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A review of the research literature on assessment in post-compulsory education in the UK

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We know a great deal about the impact of assessment on the formal school sector and pupil knowledge, understanding and motivation. We know considerably less about such impact post-16, particularly in less formal learning and accreditation situations. This research review suggests there is considerable work to be done on the impact of forms of assessment post-16.

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A review of the research literature on assessment in post-compulsory education in the UK

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Acknowledgements

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The Learning and Skills Research Centre commissioned the review from Harry Torrance when he was Professor of Education at the University of Sussex. The project was initially funded at Sussex and the Research fellow, Dr Julie Coultas, was based at Sussex. During the project Harry Torrance moved to be Head of Research in Education and Director of the Education and Social Research Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University from where he completed the project and wrote the final report. Correspondence: h.torrance@mmu.ac.uk

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The Learning and Skills Research Centre (LSRC) is an independent research centre managed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), which aims to inform future policy development and practice in post-16 learning. Its key tasks are to explore research methods, engage with new ideas and ensure that research findings clearly and usefully inform future policy development and practice. The focus is on generating research that is independent, innovative and rigorous. The research concentrates on post-16 learning in the learning and skills sector that covers further education, government-sponsored work-based and adult community-based learning and school sixth forms.

This review is part of a major research programme looking at the impact of assessment regimes on learners' attainments in both accredited and non-accredited programmes. The research will investigate what forms of assessment are best suited to promoting learners' confidence to learn, both formally and informally. The first phase of this research programme will establish what is known about the impact of summative assessment. It is envisaged that the findings of the review will inform a programme of primary research in the area of summative assessment and testing.

Context

There is increasing concern that there is too much assessment in the English education system. In 2003 the government requested the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to review the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), as part of a broader review of the regulatory arrangements. A revised NQF and supporting information, including level descriptors, will be published in 2004. The aim is to ensure that the NQF and the arrangements for accreditation and monitoring are fit for purpose and streamlined.

In addition, the government is reviewing 14–19 qualifications with Mike Tomlinson as chair of the working group (DfES 2004), and the consultation document specifically identifies assessment as an area to be looked at. The review is looking at matching styles of assessment to styles of learning, variety of assessment methods and assessment for learning.

It is becoming increasingly clear, for example through the publications of the National Education Research Forum (NERF) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Programme, that work needs to be done to bring the findings of research and outcomes of development activity into much closer relation to the daily work of practitioners and policy-makers. There are examples of practical strategies that have been developed and investigations undertaken in some parts of the education and training sectors, and in other sectors such as social care and health care, aimed at improving the influence of sound evidence in the daily work of practitioners and in the formulation of policy.

The extent and quality of the evidence on whether summative assessment has a positive or negative effect on post-16 learners' motivation for learning in the learning and skills sector are currently not known. There is a body of evidence relating to pre-16 work. We know a great deal about the impact of assessment on the formal school sector and pupil knowledge, understanding and motivation. We know considerably less about such impact in the learning and skills sector, particularly in less formal learning and accreditation situations. Indeed, we know little about the overall mix of summative and formative assessment in the learning and skills sector, let alone the impact of one or other of these forms on student motivation.

The focus on 'motivation for learning' obviously begs significant questions about what is meant by 'motivation', whether or not it can be satisfactorily measured, and if not, what other sorts of evidence would be relevant (eg student perceptions of impact on motivation). It similarly begs questions about to what extent we would wish to develop 'intrinsic' rather than 'extrinsic' student orientations to learning, an issue of particular relevance to developing a commitment to 'lifelong learning'.

LSDA has carried out a review of research and development on widening adult participation in which activities to encourage learner motivation are described. It is interesting that while all the literature reviewed relates to participation, it does not refer to the impact that assessment regimes may have on learner participation. The report concludes that: 'Information on attitudes and aspirations needs to be supplemented with better information on the dynamics of decision-making processes among particular groups of individuals' (Macleod 2003, page 8, paragraph 43).

Another literature review by LSDA on learner motivation states that:

We know relatively little about what really motivates people to learn. Most of the research reviewed did not actually increase understanding of the dispositional factors that lead to learner motivation and how these interacted with policy, structural or situational factors.
(LSDA 2003, page 3, paragraph 1)

The review suggests that the barriers to learning fall into four main groups:

■ *structural factors – economic, social factors including academic attainment, social class, employment status and state of the labour market*

■ *policy-related factors including the effect of legislation and the configuration of funding mechanisms*

■ *supply-related or institutional factors including institutional ethos, attitudes and behaviour*

■ *personal and cultural factors (dispositional and situational factors), including perceptions of a range of different types of risk.*

(LSDA 2003, page 4, paragraph 8)

The role of assessment on motivation is not explored. The current review aims to evaluate primary research evidence that addresses the relationship between summative assessment and testing and learner motivation.

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Summary

The review did not identify any material of direct relevance to the review question. A significant amount of indirectly relevant material was identified and the report summarises this, effectively reviewing the 'field of assessment in post-compulsory education in the UK'. For this study 105 books, articles and research reports were reviewed. Most of the literature that was not reviewed, and a significant amount of what was, focused on policy implementation and systemic development rather than the experience of the learner. We know very little about how assessment procedures and processes are operationalised and experienced by learners (and indeed tutors) in action in the learning and skills sector, far less how they affect motivation and facilitate or inhibit learning. The empirical base of the field is relatively weak. Some high-quality ethnographic studies have been identified, particularly with respect to investigations of the 'traditional' 16–19 further education (FE) sector, but most of this work does not address assessment directly. Much other material does not report in detail on methodology and is very difficult to evaluate for research quality. The overall learning and skills sector is also very diverse and it is difficult to draw conclusions, based on evidence in one sub-sector, that would hold good across others (ie 16–19 further education, work-based learning, adult education, etc).

Nevertheless, some general conclusions can be drawn. Definitions of motivation are very rarely discussed in the literature and the term is often invoked loosely, without definition, to 'explain' why some learners progress while others do not, when in fact the use of such a term simply begs the explanation. More sophisticated discussions recognise the complex interaction effects of individual drive and interest, social background and institutional provision (including assessment modes and methods). Where assessment methods are discussed, the evidence suggests that learners across all sectors prefer coursework assessment and practical competence-oriented assessment over end-of-course tests. Many fear tests and there is also evidence that they can precipitate drop-out and deter progression. No research evidence was uncovered about what might motivate or deter potential learners who never engage with post-compulsory education – they do not appear in the reviewed literature because they are not included in the sample in the first place.

Coursework assessment brings problems of its own, however, especially with respect to workload and understanding assessment processes and criteria. Attempts to provide clarity of objectives and processes often simply encourage excessive and instrumental evidence gathering. Much more needs to be done at local level on the professional development of trainers and tutors in the field of assessment so that the formative potential of coursework assessment and portfolio completion may be realised. Negotiating learning objectives and recording learning outcomes are becoming common practice in less formal adult education (AE) (return-to-learn) settings and this seems to hold positive potential for other sectors, especially work-based assessment where portfolio completion is often practised as an entirely summative, supervisor-controlled procedure, sometimes not involving the trainee at all.

All literature, across all sectors, stresses the importance of monitoring, support and feedback on progress in improving retention and achievement. Assessment policies and methods that encourage the active engagement of tutors and learners in such feedback processes will be more effective in improving retention and raising achievement than those that do not. Nevertheless, to reiterate, we know very little about how assessment procedures and processes are operationalised and experienced by learners (and indeed tutors) in action, and a key finding of this review is that more research is needed to identify what actually happens in practice and to learn specific lessons about what sorts of support make a positive difference in what circumstances.

