation of the Union Learning Fund Year 4.*

Squirrell G (2001) *Evaluation of DfEE-Funded Pilots for Rough Sleepers: Off the streets and into work.*

St. Pierre R, Gamse B, Alamprese J, Rimdzius T, Tao F, (1998) *Even Start: Evidence from the past and a look to the future. National Evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program.*

Taylor S (2002) *Learning Pathways for Adults in Oxfordshire, Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire. Summary Report.*

Tyers C, Aston J, Barkworth R, Willison R, Taylor, J (2003). *Evaluation of Adult Guidance Pilots.*

Young MB, Fleischman H, Fitzgerald N, Morgan MA (1995). *National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs. Executive Summary.*

Zandniapour L, Conway M (2001) *Gaining Ground: The labor market progress of participants of sectoral employment development programs.*

Findings from the review

This section describes the main findings from the review under three aspects of widening participation activity, those being:

- outreach, targeting and engagement
- participation and retention
- achievement and progression.

It also draws some conclusions about strategies which appear to be effective in widening participation in these three areas, and highlights some recurring themes in these strategies.

Ratings ascribed to studies included in the in-depth review

Each of the 17 studies reviewed in-depth was given an overall review-specific weight of evidence. The weight of evidence was based on the quality of the execution of the research, the appropriateness of research design and the relevance of the focus of the study for this review. The weight of evidence rating scale ran from high to low. A low rating for overall weight of evidence meant that there were weaknesses in the study's methodology or in reporting, making the findings and conclusions of that study less sound than higher-rated studies.

The 17 studies included in the in-depth review were rated as follows:

- 2 studies received a high rating.¹⁰
- 1 study received a medium-high rating.¹¹
- 7 studies received a medium rating.¹²
- 1 study received a medium-low rating.¹³
- 6 studies received a low rating.¹⁴

For ease of reading, the findings of studies will be referred to as being more or less 'sound', based on the overall weight of evidence.

¹⁰ BMRB, and St Pierre et al.

¹¹ Paris.

¹² Grief, Scheer, Shaw et al, Taylor, Tyers et al, Young et al, and Zandniapour.

¹³ Robinson and Hughes.

¹⁴ Coats, Field et al, H A Associates, Hawaii University and College of Manoa, McRoberts and Leitch, and Squirrel.

Overall findings

While the EPPI review has not identified evidence of strategies that can be confidently described as 'reliably proven' to raise, or not to raise, participation in learning by adults, a number of studies offer what might be described as compelling evidence, although each is marred to some extent by methodological and reporting weaknesses.

The term 'compelling evidence' – a less demanding criterion – was applied to studies that were judged by the reviewers, on the basis of the quality and relevance of the study and reviewers' knowledge and experience of the field, to offer useful insights, though without meeting the standard expected for a robust evaluation. Thus, studies that are high-rated or medium-rated contained evidence that was likely to be regarded as more compelling than that found in a low-rated study. In the case of six low-rated studies, the evidence cannot be confidently described as 'compelling'.

The two high-rated studies – the high rating indicating that the studies were sound in both method and reporting – showed that the programmes they evaluated either failed, were inconclusive in their outcomes, or that the interventions were not of great help to participants.¹⁵

The findings of the studies which do offer compelling evidence are reported below under headings relating to the three key aspects of widening participation activities mentioned above.

Outreach, targeting and engagement

Six studies contained evidence on outreach, targeting and engagement strategies.¹⁶ The topics of these studies included the impact of the DfES's Adult Guidance Pilots, the Union Learning Fund, the Adult and Community Learning Fund and pilot UK ICT online Pioneer and Pathfinder projects.

These studies, which were considered to be of medium to low soundness, suggest that outreach, targeting and engagement strategies which appear to widen participation, share some of the following elements:

- The presence of initiatives within the community through outreach work, and more specifically, person-to-person recruitment (word of mouth), is more likely to attract potential learners from minority communities.
- Tailored flexible support and provision which is responsive to individual learner needs is more likely to engage hard-to-reach learners. Such support and provision can be created through networking and partnerships between key organisations.
- A sound understanding of the needs of the target group, and clarity about what the provider is able to offer can pre-empt disengagement. Additionally, funding projects to target the needs of certain hard-to-reach groups can be successful in engaging learners from these groups.

¹⁵ St Pierre et al, and BMRB.

¹⁶ Field et al, HA Associates, Shaw et al, Squirrel, Tyers et al, and Hawaii University and College of Manoa.

- Catalysts, such as intermediary bodies (eg the Basic Skills Agency and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) or trade unions, can play a key role in engaging new learners through developing effective partnerships with community-based organisations and employers.

Participation and retention

Six studies provided evidence on participation and retention strategies.¹⁷ The subject focus of these studies includes encouraging adults to take up basic skills learning provision, the effect of grants in the United States in encouraging participation in basic skills provision and encouraging the take-up of vocational education programmes by indigenous people in Australia.