Section 1	**Introduction**

The review question was: 'do summative assessment and testing have a positive or negative effect on post-16 learners' motivation for learning in the learning and skills sector?'
The original call for proposals invited a tender for a 'systematic review' of research relevant to the review question. Such a review, following EPPI-Centre methodology (Gough and Elbourne 2002) would involve:

■ specifying a single 'answerable' research question

■ identifying 'search' terms

■ conducting a 'systematic' search of electronic databases, plus hand-searching journals, 'grey' literature, etc

■ defining and reporting explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, including those in relation to research methodology and quality

■ most initial inclusion and exclusion filtering decisions taken on title or abstract

■ identification of a 'map' of the field comprising articles to be read, with further exclusion of articles deemed less relevant or low quality after reading

■ final review of only those texts directly relevant to the research question and of high methodological quality.

Our knowledge of the assessment field in the UK, and indeed internationally, suggested that there might be relatively little empirical research pertaining directly to the review question, and that a more flexible approach to identifying and reviewing relevant literature might be useful. Our subsequent trawl and analysis of electronic databases and hand searches of journals confirmed this initial suspicion. Nevertheless, we have tried to be as thorough as possible and can now speak from a position of extensive knowledge of relevant databases – we now know there is very little directly relevant research-based material available, rather than simply suspecting that this is so. Such a finding is confirmed by an international review recently published by OECD; Behringer and Coles (2003, page 8) report that: 'The relationships between qualification systems and life-long learning are complex and little understood – evidence for the effects of one on the other are not available in the literature.'

What we have discovered is a reasonable amount of what might be termed partially relevant material, which will allow us to describe and review the field of 'assessment in post-compulsory education in the UK'. However, a good deal of even this literature encompasses policy proposals and critiques, short papers reporting early or limited empirical findings, and such like; there appears to be very little in the way of really sound and extensive research evidence. Thus, some such policy discussions, conference presentations, and so on, are included in our review of the field, though these will be duly noted as non-empirical, limited empirical, and so on, as and when included in the substantive text. The danger of including material which a strictly 'systematic review' would have excluded, is that the empirical basis for any conclusions is more open to challenge. The danger of excluding such material is that this report would have been very short indeed. What we have endeavoured to produce is an overview of research findings and commonly argued positions in the field of 'assessment in post-compulsory education in the UK', so that we can distil lessons for policy, but also identify key areas for further enquiry. In many respects, therefore, the conclusions from this review represent hypotheses to be tested, as much as findings to be disseminated.

Defining terms

Research

We take 'research' to be deliberately designed, systematically conducted and publicly reported empirical enquiry. Within this broad definition most reliance is placed on research that is not just publicly reported (eg in 'grey literature' research reports), but subject to peer review before publication in scholarly academic journals. More reliance is also placed on reports that include material by which methodological quality can be evaluated and which can be judged to be of high quality. As noted above, very little relevant work in the field met these criteria – much was two or three page 'newsletter' type reports, possibly drawing on personal experience as an AE tutor and/or wider research which was referred to but not described in detail. Much published work in the field also comprises policy advocacy and critique, rather than empirical investigation. In fact, some of these publications are included in the review (with problems of quality and reliability duly noted) and this process of inclusion is described in more detail below.

The learning and skills sector

The review has taken the learning and skills sector to comprise all post-compulsory education which is commonly known as further education and adult and community education; ie post-compulsory education which takes place in sixth form and FE college settings, workplaces, AE institutions and organisations, and less formal settings such as community education projects and 'return-to-learn' basic skills programmes. It includes formal Access to HE courses, but not higher education itself, nor professional training (ie teacher training, nurse training, etc).

Summative assessment and testing

Summative assessment is taken to encompass formal testing but also all aspects of coursework assignments or portfolio completion that contribute to final grading and pass or fail decisions. Thus the term 'summative' relates to assessment function, not assessment method, and this inclusive definition was confirmed at a 'user consultation seminar' early in the review process (March 2003). This decision proved prescient in terms of locating material since restricting the search to 'summative assessment', 'tests' and 'testing' in the learning and skills sector would have revealed virtually nothing of even indirect relevance. In fact, because of the limited material available a large range of proxy terms for 'summative assessment and testing' and 'motivation' were employed in the search. In particular, we found many more hits using specific assessment and qualification terms on the one hand (eg key skills tests, GNVQ, NVQ, etc) and search terms relating to motivation on the other (eg 'drop-out', 'retention', 'completion', etc).

Assessment in the learning and skills sector

Before discussing definitions of motivation it is probably helpful to outline the very diverse nature of the learning and skills sector and the different approaches to assessment within it. The sector embraces:

- formal academic instructional settings with relatively young learners (eg sixth form colleges and FE colleges)

- formal vocational training settings with similarly young learners (apprenticeships and technical training of various kinds based in FE colleges and/or private training providers)

- formal AE classes and training programmes for adults of various kinds

- on-the-job training and assessment by direct observation in the workplace of young and mature workers

- informal community and AE development programmes which may not even have educational achievement as a primary objective but through which adults involved in the developments can demonstrate skills and knowledge for accreditation.

Across these settings, assessment procedures and methods can be similarly diverse, including:

- different combinations of coursework, practical work, portfolios of evidence and end-of-unit or course tests in more formal academic and training settings for younger learners, leading for example to the award of AS and A2 certificates under the Curriculum 2000 A-level reforms (including vocational A-levels, previously known as General National Vocational Qualifications, GNVQs)

- formal testing of key skills such as literacy and numeracy for younger learners under Curriculum 2000 and older learners through programmes teaching adult basic skills

- direct observation and assessment of work-based activity often also involving the compilation of a portfolio of evidence of achievement – demonstrating which competences have been achieved

- identification, agreement and recording of learning outcomes derived from informal learning encounters.

Moreover, while these assessment methods have been laid out fairly schematically and discreetly, they are often employed in different combinations so, for example, a Modern Apprenticeship may involve young workers receiving college-based training assessed by practical assignments and knowledge tests to complete a technical certificate; plus work-based training assessed by observation and portfolio (to complete an NVQ); plus key skills tests. Each element can be assessed and passed separately, but all must be passed for the Modern Apprenticeship to be completed successfully.

A further complication is that changes to assessment modes and methods are often driven, especially recently, by government commitment to setting and meeting targets for producing a 'qualified' workforce, including raising retention and achievement rates for younger learners (16–19) and testing the outcomes of basic training for the unemployed and adult returners to learning. This runs alongside a parallel government interest in financial accountability and value for money, ie measuring the effectiveness of programmes by assessing the learners. Thus the use of particular combinations of assessment methods is often driven as much by accountability pressures as by curriculum and pedagogic fitness-for-purpose.

Motivation

A key issue in defining 'motivation' is the extent to which it is seen as an essentially internal individual character trait or as a product of the interaction between individual and environment – particular social context and experience of educational process. Both interpretations can be found in the post-16 literature we have reviewed, sometimes used by the same author in the same article. Weiner (1990) argues that motivation for the researcher in education has been confounded with the field of learning, so that motivation is often inferred from learning and learning is taken to be an indicator of motivation. This is certainly what we have found in this review; and lack of definition and operationalisation of the concept of motivation in the literature weakens a large proportion of the empirical work. It is not at all clear what authors mean when they use the term and often it simply seems to be 'shorthand' for explaining that which is hard to explain. For example:

- 'motivation was high' (Ofsted 1997)

- 'this really depends on … the motivation of the apprentice' (Kodz *et al.* 1998)

- 'students who failed … were often weakly motivated' (Bates 2002).

A standard definition of motivation is 'a construct that is used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of an individual's behaviour in a particular situation' (Byrnes 2001). More recently, the notion of engagement, where the student is active, attentive, curious and willing to participate, has been included within the definition of motivation (Byrnes 2001). Much of the literature we review implies that this sort of definition is being employed, but very few papers address or discuss this issue directly. Most imply either that motivation is to do with individual drive and enthusiasm, or that it is a product of the particular juxtaposition of circumstances that individuals find themselves in at particular points in time (or, as noted above, in some papers, both). These assumptions are also often confounded with notions (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation – so that learners are reported as motivated by what is taken to be a genuine or authentic desire to learn (intrinsic), or by the pursuit of an external goal (extrinsic, eg a qualification). The term is also employed rather differently depending on the substantive thrust of the paper. Thus motivation with regard to continuing in education or returning to learning (ie access and engagement) is often related to extrinsic factors such as pursuing qualifications whereas motivation to succeed (persistence and achievement) is often related to more intrinsic factors combined with levels of social and educational support. The problem is compounded, of course, as Harlen and Crick (2003) note in relation to their parallel review of assessment and motivation in the compulsory school sector, by the fact that: 'The interaction of different aspects of motivation with a variety of personal characteristics mean that what motivates some students may alienate others' (2003, page 171).

Similarly, as Behringer and Coles note in their review for OECD:

If there are relationships between qualification systems and life long learning that are not just spurious correlations, then there will be a means by which these happen … mechanisms … [or] 'drivers' … They may also operate in different ways in different social, economic and cultural conditions. Hence the importance of giving full consideration to these contextual conditions. (Behringer and Coles 2003, pages 9–10)

For these reasons, to reiterate, we took a fairly pragmatic view of what to include in our search terms and discussed relevant proxies with sponsors and users. The use of such proxies widened the range of possible titles for inclusion and increased the search work involved, but in 'casting the net' so wide we can be confident that virtually all readily accessible material of potential relevance has been identified. It is always possible that something has escaped the search, especially perhaps in the 'grey' literature of unpublished reports and internet sites, but our confidence is increased by the fact that nothing additional was brought to our attention when the first draft of this report was circulated to the advisory group for comment and discussed at an LSRC seminar in November 2003. Ongoing work, which was published after the end of the review, has been brought to our attention, eg Lillis and Sparrow (2003). This is noted for future reference but is not included in the review. Similarly, including partially relevant material in the overall review has broadened the task but we believe rendered the final product more useful. In terms of the methodology of systematic reviewing, it might be said that we have stopped at the 'mapping stage' of the process and reviewed all articles in the mapped field, rather than continue to exclude articles and end up reviewing only a few in detail, as has been done in some reviews for other sponsors.

Inclusion criteria for the literature search

The parameters of the search were restricted to English language publications, directly referring to UK policy and practice, and published after 1988. These restrictions were related to the issue of utility of the findings. The UK post-compulsory sector has undergone significant change since the mid-1980s with the introduction of competence-based assessment and qualifications such as NVQ and GNVQ, and it was felt that material deriving from or related to these changes would be of most use for future policy development.

The search terms employed yielded 6491 hits. Eventually, out of 751 potentially relevant titles and abstracts, 105 were identified for reading and reviewing. The full search history and key search terms used are reported in Appendices 1 and 2 with the full list of titles and details in the reference section. Of the 105 titles identified for reviewing, 52 were identified as based on 'empirical research' (in the loosest sense of the word, ie likely to be empirical reports of research studies) and were systematically summarised using a template (Appendices 3 and 4), evaluating both research quality and substantive content. A key criterion of inclusion was that the titles and abstracts indicated that the article was likely to include data reporting learners' views and experience of post-compulsory education in general (especially drop-out, retention, and so on), and the impact of assessment on their learning in particular. These 52 papers form the 'core data' for this review. However, many were found, on reading, to be of low quality or low relevance or both, and they have been supplemented by the reading of a further 53 titles. These were initially identified as probably including some reference to 'empirical research', but less likely to be directly relevant; or they were general reviews of the field based on research or reviewing the research of others; or policy reviews or opinion pieces drawing on experiential evidence rather than research evidence. These 53 additional articles were read and reviewed for inclusion in the final report but not summarised by template. They include key 'in-depth' treatments of the topic such as Ecclestone 2002a, for which data extraction by template was thought inappropriate. In the event many of the articles initially identified as less relevant or of potentially lower research quality than the 52 reviewed by template, proved to be just as relevant and research-based, if not more so, and are used extensively in the overall review. Thus we have adapted and modified the systematic review methodology. Rather than regard all 105 titles as constituting the 'mapped' field and then excluding further articles from the final review after reading, we have included them all, but with changed weighting compared with our initial judgements. The justification is that the result will significantly improve the utility of the review.

Section 2   **The review**

A brief overview of the field of assessment in the learning and skills sector

To begin with it is probably worth trying to communicate some overall sense of the field. 'Assessment' is not an easily delineated or identifiable body of work in the post-compulsory sector. Work on assessment and assessment issues is often more of a by-product of other interests – evaluating the introduction of a new programme or award (especially outcomes-based approaches) or discussing the problems and possibilities of adults returning to learning. Many of the titles or abstracts that feature specific references to particular qualifications such as A-level, GNVQ or NVQ, fall into the two following broad groups.

■ *Work that discusses qualifications as currency in the labour market*
These pieces are either econometric treatments of rates of return, at the level of national skill development and economic investment or at the level of individual life chances and earnings or ethnographic accounts of why young workers and/or adults continue in learning or return to learning (a key factor being to improve their chances in the labour market). Some examples of this latter group of work will be included in the review because it carries implications for motivation and assessment policy.

■ *Work that discusses new tests or qualifications such as GNVQ or key skills as curriculum innovations*
These pieces tend to report on problems of development and implementation; thus the focus is on curriculum and staff development, pedagogical issues, technical issues of the validity and reliability of assessment, and so on, rather than the impact on the learner. Again, some implementation studies will be briefly noted as examples of what is available and what lessons can be learned about the mediation of policy in action.

Similarly, there is a significant literature discussing competence-based skill development and assessment in professional contexts – nurse training, teacher training, and so on – but we have not included such literature in our definition of the field as it is not directly relevant to the learning and skills sector and is generally discussing issues in relation to already academically well-qualified learners. A brief look at such titles also suggests that their content is very similar to the second point above – discussion of implementation issues and the validity and reliability of competence-based assessment, rather than the impact on the learner.