These studies, which were considered to be of medium to low soundness, suggest that the strategies which appear to widen participation in this area have some of the following themes in common:

- A shared understanding between learners, learning providers and employers about what motivates learners and the key barriers learners face in accessing learning opportunities can be used to create responsive learning opportunities and shape learning provision to encourage participation and retention.
- The suitability of the design of a learning programme, its delivery method, and the nature of support offered to the needs of the learners can help to enhance learner participation and retention. The characteristics of the staff delivering the programme (especially, their experience and knowledge of the target community) also play an important part.
- The provision of funding which can be used flexibly to support additional costs incurred by learning providers can help to set up and sustain innovative learning provision for hard-to-reach groups.
- Sustained attendance in a learning programme appears to depend on the appropriate level of support available to learners, in accordance with their needs, during the early stages after enrolment, and the efforts made by the providers to link the learning programme to outcomes desired by the learner.

Achievement and progression

Ten studies provided evidence on the issue of achievement and progression.¹⁸ The topic focus of these studies included: pre-vocational training programmes designed to help people with very low skills become employable, family literacy programmes, employee basic skills programmes and sectoral employment learning projects operating in the United States, and learning pathways that encourage progression in learning.

These studies, which varied in their soundness from high to low, suggest that the strategies which appear to widen participation in this area have some of the following features in common:

- Tailoring learning programmes which address learners' desired outcomes, skilled trainers, clarity about the expectations of the learners and the extent to which they can be met by the

¹⁷ Field et al, Grief and Taylor, Paris, Robinson and Hughes, Young, and Hawaii University and College of Manoa.

¹⁸ BMRB, St. Pierre et al. Paris, Scheer, Taylor, Tyers et al, Zandniapour, Field, McRoberts and Leitch, and Coats.

learning programme, together with appropriate and sensitive assessment of progress, can help learners to achieve accreditation, progress to suitable employment or other learning programmes.

- A high level of learner support – especially to those from hard-to-reach groups – can aid participation.
- Skilled and experienced staff in the provider organisation, effective networking and collaboration between learning providers and local agencies to improve learning pathways and support progression can all contribute to positive outcomes for learners.
- Embedding or tailoring basic skills training to the needs of employers and employees in workforce development programmes can lead not just to improvements in learners' self-confidence and self-image, but also to improving the quality of their work and their economic position.
- Well-targeted information, advice and guidance (IAG) services have a useful role to play in the planning of learning provision and progression, both in the community and workplace settings, and in identifying smaller steps which learners can take to gain confidence and achieve substantial and measurable progress.

Recurring themes within the successful strategies identified by this review

Analysis of the successful strategies discussed above, under the three headings signifying key aspects of widening participation, led to the identification of recurring themes that appeared to be important in effectively widening adult participation. Each of the seven themes discussed below is highlighted in at least three studies out of the 17 selected for the in-depth review as being important success factors:

Sufficient, suitable resources including quality support services

Four studies address the subject of sufficient, suitable resources.¹⁹ Insufficient or unsuitable resources and accommodation in organisations hosting the learning provision are found to act as barriers to success in some pilots. Conversely, studies also note the importance of teachers and administrative staff having access to appropriate professional development, curriculum and technical support networks, equipment, facilities and venues. The importance of providing a range of high quality support services is raised in several studies.

Quality support with a high staff-to-student ratio is needed. Additional support (in the form of one-to-one support from tutors, phone calls, letters etc) can be very important to the participants in distance learning programmes. Programmes should have at least some full-time instructional and administrative staff, provide a range of other client support services and give attention to helping clients continue beyond the initial month following their enrolment.

Effective use of resources and good management of interventions

Five studies make recommendations for effective practice relating to the use of resources and the management of interventions.²⁰ Examples include:

¹⁹ Field et al, Squirrel, Young et al, and Tyers et al.

²⁰ Field et al, Grief et al, Squirrel, Taylor, and Tyers et al.

- careful planning of courses with clear targets
- funding to cover specific additional costs, such as the costs of sustaining partnerships and the additional costs incurred by providers, particularly the costs of learner and learning support
- the constant search for new ways to widen participation
- continuous engagement with the community at all levels in colleges and in all parts of the community
- a thoroughness in curriculum design and teaching and learning strategies by colleges, ensuring that widening participation objectives are reflected and reinforced throughout the organisation
- the need for staff development and the recruitment of suitable staff.

Several studies argue that it is important that those planning and implementing interventions have sufficient information about their target groups. If this knowledge is not already available in an organisation, it should either be hired in, or a feasibility study should be undertaken. In commissioning future programmes, greater attention should be paid by the managing agents to the specification of target groups and the subsequent collection of data on a range of participant characteristics, with a view to monitoring closely and systematically whether activities are contributing to the programme's objectives.