The papers identified for inclusion break down into three distinct categories of study relating to sector:

- small-scale studies of particular awards, especially GNVQ (eg Abbott 1997; Bates 1998, 2002; Bathmaker 2001; Bloomer 1998; Ecclestone 2001, 2002a,b; Foreman-Peck 1999; Hodkinson 1998; Smith 1998; Solomon 1996; Williams 2000)

- small-scale studies of Access courses, often written by tutors organising such courses (and, puzzlingly, deriving particularly from Scotland rather than elsewhere, eg Cooke *et al.* 1996; Cullen 1994; Johnstone and Cullen 1994; Karkalas and Mackenzie 1996; Mackenzie 1994)

- small and larger scale studies of adults 'returning to learning', especially in basic skills contexts, but still employing largely qualitative methods, especially life history-type approaches (eg McGivney 1992, 1996, 2002; Turner and Watters 2001; Ward and Edwards 2002; Watters 2002).

One can interpret such distinct 'bodies of knowledge' as reflecting the working contexts and professional interests of the researchers involved – the 'tribes and territories' that the researchers inhabit (Becher and Trowler 2001). Indeed they often refer internally to each other (ie GNVQ literature to GNVQ literature), but not externally (ie across GNVQ to Access, or vice-versa). Beyond these identifiable groups of publications that emerge from a wider review of the field, there is other work that refers to assessment issues, but it is relatively sparse and disparate. Thus there is a significant body of work on what might be termed the traditional 16–19 FE sector; a significant but smaller body of work on older adults and non-formal contexts of learning; and a little research on work-based learning and assessment.

Within these categories there are a significant number of articles that address attitudes towards educational engagement and progress and associated motivational issues at a fairly general level but, as noted above, when discussing definitions of motivation, many of these are confused and confusing, and while they often refer to the market value of qualifications and/or the pursuit of extrinsic reward, they very rarely focus on assessment functions or methods as such. There is also a fairly significant division between studies employing a basically sociological perspective, and arguing for the complexity of social factors underlying motivation and progression (eg Adamson and McAleavy 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson 1999; Crossan *et al.* 2003; Reay *et al.* 2002; Warmington 2003), and those emphasising a more 'college-effectiveness' perspective, arguing that better educational provision and student support will increase motivation, retention and achievement (eg summarised by Martinez 2001). Across the field, however, there is nothing, except Ecclestone 2002a, that explicitly discusses and explores the impact of assessment on motivation in detail. Much of the AE literature reports learners' fears of formal assessment, but this tends to derive from fairly anecdotal sources and, again, does not explore impact in any detail. Probably the most substantial research-based sources for these claims are Turner and Watters (2001) and Ward and Edwards (2002).

Implementation

Any number of titles could have been included as examples of the way in which implementation of assessment developments has been addressed in the learning and skills sector. It has certainly been illuminating to discover how often assessment developments are considered from the perspective of awarding bodies or curriculum and institutional development, ie as problems for system-planners, local managers and lecturers at the 'chalk face', rather than as facilitating or inhibiting learning because of their impact on the learner. The following highlight examples across the sector.

Raggatt (1994) produced an early study of implementing NVQs in colleges. A questionnaire sent to a national sample of staff development officers and heads of department in FE colleges produced 292 returns. While dated, the results are interesting (though they relate to staff, not student, perceptions): 65% agreed that NVQs 'motivate' learners while 75% 'believe that NVQs require too much assessment' (page 65). A similar survey today would probably reveal figures that were substantially the same. Examples from other sectors include Bates (1998) and Bloomer (1998) on implementing GNVQs; Bowring (1994) and Trodd (1996) on implementing pilot Records of achievement in non-vocational adult education; Martin (1998) on the development of the National Open College Network (NOCN); and Eraut *et al.* (1996), Leader (1995), Priddey and Williams (1996) and Spielhofer (2001) on aspects of assessing work-based learning. The studies are often small (Priddey and Williams n=5 training managers in the central training unit of one bank; Spielhofer n=29 NVQ candidates in two bank branches) but all point to the mediation of policy in practice. Straightforward implementation of central directives cannot be assumed, especially when it involves understanding of assessment criteria as well as knowledge of assessment procedures.

Similar studies are still appearing as new policies are introduced and pursued, for example Faraday (1996), Greenwood *et al.* (2002) and Grief (2002) on accrediting learning in non-formal setting (especially NOCN-type accreditation, see also Lillis and Sparrow 2003); James and Brewer (1998), Hodgson and Spours (2002) and Bolton and Hyland (2003) on the introduction of key skills. However the first three of these studies are largely summaries of informal insider knowledge of developments, plus limited case-study evidence – more at the level of policy advocacy than research: James and Brewer is a case study of one development and in Bolton and Hyland n=41 FE lecturers across seven colleges; only Hodgson and Spours constitutes nationally valid and reliable research. Once again, however, the main finding across the studies is that policy is mediated in action, with key skills being interpreted in many different ways by lecturers and largely ignored by students. Specific reference to the work on key skills will be included later in the report.

Assessment and motivation

We have found no published work that directly addresses the review question, but some that analyses the relationship between assessment and motivation, most significantly Ecclestone 2001, 2002a and 2002b, all of which publications derive from the same PhD study reported as *Learning autonomy in post-16 education* (Ecclestone 2002a). The work explicitly explores definitions of motivation and the likely balance to be struck by assessment policy and practice between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. It also explores at some length the interaction of social context and individual motivation, and posits the concept of 'assessment careers'. Here the notion of 'learning careers' (Bloomer and Hodkinson 1999) is developed in relation to 'assessment regimes', raising the possibility that people develop 'assessment careers' – that is, preferences for one type of assessment over another which are developed and sedimented over time as learners experience success or (more often) failure with particular methods, especially traditional tests and examinations (see also Ecclestone and Pryor 2003).

The data and analysis in Ecclestone's publications are intellectually ambitious and persuasive, but nevertheless derive from a small-scale study in one particular sub-sector of the learning and skills sector. The focus is on competence-based assignments and portfolio completion, rather than on testing; and the research comprised 'case-study' interviews and observations with eight GNVQ lecturers and 18 students in two FE colleges in the north east of England, plus questionnaires to 60 other lecturers and 72 other students involved in the same programmes in the same colleges. The work is therefore powerfully indicative of problems and issues, but is not definitive of the sector.

Crucially, the study argues that to understand the impact of assessment processes and procedures on learner motivation we 'need to differentiate between the effects of an assessment model, institutional factors … students' dispositions to learning and their expectations of progression and achievement' (Ecclestone 2002a, page 45). Elsewhere Ecclestone argues that: 'links between autonomy, motivation and assessment are affected by the beliefs, values and assumptions embedded in learning and assessment interactions … More widely … motivation … cannot be isolated from the material conditions affecting students and their life chances' (2002b, page 143–4).

We agree and in this respect the review question posed by the LSRC is at the cutting edge of motivation theory – not surprising then, that there is not much published on it.

Ecclestone reports that making learning objectives and criteria of assessment explicit benefits some learners in some ways, especially 'less confident students' (2002a, page 130). It provides a framework for progressive development of understandings and competences and, in the words of one student, explicit criteria 'make the teachers talk to you more'; that is, there is something concrete to talk about and this can potentially engage the interest and intrinsic motivation of the learner. However, the same structure can also be interpreted as a series of incremental 'hoops' to be jumped through, and become very extrinsically and instrumentally driven. Thus the 'teachers emphasised external goals and in particular the persuasive power of credentialism' (2002a, page 110); while the students focused on meeting the criteria in very limited ways. Developing independence was particularly problematic in these circumstances and ultimately detailed specifications 'consolidated a view that autonomy meant solitary, compliant work' (page 152). Ecclestone terms this 'procedural autonomy' (2002b, page 24) and it accords with other findings with respect to GNVQ students becoming 'hunters and gatherers' of information (Bates 1998, 2002). Bates (2002) reporting on an ESRC-funded ethnographic study in one midlands school sixth form also notes the 'instrumental application of criteria' which in some cases led to 'fabricating evidence' (page 12). Furthermore, Bates (2002) and Bloomer (1998) report that action plans were often written up *after* completing an assignment, rather than before. Bloomer (1998) was reporting on an interview-based study of 102 young people in Devon moving from school to further education and work, including 43 taking GNVQs.

One important consequence noted by Ecclestone, of the extrinsic expelling the intrinsic, so to speak, was that many students 'aimed low' in terms of meeting the criteria for a 'pass' rather than a 'merit', or a 'merit' rather than a 'distinction', choosing to work in a 'comfort zone' (2002a, page 119) rather than push themselves. They didn't want to do the extra work, but they also didn't want to take the risk of relative failure, a disposition deriving from previous unsuccessful school experience. This observation is at the core of the idea of an 'assessment career', where learners choose the assessment regimes and methods with which they feel most comfortable, even if it is not necessarily in their own best interests.

Other evidence can be said to challenge such findings, however. Thus the Ofsted report on the first two years of GNVQ (Ofsted 1997) asserts that 'the motivation of students was high … The presentation of portfolios … is generally good, with the large majority of students taking great pride in their work' (page 28). Similarly Bloomer (1998) found that 'students frequently claimed that practical experience made for more effective learning on the grounds that it was easier to remember things after having *done them* or *seen them* than after merely having *read them*' (page 172, original emphasis). This seems to imply that the pedagogy and assessment methods of GNVQ are at least potentially motivating for students, though Bloomer (1998) also notes that students developed a 'treasure hunt' approach to learning (page 172) very reminiscent of Bates' 'hunters and gatherers'. A key issue here is the extent to which policy development might drive out 'the good' in search of 'the perfect'. If some young people are motivated by, and take 'great pride' in, 'hunting and gathering' information, is that really such a bad thing? A further issue in evaluating such evidence is whether inspection or research reports should simply record the views of learners without comment, or interpret them in the overall context of educational practice and award status. Thus learners may report positively on their experiences, take pride in what they do, and be very happy to work within their own 'comfort zone', but this may not be expanding their horizons as much as it could.

There is, in fact, in the literature, almost a sub-genre of GNVQ policy critique that seeks to explore the rhetoric of whether or not competence-based, individually pursued awards really deliver on the development of independent learning and useful skills for the future. Some of this will be reviewed later when discussing the utility of GNVQ and Access courses in preparing for further study. For the moment we note Ecclestone's most recent overall judgement of her evidence. This seems to indicate that even an apparently benign and well-intentioned development, which one might argue provides an important transitional 'holding pen' for those not well qualified enough or confident enough to move on immediately to further academic study (ie academic A-level), ultimately restricts rather than develops the ambitions of the majority:

independent learning meant 'doing it for yourself' … [this] ad hoc informal and non-formal learning consolidated low risk strategies and instrumental attitudes … It encouraged less confident students to maintain comfortable dispositions to learning, even when these hindered their achievements … Aiming low, playing safe and working informally with friends were therefore crucial to a new identity.
(Ecclestone and Pryor 2003, page 480)

The implication of such a conclusion is that policy-drivers are not enough – and certainly not when they go down the road of more and more specification. Policy may provide the direction and framework for changes in practice, but qualitative improvements at local level require the time and resources to sustain long-term professional development and, with respect to learner motivation, the capacity of tutors to develop policy to *challenge* learners.

Other sub-sectors

Other work reporting on the interaction of assessment and motivation comprises Cooke *et al.* (1996) investigating experience in continuing education classes at Dundee University; Mackenzie (1994) investigating Access courses and Bowring (1994) reporting on a Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) pilot development of Records of achievement for adult learners. Cooke *et al.* (1996) report findings from a questionnaire to various non-credit students (n=569): 29% wanted the opportunity to gain a qualification and:

There was … considerable support for assessment and certification amongst students, particularly if the assessment was in a form that was relevant and appropriate to adults and was optional rather than compulsory. Those who viewed assessment in a positive light saw it as a way of motivating themselves, as a way of measuring themselves against a yardstick and of gaining some form of recognition of employers and others. (Cooke *et al.* 1996, page 32)

As participants in what one might term 'traditional' AE classes, the sample here, of course, could well include adult learners who had already been reasonably or even very successful, academically.

Mackenzie (1994) reports results from a questionnaire to Access course students on examination anxiety (n=47). Nearly all reported some anxiety but overall such anxiety did not seem to present a major or insurmountable difficulty for these adult learners, and certainly did not demotivate them. With respect to Records of achievement, Bowring (1994) reports that: 'Learners welcomed the opportunity to clarify learning objectives, monitor their own progress and identify their achievements … [and] … discuss more clearly their progress and learning targets with the tutor' (page 202).

This confirms some of the positive findings from Ecclestone's study (and echoes reports from other AE studies which will be discussed later) but must be treated with caution since it is a 'self-report' of a pilot managed by Bowring on behalf of his employer and probably comes as much under the 'policy advocacy' label, as it does under 'research'.

Finally, Kodz *et al.* (1998) reporting a survey of trainees and employers in eight training suppliers in Avon (n=40) mention motivation in the context of key skills development and implementation, but implicitly define motivation as a characteristic of the learner, rather than a function of the assessment system:

The drawing up of the action sheet is usually a joint effort between assessor and trainee but this really depends on how well the visit went, the motivation of the apprentice, and their understanding of the key skills and the assessment process. (Kodz *et al.* 1998, page 70)

It does, however, confirm the interpretation and mediation of policy at local level.

Assessment

Considerably more sources have something to say about the role and impact of assessment more generally in learners' experience of educational activities and about the response that learners have to particular methods of assessment. Thus Ecclestone (2002a) further reports that obstacles to GNVQ achievement included the balancing of 'heavy workload, [part-time, paid] work commitments and social life' (page 123). Similar findings about workload are reported in other investigations (eg Bloomer and Hodkinson 1999; Foreman-Peck 1999) and are confirmed by Davies (1998), reporting on a large-scale survey of GNVQs carried out for the DfES (n=3391): 'A main cause of drop-out and unsuccessful completion was the workload to complete portfolio evidence. This was especially daunting for students who on entry were among the least able, least motivated and least mature' (page 29).

Martinez (2001, and with Munday 1998) summarises research indicating workload problems very briefly, almost in passing, noting it as a now well-established common-place.

Across both the formal and informal sectors, however, even among A-level students, coursework gets a much better press than final tests or examinations. Thus Solomon (1996) reporting an interview-based study of GNVQ science students (n=77) notes that: 'The majority disliked, or even dreaded examinations. Indeed some claimed that they had chosen to do GNVQ rather than A-level precisely because of the absence of examinations' (page 41).

Abbott (1997) reporting a small-scale questionnaire survey of GNVQ students (n=123) confirms such findings. Bloomer (1998) similarly reports that GNVQ students prefer coursework and also that both they and their tutors thought the associated unit tests were not valid assessments of their underpinning knowledge (page 181). This view is echoed by Ofsted (1997), which reports 'The mastery tests … are uneven in quality and not always well suited to testing depth of students' knowledge in the vocational areas' (page 6).