Suitable ways to measure learning gains

Variations on the theme of suitable ways to measure learning gains crop up in three studies.²¹ Project leaders need to be aware of the length of time that it may take to bring potential learners up to a starting point, before they are ready to embark on a programme that might lead to tangible outcomes. Moreover, project leaders and funders should recognise that investing time in a range of client-related tasks which do not obviously lead to a clear outcome can still be regarded as effective. For some learners, educational progression might be delayed rather than immediate, while for others it might be horizontal rather than vertical; therefore, the way in which, and the time period over which, learning gains are measured should be considered carefully.

Listening to learners, responding to feedback, encouraging realistic expectations about what learning programmes offer

In four studies, a willingness to listen to learners and flexibility to respond to their feedback are seen as essential ingredients for reaching and engaging the target group, as is involving learners in the planning of provision.²² It is, however, important to create realistic expectations about what learning programmes offer, as over-selling or misunderstanding may result in disengaged clients.

Steps that break down barriers to learning

A list of steps that break down barriers to learning is cited frequently. Seven studies provide evidence on this.²³ Suitable steps include:

²¹ Taylor, Field et al, and Squirrel.

²² BMRB, Field et al, Grief et al, and Tyers et al.

²³ Field et al, Grief et al, HA Associates, Paris, Tyers et al, Hawaii University and College of Manoa, and Young et al.

- accessible, familiar venues
- a learner-centred approach by staff
- innovative provision
- additional support for travel or childcare
- an informal atmosphere
- links to existing activities.

Outreach and word-of-mouth communication are regarded as being important ways of engaging new clients, particularly for those with a mistrust of authority. In the case of employees, company incentives, such as paying employees for attending, are shown to be a potential motivator for participation.

Flexible and tailored delivery and support

Flexible, tailored delivery and support are important to providing an effective service. Seven studies address this theme, indicating in various ways that client needs should be taken into account and provision adapted to meet those needs.²⁴ Tailored, flexible provision which involves outreach can be expensive, but is necessary for targeting the right group; a 'one-size-fits-all' approach can end up fitting no-one. Several studies recommend that basic skills provision should be tailored to specific occupational needs. Some studies indicate the value of embedding basic skills instruction in provision specific to the workplace, eg through increased use of job skill requirement analyses. However, this approach to basic skills provision does not attract universal support; one study argues that 'basic skills by stealth' can lead to the loss of opportunities for effective basic skills teaching.

As well as developing specific basic skills provision for the workplace, several studies draw attention to the need to tailor work-based or job-related provision to the circumstances of learners. Arranging provision to suit shift workers, at convenient times for workers and in ways that fit with childcare and other responsibilities, is seen as an important way to address barriers to learning.

These studies highlight the value of flexible provision to widening participation. The operation of an open entry/exit policy can enable continual recruitment and re-engagement of learners within a basic skills programme. A balance between drop-in and more structured provision can also be useful in appealing to different learners. Building the curriculum on the basis of identified needs and of adopting flexible and adaptive teaching approaches can be effective, as can allowing staff flexibility for 'just-in-time' basic skills sessions.

Networking and partnership, including the use of intermediary organisations

Six studies draw attention to the importance of networking and partnership in providing effective services.²⁵ Private sector partnership can be important in attracting men, in particular, to learning. Effective partnerships between providers and local organisations that have strong links with potential learners can be particularly important in helping to reach target groups. Engaging learners through small community-based organisations appears to be highly effective, both on

²⁴ Paris, Grief et al, Scheer, Tyers et al, Field et al, HA Associates, and Hawaii University and College of Manoa.

²⁵ Grief et al, Shaw et al, Taylor; Tyers et al, Field et al, and HA Associates.

educational and cost grounds, and further research and policy should reflect this. The following dimensions of partnership working can be significant:

- regular partner meetings
- close working with shop stewards
- securing full commitment from companies
- a range of effective partnerships.

The involvement of two intermediary bodies – the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) – was seen as being key to the success of the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF). The intermediary bodies had considerable standing and experience in the field and allowed the ACLF to develop more rapidly than it would otherwise have done, and to work systematically to support and nurture the work of a wide range of organisations whose applications were approved.

Strategies which were not successful in widening participation

Two high-rated studies show that the programmes they evaluated either failed, were inconclusive in their outcomes, or that the interventions were not of great help to participants.²⁶

One of the studies reports on a US government-funded evaluation of the Even Start family literacy programme, which was designed to improve the educational opportunities of children and adults by integrating early childhood education with adult education programmes.²⁷ The key finding was that, after five years of operation, and despite success in generating high levels of participation, the programme showed no significant impact upon participants, compared with control group families. For example, there were no statistically-significant impacts on the economic self-sufficiency of participating mothers, nor on their parenting skills.