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) in a longitudinal study of 79 young people, interviewed up to five times over four years (from 15–19 years of age; n=49 eventually, with drop-out) report that even successful A-level students prefer modular schemes and module tests to end-of-course examinations because 'I don't have to worry about it again once I've got the module result' (page 40). However, this does beg questions about the instrumentalism inherent in pursuing short-term 'performance goals' (Dweck 1999). Similarly Harris (2001) in a questionnaire survey of 423 A-level students in nine institutions notes that pursuing A-levels may not be a particularly positive choice, often involves a great deal of stress even for those who are relatively successful and concludes that A-level is 'a demanding experience which seems to be about trying to live up to everyone else's expectations at the same time as being unsure about your own' (page 68).

Instrumentalism also features strongly in Ecclestone's discussion of GNVQ, with teachers and students alike perceiving even portfolio assessment as synonymous with external summative judgements. Formative assessment, insofar as it was recognised at all, was simply seen as a preparation for such judgements:

assessment was associated with marking assignments, collecting evidence of achievement and formal tests … assessment for … the teachers … was … a time-consuming, solitary and boring chore. Teachers' rooms were full of student files and portfolios and teachers carried a high and frequent marking load … activities associated with formative assessment became little more than a pre-emptive extension of summative checking, tracking and evidencing.
(Ecclestone 2002a, pages 155, 156, 167)

Ecclestone calls this an 'auditing approach to feedback' (2002a, page 167) and in so doing draws our attention to the problems of providing formative feedback within highly circumscribed educational programmes. Later sections of this review will note the positive role for student support and feedback that is often reported in the literature, but Ecclestone provides an important cautionary voice on the role of assessment in performative accountability systems and 'the minefield of risk aversion that increasingly accompanies assessment regimes' (Ecclestone 2002a, page 183).

Adult learners

Probably the most substantial study including material on adult views of assessment and assessment methods is Ward and Edwards (2002). They conducted semi-structured interviews with 70 adult literacy and numeracy learners in eight AE institutions and FE colleges in the north west of England and report that 'many learners are deterred by or do not seek qualifications' (page 11). This generally derived from previously negative experiences at school: 'Most did not want to take exams and the overwhelming preference was for ongoing assessment … Fear and panic were the main reasons given for aversion to tests' (page 39).

Likewise, Turner and Watters (2001), having conducted semi-structured interviews with 169 learners drawn from non-accredited courses in 10 institutions, report that 'assessment' carried very negative connotations from previous unsuccessful school experience and that: 'Assessment was not a term used by learners … they spoke of feedback from tutors … proper account needs to be taken of learners' unease about "assessment" and the possibility that this might reinforce deficit models' (pages 4–6).

Watters (2002) in a related summary article states that: '"Assessment" as understood by the learners was not understood as having any formative purpose or as supporting their learning. Many linked formal assessment with competitiveness between learners, which they disliked and felt undermined trust' (page 10).

Crossan *et al.* (2003) summarising interviews conducted with 70 learners in four colleges similarly note that adult returners to learning often hated school, citing one respondent as saying 'I was always frightened that I would get it wrong' (page 59). Crossan *et al.* also draw attention to the fact that continuing in education, in some communities, was (and perhaps still is) regarded as 'cissie' among males (page 63), thus reminding us of the complex factors regarding identity formation that underpin many interpretations of education, and by association, assessment (see also Willis 1977 for a classic case study of working-class male responses to formal educational activity).

Merton (2001) reporting 'action research' interviews and development with 47 excluded young adults returning to 'basic provision' classes also focuses on memories of testing as part of the negative disposition that many initially unsuccessful learners bring with them into adulthood ('I used to panic and forget things', page 9). Janssen (2000) reporting on focus group interviews with four groups of learners (n=4x10=40) returning to adult education notes that when students were not learning for a qualification, they: 'appreciate the lack of pressure to perform to a set standard, the opportunities for taking risks, the benefits from making mistakes happily and learning from them' (page 15).

Interestingly, while not directly relevant to the learning and skills sector, Kelly (1989) and Bilston (1989) summarising data from Open University degree-marking, report that older students did worse in timed examination than younger students (5% poorer pass rate). However, since none of the data itself is presented, and there is no indication of prior achievement levels and so on, it is difficult to know how significant such a finding really is. It is indicative of a potentially interesting source of data for future studies, however. Similarly, Gibbs and Lucas (1997) reporting on examination data from one HE institution collected over 10 years conclude that: 'modules with a high proportion of coursework assessment produced higher average module marks than those with a high proportion of assessment by examinations and subject areas which used more coursework assessment produced higher marks' (page 183).

The explanation here could be that coursework marks are easier to obtain, or that coursework assessment, aligned with module objectives, is a more valid and reliable way of assessing complex understandings and competences.

Karkalas and Mackenzie (1996), reporting the findings of a questionnaire-based study of 253 Glasgow University Access students, of whom 74 did not continue into higher education, note that the formality of the assessment system employed, including formal examinations, may have had something to do with non-continuation since: 'the Access course would seem to have focused in some ways on the level and demands of undergraduate study rather than the actual situation of some students even while it was attempting to build a bridge between them' (page 21).

Of course this does not explain why 179 students *did* continue, and highlights the need for comparative studies of continuers and non-continuers, the successful and the unsuccessful on learning and skills sector programmes, to identify what makes a difference in terms of institutional procedure and support. Certainly Ward and Edwards note of the returners in their study that:

some said they had learned to cope with tests. They were still not a positive choice but some were now willing to have a go … External certification was important for a few because it was a reward for achievements and a motivator which 'spurred them on'. There was a feeling that exams still make you sick but results and certificates give you a boost and confidence.
(Ward and Edwards 2002, page 39)

Adamson and McAleavy (2002) reporting on a questionnaire survey of withdrawal from FE courses in Northern Ireland (n=165) do not identify assessment issues as particularly important, with only 23% of the sample indicating that coursework was 'too difficult'; only 12% 'failed assignments'; and only 16% had 'difficulty coping with work'. Thus those who continue straight from school into 'traditional' further education, even if unsuccessful, are perhaps, not surprisingly, less intimidated by the processes of formal education than those who do not proceed immediately and return rather later.

Key skills testing

Coping with coursework is not the same as sitting tests, of course, and the introduction of key skills testing may exacerbate problems of non-completion or withdrawal. Hodgson and Spours (2002) reporting a large-scale national survey plus case-study interviews with students and tutors, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, note that 'key skills' are often confused with or conflated with 'basic skills' and suffer by association with the low status of basic skills work. Introduced by Curriculum 2000 policy developments, ostensibly for *all* young learners in 16–19 education or training, key skills teaching and testing are perceived as additional, not integral to both academic work and vocational training. They are regarded as 'pointless' (page 37) with a maximum of only 7% of UCAS applicants taking them. There were 'poor early test results, particularly at Level 3 Application of Number' (page 36) and Hodgson and Spours further note that: 'the government opted for a strong external testing regime and a demanding portfolio approach. This … has created problems … for authentic assessment in the workplace' (page 35).

They conclude: 'teaching to the test appears to be necessary in order to ensure any measure of success … [and] the exhaustive evidence gathering required [for the portfolio] leads to a paper chase' (Hodgson and Spours 2002, page 40).

Abbott (1997) likewise reports very negative attitudes towards key skills tests and some support among his sample of 123 GNVQ students for coursework over exams (pages 622 and 627). Similarly, Thornhill (2001) summarising findings from a DfES study of work-based training involving 115 employers and 235 young workers reports that 'Key skills are not seen as relevant by young workers and … the overriding view is that exam-based Key Skills are a retrograde step that may lead to increased NVQ non-completion' (page 3). Kodz *et al.* (1998) report that: 'Cross referencing between the NVQ portfolio and Key Skills assessment can be complex … in many cases the [training] supplier did this on behalf of the trainee as trainees often found difficulties with doing the cross referencing themselves' (page 71).

This would seem to defeat the whole (formative) purpose of identifying key skills in action. Finally, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (2002) is even more scathing reporting that 'failure to achieve key skills qualifications was a significant cause of poor achievement in Modern Apprenticeships and commenting on 'high ideals which do not work, as in the case of key skills'.

Work-based training

Other evidence from the work-based sector also favours ongoing assessment of practical competences rather than formal testing. Fuller (1995) reporting a study involving interviews with air traffic control staff (n=35) and a questionnaire to students (n=80) notes that: 'A clear majority of respondents indicated that they preferred practical methods of assessment and that given a choice they would prefer "continuous assessment to a final exam" ' (page 72).

Spielhofer (2001) reports from an interview-based study of bank staff (n=29) that NVQ portfolio assessment was generally seen as positive in that candidates could gain accreditation for on-the-job learning. However, tangible (written) evidence was privileged because the portfolio had to be compiled and assessed out of regular hours and as such: 'competence was assigned to those people who were able to write competently about their work' (page 636).

Spielhofer (2001) also notes that simply recording competences from the working environment did not lead to much in the way of innovative thinking and this perhaps reflects something of the problems noted by Ecclestone with regard to an 'auditing approach' to formative assessment in GNVQ and students 'aiming low' to work in their 'comfort zone': 'The potential for learning new skills and developing greater flexibility in the workplace was found to be very limited' (page 629).

Similar problems are noted by Tolley *et al.* (2003) in a DfES-funded study of NVQs in the workplace, involving interviews and observations in business administration, hairdressing, engineering and childcare (of which only engineering was actually studied in the workplace – all the other case studies were of college-based simulations). Portfolios were widely interpreted as summative documents, simply being 'signed off' for the purposes of gaining the qualification. Some examples follow.

In engineering: 'Assessment at both NVQ 2 and 3 was seen as being more to do with "signing off" portfolios for accreditation purposes than as an opportunity to further the candidates' learning through feedback' (page 5).

In child care: 'Tutors asserted the value of the portfolio in supporting formative assessment – a view not shared by candidates who saw it as a means of working from unit to unit and something to be "signed off" by assessors' (page 6).

In administration the most was not made of on-the-job informal learning opportunities so that: 'candidates often failed to recognise these [informal] learning opportunities as and when they occurred, let alone capture evidence of them in their portfolios' (page 7).

Tolley *et al.* conclude that: 'Assessment at both NVQ 2 and 3 was seen by candidates and employers (but not college tutors) as being concerned primarily with "signing off" of portfolio evidence for accreditation purposes' (page 8).

This accords with evidence from Kodz *et al.* (1998), cited earlier, about the lack of integration of key skills with portfolio development. NVQs are designed to be assessed in the workplace, on the job, under naturalistic conditions; with observational judgements made by assessors (usually specially trained supervisors and line managers) about whether or not a learner or candidate is competent. If portfolio evidence is also assessed it should be done in tandem with this process and integrated with it. However, the research evidence cited above indicates this is not easily achieved. It suggests that formal work-based training needs to pay more attention to the communication and negotiation of learning objectives so prevalent in the non-formal sector under NOCN-type procedures.

Motivation

Much of what can be termed the more general literature on motivation in the learning and skills sector, which is associated with assessment because it involves relating learning to the pursuit of accreditation and qualifications, revolves around how access, retention and progression are linked to life circumstances and especially to employment prospects. A key publication with respect to the 'traditional' FE sector is Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999), a longitudinal ethnographic-style study of a small number of learners followed over four years (n=49). Martinez and Munday (1998) is also relevant, not least because of the much larger database derived from college information systems (management information systems data on enrolment, retention etc, n=9000). But the focus of this study is much more on college provision and support and the learner experience of college, than on the motivation of young learners as such, set in social context. Neither study attends to assessment issues in much detail though both report that assignment deadlines, coursework loads and so on are important in decisions about continuing in further education, and Martinez and Munday make particular recommendations about levels of student support to which we will refer below.

Bloomer and Hodkinson 'argue that young people develop dispositions to knowledge and learning' (page 6) in the context of their overall life circumstances and develop 'learning careers … in which people's dispositions to those aspects of experience which bear upon their capacity to learn endure or transform over time' (page 37). Clearly experience of early success and failure in formal school assessment situations will have a bearing on the development of these dispositions and learning careers, even if specific methods of assessment are given relatively little attention. With respect to assessment, such evidence as is reported tends to confirm Ecclestone's observations about 'aiming low'. Bloomer and Hodkinson summarise this aspect of their data, with respect to relatively unengaged learners drifting through their college experience, by quoting one thus: 'I know I'm capable of more but I just can't be bothered to put in the huge amount of extra work' (page 70). Pressures, whether college-based or deriving from elsewhere, were often responded to by sharp changes of direction. Thus leaving and perhaps later starting new courses, was not necessarily seen as negative by either the young people or the researchers. Leaving was often a positive choice.

This accords with the findings of Kidd and Wardman (1999). They report on interviews with 248 16–17 year olds in which 47% of the sample had dropped out of courses at least once. Males were significantly more likely to be 'multi-switchers' than females, with many respondents claiming that they: 'saw positive personal benefits to changing courses, saying that trying things out was an important part of growing up and that they had learned something about themselves in the process' (page 272).

Similarly, Adamson and McAleavy (2002) report that: 'non-completion … appears to occur as a result of a complex decision-making process with an array of factors impacting on the student … [and] the majority of non-completing students are presently employed, either full-time or part-time. Moreover a number … are actively pursuing other qualifications' (pages 535 and 549).

Longhurst (1999), in a survey of student absenteeism in his own FE college (n=107) found that 52% of respondents had missed classes in the previous seven days. Among the reasons cited, 80% mentioned illness, 63% medical appointments, 51% weather conditions, and 46% admitted missing classes for social reasons. Age was significantly related to absenteeism with older students more likely to be absent. Assessment issues were not mentioned, although 42% admitted absenteeism in order to catch up with assignment work. Longhurst concludes that: 'factors to do with courses and teachers are found to be the least significant … Students strongly committed to their studies are less likely to be absent because of situational factors than are those who are less committed' (page 74).

Ultimately, however, this is less an explanation, more a tautology. Those who are most motivated are … most motivated; we know that motivation makes a difference, but we don't know what makes a difference to motivation. Having said this, however, the conundrum is a real one, and is reflected in other work. Cullen (1994) in an interview-based study of 14 discontinuing Access students found evidence that workload and deadlines could be used as excuses for students who wished to withdraw for other life-circumstance reasons. She reports:

the impossibility of complying with an imminent essay deadline was used by at least four people as an opportunity to indicate a wish to leave and was met with offers of flexibility which would have helped if work pressure was the problem, but since this was only a 'cover' this support was not effective.
(Cullen 1994, page 10)

Adamson and McAleavy's study primarily focused on reasons for withdrawal but they also asked about why people enrolled for course to begin with. Of their sample, 79% identified 'to get a qualification' and 76% 'to improve qualifications'. Connelly and Halliday (2001) reporting on a questionnaire study of reasons for choosing further education carried out in 10 Scottish colleges (n=700) also record that gaining qualifications associated with employment was most important but note that issues to do with identity and personal development were significant: 'It is clear that students want learning to connect to life as they live it, locally, and vice-versa' (page 191). Merton (2001) reports similarly with respect to disaffected and excluded young people.