On some measures, however, the Even Start programme did achieve benefits that the researchers believe would not have been achieved otherwise. For example, much higher proportions of Even Start adults and children participated in educational services than was the case among those not in the programme. Even Start also led to a substantial increase in the percentage of adults achieving a general education diploma (GED). The authors comment that without Even Start, it is likely that few of these adults would have found the needed assistance to reach this goal, and that this view was supported by data from the study.

The other study was concerned with the experience and progress of participants in a government-funded pre-vocational training programme (PVT).²⁸ The programme was designed to help people with very basic skills move towards a position from which they could compete for jobs and vocational training. Overall, the findings suggest that the programme was not of great help to participants. Though it was most helpful in improving self-confidence – for example, about getting and keeping a job – it proved less successful in overcoming a lack of qualifications, which was the most serious problem for participants.

²⁶ St Pierre et al, and BMRB.

²⁷ St Pierre et al.

²⁸ BMRB.

The value of this study lies in illuminating factors that appear to contribute to this disappointing outcome, which may be of interest to those seeking to develop similar programmes in future. The factors included:

- poorly skilled trainers
- lack of relevance of course and work placements to learners' interests
- lack of specificity in job search advice and support given
- failure to establish a link at the start of the programme between its objectives and learners' aspirations and desired outcomes; those learners who held clear career aspirations felt that the course had not sufficiently prepared them for work, while those with less clear job goals could not see how the courses they were taking would equip them for work; learners were disappointed that PVT was not of more immediate, 'practical' assistance in achieving the ultimate goal of employment, and many appeared to be expecting too much from a training programme designed to address low level skills needs, rather than to help individuals straight into employment.

Based on their findings, the authors of the study outline an 'ideal' pre-vocational training programme to engage the discontented group, provide satisfaction with training and longer-term work-related benefits. This would cover:

- induction
- job counselling
- addressing the barriers identified in job counselling
- a tailored learning programme
- a job skills programme
- guaranteed work placements
- regular progress reviews
- an exit interview
- follow-through.

Rigorous evaluation of a programme developed using these elements should shed light on the efficacy of such an approach.

Conclusions

The main questions for this review were:

- Which strategies have been *reliably proven* to raise, or not to raise, participation in learning by adults with traditionally low participation?
- Which strategies do, or do not, offer *compelling evidence* that they raise participation in learning by adults with traditionally low participation?
- With reference to strategies that provide evidence of raising participation in learning by adults with traditionally low participation, *how and why do these strategies work?*

As was reported in the previous section, an overarching finding from the EPPI review is that we have not been able to identify evidence of strategies that can be confidently described as ‘reliably proven’ to raise, or not to raise, participation in learning by adults. However, a number of studies offer what might be described as compelling evidence, although each suffers to some extent from methodological and/or reporting weaknesses.

In 2001, the LSDA commissioned an independent, international review of literature on evidence and practice in attracting new learners.²⁹ The authors of this review note that, while the international literature demonstrates clear interest in ‘what works’ in terms of generating and sustaining interest in learning, there is a lack of effective evaluation evidence. In particular, there is a dearth of data linking interventions to desired outcomes. Therefore, the findings of the EPPI review confirm the conclusions of the earlier literature review, that there is a shortage of effective evaluation evidence in this field. The authors of that review also argued that:

We need more definitive evidence of the effects of initiatives on learners themselves, before we are able to conclude which initiatives work best and which are less effective.

From these studies included in the EPPI review which offer compelling evidence, the two most promising strategies for widening participation involve:

- a substantial degree of flexibility in learning provision and support services, tailored to learners’ needs
- programmes tailored to the needs of employees and the workplace, including occupationally-specific learning.

These findings echo the results of a further, previous review of research and development literature by the LSDA on widening participation, which calls for ‘appropriate, targeted provision’. It notes that developing appropriate provision is about more than just getting the content of the learning programmes right; it is also about effective pre-course assessment, on-course support for aspects of learning, flexible delivery of programmes, ways of recognising and accrediting achievements and clear progression routes into further study and work.³⁰

²⁹ Hillage J, Aston J (2001) *Attracting New Learners: A Literature Review*. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA).

³⁰ Macleod D (2003) *Widening Adult Participation: A Review of Research and Development*. London: (LSDA).

The findings from the EPPI review support and help to sharpen the focus of the cross-cutting themes described in the LSC's widening participation strategy *Successful Participation for All*, which proposes action to support learner interests, promote demand for learning opportunities, develop the supply of diverse learning opportunities and create 'a learning environment for adults'. The findings of this review may help the LSC refine and develop action under the four cross-cutting themes and the overarching theme.

Developing essential partnerships

Developing essential partnerships is an overarching theme within the LSC's strategy. A recurring theme within the successful strategies identified by the EPPI review was the importance of community-based organisations and intermediary bodies, because of their considerable prior standing within communities. The LSC's strategy also acknowledges the resource implications for organisations working in partnership; this is supported by the EPPI review findings, which highlight the importance of funding to cover specific costs, including the costs of partnership.

Supporting learner interests

The LSC strategy emphasises the importance of understanding and meeting learner needs and of assuring learners of support to make appropriate choices. There is considerable support within the EPPI review for these broad approaches. For example, one of the findings of the review is that a sound understanding of the needs of the target group, and clarity about what the provider can offer, can pre-empt disengagement. Also important is the development of a shared understanding between learners, providers and employers about what motivates them and what the key barriers are and how to overcome them.

Promoting demand for learning opportunities

Under this theme, the LSC strategy discusses the need to be creative about the nature of learning opportunities available by, for example, developing transition arrangements between informal learning and more structured provision through collaboration between local providers. The EPPI review offers support for the role of intermediary bodies in supporting and developing partnerships and networks committed to the promotion of learning. It also draws attention to the importance of the presence of staff working through outreach methods within the community and for some minority communities of using person-to-person recruitment methods.

Developing the supply of diverse learning opportunities

The LSC strategy recognises the diversity in the provider base and encourages the development of providers from the voluntary and community sectors in particular. Key strategies include proactively developing and/or maintaining appropriate partnerships and networks committed to diversity in delivery.

The EPPI review finds that tailored, flexible support and provision created through networking and partnerships between key organisations, which is responsive to individual learner needs, is more likely to engage 'hard-to-reach' groups. The review also highlights the value of accessible, familiar venues open at convenient hours for workers, and the adoption of learner-centred approaches by staff.

Creating a learning environment for adults

Under this theme, the LSC strategy focuses on developing a learning environment suitable for adults by developing an appropriate range of flexible learning opportunities.

The review draws attention to the importance of designing and delivering a learning programme in ways suitable for the adult target group, including consideration of the types of learning support needed. A particularly relevant finding for this theme is that sustained attendance in learning programmes appears to depend upon the appropriate level of support available, in accordance with learners' needs – particularly during the early stages after enrolment – and the efforts made by the providers to link learning programmes to the outcomes desired by learners.

Potential strengths and limitations of the EPPI review

It is fair to say that the review process had a number of strengths and a number of potential limitations for helping us identify strategies effective in widening participation. These are discussed briefly below.

Strengths of the process include:

- a rigorous search strategy and systematic methodology for assessing the value of studies, using procedures developed by the EPPI-Centre
- the high volume of references identified and key-worded
- a review that is informed by the LSC widening adult participation strategy, providing a clear context
- confirmation that there are few sound evaluations available in the English language in this field.

Potential limitations arising from the literature available for this review include:

- a lack of studies that evaluate the impact of interventions by comparison with a baseline or control group
- weaknesses in the reporting of methods and evidence.

Lack of studies that evaluate the impact of interventions

A significant issue for the reviewers was the extent to which the studies attempted to measure the effect of the practice or approach under examination. The use of control and treatment groups for comparative purposes was rare, and there were examples of the use of process evaluation rather than outcome evaluation. In some cases, evaluation was not the primary purpose of the study. For example, the purpose of one of the examined studies was described as being to identify the barriers and problems associated with learning pathways to illustrate broader problems relating to progression.

These constraints mean that the review is in no sense a comprehensive review of strategies that work. It is limited to reviewing strategies that have been the subject of evaluations. The lack of

strong evaluations has important implications for attempts to develop evidence-based policy and planning. It is worth noting the benefits of studies in which the evaluation of outcomes is an integral part of government-funded interventions and is conducted using large samples, such as the evaluation of the US government Even Start programme.

Weaknesses in the reporting of methods and evidence

In some cases, weak or unsuitable methods may have led to the justifiable exclusion or downgrading of weight of evidence ratings of studies. It is also possible that EPPI-Centre reporting requirements (which favour descriptions of method detailed to such an extent that the study is capable of replication by other researchers) may have caused some well-executed studies to be downgraded in this review. For example, applied, near-market research, that gives priority to the reporting of conclusions and implications for policy or practice, may not meet the reporting standards favoured by the EPPI method.

It may be argued that these limitations raise concerns about the usefulness of the findings drawn from this review. However, their value lies in the fact that the features or common themes presented under each of the three key aspects of widening participation, and indeed, in the section on ‘recurring themes within the successful strategies identified by this review’, occur in more than one study, at least one of which is high, medium-high or medium rated for methodological and/or reporting soundness. The common themes emerging from these studies highlight some of the critical ingredients needed to formulate strategies for successfully raising adult participation in learning.

Gaps in research

The EPPI review has been instrumental in helping us to identify some of the gaps that exist in our knowledge base of the strategies that have been reliably proven to widen participation in learning by adults with traditionally low participation. We still do not have a comprehensive picture of how adult participation can be widened, as we lack a robust evidence base about what does work.

In 2003, the LSDA published a report which reviewed research and development on widening adult participation in learning.³¹ The LSDA review identified a number of gaps in research on widening participation and made recommendations on how these gaps might be addressed, to improve our knowledge of ‘what works’. Comparing the gaps identified by the EPPI review with those identified by the LSDA review enables us to map out the terrain for further research activity. Some key areas which need to be addressed via a methodologically robust research include:

- ***What works in motivating adult learners to engage and participate in learning.***

One of the key themes in the LSDA review was the need to better understand what motivates people to participate in learning and, in particular, to know more about what might influence the decisions of those who appear least motivated to learn. Although the literature examined for the EPPI review touches on issues of engagement and outreach, it does not identify strategies that might be effective in motivating such learners. There is, therefore, still an important gap in our

³¹ Macleod D (2003) *Widening Adult Participation: A Review of Research and Development*. London: (LSDA).

knowledge base of what motivates these groups to learn and the dynamics of decision-making processes among particular groups of individuals. This remains to be addressed.

- ***What works in sustaining attendance in a learning programme; the role support plays and what is 'appropriate' support.***

The LSDA review noted that learners may have complex and multiple reasons for withdrawing from their programmes of study. The EPPI review concludes that sustained attendance in a learning programme appears to depend on the appropriate level of support available to learners, in accordance with their needs during the early stages after enrolment. The evidence about what affects continued participation, however, is insufficient to enable appropriate support to be provided to learners; indeed, there is debate about what constitutes 'appropriate support'.

- ***What works in creating and sustaining a partnership approach to widening participation in the learning and skills sector; and what types of partnerships work best in different contexts.***

An area on which the EPPI review failed to make a reliable finding is that of system-wide strategies for widening participation. A key finding in the earlier LSDA review was the importance of learning providers seeking an appropriate role for their organisation in widening participation that fits with their environment. Although the EPPI review commented on the importance of partnership, and the value of intermediary bodies as part of a partnership approach to widening participation, it had little to say about the way in which providers within a system might take particular complementary roles to widen participation. Given the competing demands on, and the range of policy priorities to be pursued by, learning providers within the English post-16 system, this is an issue which needs to be investigated in more depth to make best use of the available organisational resources.

Many of the gaps identified in the earlier LSDA review on widening adult participation have been echoed in the EPPI review. If national policy initiatives relating to skills acquisition and learning, and training for economic productivity are to achieve their intended outcomes, then a critical success factor would appear to be the engagement of a wide range of adults, many of whom are not currently learning, in post-16 programmes. Therefore, widening participation policies and attendant strategies need to be developed as part of a wider suite of interventions to support engagement, participation, achievement in and progression through learning. This can only be achieved through building a robust evidence base on what works well in widening participation and why.

Implications

This section highlights some possible implications for the LSC, providers and the research community, arising from the review.

National and local LSCs, may wish to consider:

- how best to work with providers to increase the flexibility and tailoring of provision and support
- how to adequately fund and resource interventions to widen adult participation
- how to ensure the effective management of interventions to widen participation
- how best to incorporate widening adult participation strategies into workforce development programmes and to tailor them to the needs of employees and the workplace
- the importance of piloting interventions to widen adult participation, coupled with evaluation strategies that enable impact to be measured with confidence.

Learning providers may wish to consider:

- how providers can increase flexibility and tailoring of provision and support, including provision tailored to workplace requirements
- steps that need to be taken to ensure the effective management of interventions to widen participation.

The **research community** may wish to consider how to:

- ensure that research methods, recording and reporting arrangements are robust enough to yield evaluation evidence suitable for informing policy and practice
- address the gaps in the research evidence on widening participation; this information might then be used to help inform decisions on future research priorities in relation to widening participation.

Appendix: methods used in the EPPI review

Defining relevant studies: inclusion and exclusion criteria

The review group attempted to identify as many studies as possible that might answer one or more of the review questions. Only those studies based on verifiable evidence were included. Before identifying potential studies, the research team had lengthy discussions, and from these agreed a set of criteria for including and excluding studies. When first drafted, there appeared to be some ambiguity in the wording, and great care was taken to eliminate this and make the criteria as clear as possible.

The review therefore excludes studies that are:

1. *Not evaluative*

Studies that are descriptions, ie that exclude any analytical or evaluative component or exploration of relationships between variables, showing whether the interventions, programmes or policies are successful in widening participation in learning. At a review group meeting in July, it was decided to amend this to also exclude exploration of relationships studies, so that only evaluations (either naturally occurring, or researcher manipulated) were included in the map.

2. *Not on topic*

- Studies that do not report on whether a strategy has been successful or unsuccessful in widening participation in learning by adults
- Studies that do not report an intervention, programme or policy about:
 - reaching and engaging reluctant learners and those who experience barriers to learning
 - helping and supporting learners to succeed
 - enabling progression to further study or employment.

3. *Not target population*

- Studies that are not concerned with adults who are not in formal or informal learning
- Interventions, programmes and policies aimed at adults who are:
 - already well-qualified (above NQF Level 3 or equivalent)
 - not disadvantaged in terms of education and access to the labour market.
- Studies that do not report an intervention, programme or policy about adults who:
 - have not yet achieved a full NQF Level 2 qualification or equivalent
 - live in an economically disadvantaged area or neighbourhood (eg as classified by the Index of Deprivation; areas eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal funding; areas of high unemployment and low income)
 - have not been involved in learning since leaving school
 - belong to specific educationally and economically disadvantaged groups.
- Those interventions, programmes or policies that are not specifically aimed at widening participation in learning among educationally and economically disadvantaged adults, even if this is an incidental bi-product.

4. Not published after 1992

It was decided that selecting studies published after 1992 would enable the work relating to the impact of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, the Kennedy Report (1997) and the Learning and Skills Act 2001, to be captured.

Identification of potential studies: search strategy, key-wording and characteristics of key-worded studies

Search sources

Studies were identified by systematic searches of electronic databases and websites. To do this, the kinds of terms needed for finding studies that might be 'on topic' were first investigated. These fell into three categories: those that describe the population, the intervention context and the type of education. These were combined, using Boolean operators, to form a search string as follows:

TI OR AB = Adult* OR "Adult Learning" OR "Minority Groups" OR "Underrepresented Groups" AND "Participation" OR "Widening Participation" OR "Access to Education" OR "Course Completion Rates" OR "Course Completion" OR "Program* Completion" OR "Program* Completion Rates" OR "Student Retention" OR "Student Recruitment" OR "Student Progression" AND "Community Education" OR "Adult Education" OR "Post Compulsory Education" OR "Work Based Learning" OR "Transitional Education" OR "Equal Education"

Major databases, such as Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and British Education Index (BEI), were searched using two portals: Dialog or CSA. Using these portals it was possible to use the whole string. Therefore, where possible, the same search string was used for each database. However, for websites such as the DfES and Campaign for Learning it was necessary to modify it and use a much smaller number of terms.

In addition, relevant journals were searched by hand and those with specialist knowledge in the field recommended relevant studies. As well as these methods, bibliographies in other reviews and relevant papers were examined to uncover studies not already identified.

A search log was created to record details of each search. In the case of searches of electronic databases, the following details were recorded: database searched, search strategy, number of 'hits', name of downloaded file, type of filter used, name of database into which the results were imported, time and date of search, name of person who undertook the search, and any further notes about the search.

For website searches, the following details were recorded: website searched (name and URL), details of relevant studies identified, time and date of search, name of person who undertook the search, and any further notes about the search.

For searches carried out by hand, including citation searches of bibliographies, the following details were recorded: name of document searched (eg journal, report), details of relevant references identified, time and date of search, name of person who undertook the search, and any further notes about the search.

Reference management

Details of studies found were stored on two EndNote databases. The first contained details of all studies found, and the second of all studies judged to meet the review's inclusion and exclusion criteria on the basis of title and abstract only. Studies found by hand that met the review's criteria were also entered on the first database. The EndNote software automatically assigned a number to each study when first entered, and we used this number to trace and track studies thereafter. Sometimes, on closer examination, we found that one paper reported more than one study. In this case, new numbers were assigned and a note of the new tracking numbers made on the previous entry. The EndNote databases were also used to store information about why a study was excluded and the name of the reviewer. Details of all studies to be included in the map and in-depth review were stored on an EPPI-Reviewer database, keeping the same numbers they were originally assigned on EndNote.

Keywording-included studies

Studies meeting the review's inclusion and exclusion criteria were assigned descriptive keywords, to produce a descriptive map of research activity. One set of keywords was provided by the EPPI-Centre and these were applied using definitions specified in the EPPI-Centre's keywording strategy. Additional keywords, specific to the context of this review, were devised and also applied. All studies assigned keywords were added to the EPPI-Centre's Research Evidence in Education Library (REEL).

Identifying and describing studies: quality assurance process

Great care was taken to define the terms used to screen studies, so that those screening against inclusion and exclusion criteria would interpret them in the same way. To ensure that all reviewers were making the same judgements, they each screened the first 30 studies independently. Where there were discrepancies, these were discussed. In addition, an experienced member of the review team checked a random sample of those screened by the other reviewers. Where there were differences, the reasons for these were discussed. Where reviewers felt unable to make a decision, they discussed it with a colleague. When two reviewers could not decide, it was taken to the project manager for a final decision. Checks of the decisions made on 20 random studies (0.4% of the total studies) were made by a member of the EPPI-Centre.

A similar procedure was used for assuring the reliability of assigning keywords. Three studies were key-worded by all reviewers, to ensure that the same decisions were being made. Where there were discrepancies, these were discussed. As a second reliability check, 16 studies were key-worded by two reviewers working independently.

A total of 4986 papers identified as a result of the search strategy described earlier were screened, based on a reading of their title and/or abstract, resulting in the identification of 1129 potential 'includes'. 1058 of these studies were obtained, and the full document screened; the remaining 71 were unobtainable.

Of the remaining 1058 studies, 82 met the criteria for inclusion. Studies meeting the review's inclusion and exclusion criteria were assigned descriptive keywords, to produce a descriptive map of research activity.

Characteristics of the 82 studies which were assigned keywords

- ***Subject focus of the studies***

Of the 82 studies that met the criteria for key-wording, studies with *no* curriculum focus constitute the largest group (40 out of 83), followed by studies concerned with first language literacy (35).

- ***Population focus***

The largest group of studies focuses on learners (67). Teaching staff (24) and 'other populations' (17) are also the subject of a significant number of studies.

Several studies have more than one population focus. The largest groups of studies focus on learners with poor basic skills (47), learners from minority ethnic groups (22) and unemployed learners (20).

- ***Types of interventions***

The key-worded studies are concerned with interventions at a range of levels, including national or local agency and individual learning provider. The largest groups of studies are those describing interventions by partnerships (25 out of 82) and by individual learning providers (20), followed by government interventions in England and in other countries (28).

The studies are overwhelmingly concerned with practice-based interventions (64), although significant numbers of studies describe funding (17) and policy interventions (16).

Please note that the figures above are not mutually exclusive to studies, as several studies described more than one intervention.

Moving from broad characterisation (mapping) to the in-depth review

A descriptive map was produced describing research activity in the field investigated by this review. This used frequency counts and cross-tabulations of the assigned keywords to reveal characteristics of the studies, identifying where research activity has been concentrated and where there are gaps. The map was also used to identify the most suitable sub-set of studies for answering the review questions.

The decision was then taken to narrow the field to a manageable set of **studies** for in-depth review. These were a sub-set of studies relevant to the review topic, covering a wide range of subjects and containing robust evidence. Exclusion criteria were based on the **review-specific keywords**, to ensure a group of studies which were relevant to the review question.

The in-depth inclusion criteria were applied to 76 studies (82 papers) in the map.

- **Studies from developing countries** were excluded – they were deemed to be less likely to be transferable to the UK context. This applied to five studies, leaving 71 studies.

- Studies were excluded if they did not have as the 'topic focus of study' (A3): 'A.3.1 Widening Adult Participation.' This excluded 30 studies, leaving 41 studies.
- Studies were excluded if they did not have among their objectives *at least three of the following* from the **objective of the intervention A.7:**
 - *Engagement intervention objectives*
 - A.7.1 Outreach
 - A.7.2 Targeting
 - A.7.3 Stimulating demand
 - A.7.4 Information, advice and guidance
 - *Achievement and progression intervention objectives*
 - A.7.8 Retention
 - A.7.9 Achievement
 - A.7.10 Qualification or assessment reform
 - A.7.11 Progression

This excluded a further 20 studies, leaving 21 studies in the in-depth review.

- Studies were excluded which were not designated 'External Evaluation' under A.1 study type for review-specific keywords. This excluded another three studies, leaving 18 studies.
- Studies were excluded if they did not have at least one objective of the intervention studied (A7) under engagement, and at least one objective of intervention studied under achievement/progression. This excluded one study, leaving 17 studies to be included in the in-depth review.

Overall 65 studies were excluded. This left 17 studies (in 23 papers) in the in-depth review.

Detailed description of studies in the in-depth review

Studies identified as meeting the criteria were analysed in-depth using the EPPI-Centre's software (EPPI-Reviewer®) and data-extraction tool, Guidelines for Extracting Data and Quality Assessing Primary Studies in Educational Research. This tool asks detailed questions about the aims and findings of a study as well as the methods used for sampling, collecting and analysing data.

Assessing the quality of studies and weight of evidence for the review question

EPPI-Centre tools were used to make explicit the weight of evidence apportioned to each study. Three discrete components were considered:

- the soundness of studies (internal methodological coherence), based upon the study only
- the appropriateness of the research design and analysis used for answering the review question

- the relevance of the study topic focus (from the sample, measures, scenario, or other indicator of the focus of the study) to the review question; these were used to provide an overall weighting for each study.

Synthesis of evidence

The evidence was synthesised to group and amalgamate material from the studies which answers the review questions and which meets the quality criteria for appropriateness and methodology. This was done by grouping studies according to three main dimensions of widening adult participation and by indicating, for each study in the in-depth review, the overall review-specific weight of evidence.

In-depth review: quality assurance process

Data-extraction and assessment of the weight of evidence brought by the study to address the review question were conducted by pairs of reviewers working independently and then comparing their decisions and coming to a consensus. A member of the EPPI-Centre carried out a reliability check by data-extracting a sub-set of the sample of studies. The five studies that were data extracted count for 25% of the total number of studies included in the in-depth review.

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