Choosing a particular course or qualification is often construed in terms of a positive indicator of motivation but some of the literature is more cautious, especially with respect to lower status awards. Thus Hodkinson (1998) drawing on his longitudinal data with Bloomer argues that 'for many, lower status options only become choices if something perceived as better cannot be achieved and then they often do not feel like choices at all' (page 164); Foreman-Peck (1999) concurs. Lower status awards can offer a 'second chance' for engagement however. Steedman and Rudd (1998) report on a correlational analysis of the prior attainment and achievement on Intermediate GNVQ courses of a random sample of 142 students at a London college. They conclude that their study: 'provides evidence that colleges … provide a "second chance" for success: such colleges can help to "pull up" to intermediate vocational standard students who left school with low GCSE grades' (page 314).

In so doing they identify 'motivation' as the key variable in post-school success: 'commitment and motivation to succeed appear to be as – if not more – important than academic qualifications for success on Intermediate GNVQ' (page 307).

There are echoes of Longhurst's tautology here, attributing that which cannot be explained to the internal character trait, 'motivation', rather than exploring what engages and sustains motivation.

Bathmaker's (2001) much smaller scale study based on interviews with seven Foundation-level GNVQ students actually does try to explore this. She likewise regards GNVQ as providing an important second chance for young learners but locates the reason for success in the relationships developed with teachers and the rebuilding of confidence after previous failure:

Although [the students] *now wish to succeed, they equally wish to avoid any further possibility of failure. Foundation GNVQ offers a safe option, doing something they can succeed at if they work at it … A key element in helping students to succeed where they have previously failed is their relationships with teaching staff.* (Bathmaker 2001, pages 89, 91)

What we have here seems to be a much more positive interpretation of the phenomenon of 'aiming low' observed by Ecclestone. Bathmaker implies that aiming low with a 'safe option' is an important part of individual and institutional retrieval strategies to retain and progress students who might otherwise drift out of education altogether. A key difference between the studies, of course, is that Bathmaker was investigating foundation-level students, post-16, while Ecclestone was investigating Advanced GNVQ, supposedly the equivalent of A-level. It is not unreasonable to expect that an advanced programme should be held to account for restricting rather than expanding students' intellectual ambitions.

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and the development of an educated identity

Extrinsic, instrumental motivation, evidenced by the pursuit of qualifications, is often cited superficially as a key reason for continuing in or returning to learning, but a closer examination suggests the reasons are more complex. Tamkin and Hillage (1997) reviewing the literature on motivation and reward in continuing education for the DfES report that the most common reasons cited for participation are self-improvement, job satisfaction, and the desire to get a job or change jobs – ie get a better job. Selwyn and Moss (1996) reporting on a questionnaire-based study of adult learners on a part-time IT course in South Wales (n=138) state that 'the most popular motivational factor for taking a computer course was to enhance future employment prospects' (page 285). Riseborough (1992) reports on an ethnographic study of the apparently extreme instrumentalism of one group of HND Catering students: 'they are highly instrumental, they want "the Diploma without the education". The students are obsessed with getting good grades and passing the examinations … [while the college experience itself] is "boring" and "a waste of time"' (page 215).

Cox (2002) sounds an interesting cautionary note however. Reporting four case studies of qualifications gained by volunteers in different voluntary organisations, conducted by documentary analysis of training materials, awards and interviews with volunteers undergoing training, Cox concludes that 'the achievement of a qualification … was not seen as important' (page 163) and that volunteers are a particular group who are not motivated by such extrinsic rewards.

Other recent studies suggest that gaining qualifications, while still instrumentally driven in some key respects, may now be as much as about developing a legitimate identity in a society dominated by educational attainment and associated lifestyles, as it is about 'getting a job' as such. Thus, for example, Warmington (2003), reporting an ethnographic study of students on an Access course which he himself ran in an FE college, noted that many of the reasons cited among 20–30 year olds for returning to education were to avoid the lack of choice and limited autonomy associated with low status jobs and welfare dependency. He concludes that the students on his course: 'might be more accurately characterised as *disaffected workers* than disaffected learners' (page 97, original emphasis).

Crossan *et al.* (2003) likewise note that in many cases adults who wish to access not only reasonable employment prospects but also a reasonable lifestyle (for which read educated lifestyle) 'just have to' revise their literacy and numeracy skills to help their children with their homework, keep up with computers, and so on, 'these days' (page 61). Ward and Edwards (2002) also record helping children with homework as a significant reason cited by the adult learners in their study. It is almost as if our increasingly audited performative society will brook no dissent from its normative educated state, and, as Reay and Wiliam (1999) so illuminatingly put it in their study of Key stage 1 national testing in schools, quoting one of the children in the study who was expecting to fail: 'I'll be a nothing' (cited in Harlen and Crick's 2003 parallel study of assessment and motivation in compulsory schooling).

Identity, life transitions and interaction effects

Other studies of returning to learning report complex effects of the interaction of social context and educational experience or aspiration, which are parallel in some ways to those of Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999), though manifested through different pressures. Thus Dawson and Boulton (2000), summarising interviews with 38 adults re-entering education, report that a key theme was 'life transitions' involving major dislocations, such as death or divorce of a partner. Crossan *et al.* (2000 and 2003) report similar critical incidents. Dawson and Boulton conclude: 'many adults will not consider returning to education unless they experience some type of imbalance in their lives, whether dispositional and/or situational, which they feel they need to address in some way' (page 176).

Reay *et al.* reporting in-depth interviews with 23 mature students on an Access course in London point to shortage of money, lack of time and childcare problems as reasons why some did not continue and conclude that: 'complexities of ethnicity, gender and marital status intersect with, and compound, the consequences of class, making the transition process particularly difficult for working-class, lone mothers' (page 5).

McGivney (1992) summarising a survey of 50 AE organisations, but providing no detail of who and how many people were actually included in the sample, also focuses on transition issues. She concludes:

The evidence overall suggests that, whatever the motive for starting learning, instrumental motives tend to govern the next step; but that without prior participation in a general adult or community education course, many individuals would not have had sufficient confidence or awareness of available opportunities to take that second step.
(McGivney 1992, page 141)

In so doing she seems to imply that involvement in completely non-assessed educational activities might be a prerequisite for building confidence to engage in more formal assessed activities, another more positive interpretation of the 'aiming low' phenomenon discussed earlier.

In a subsequent article summarising attendance and withdrawal patterns, but again including no data, or details of how it was collected or analysed, McGivney (1996) echoes previous findings by reporting that early withdrawal was associated with lack of preparedness for the level of work encountered, later withdrawal was associated with fear of or lack of preparedness for exams. Watters and Gibson (2001) in an interview-based study of withdrawal from Access courses (n=45) report that when student confidence is weak, withdrawal occurs, and that: 'Over and over again, students interviewed remarked that drop-out occurred when assignments were due' (page 19).

But as we have noted previously with Cullen (1994), this may or may not be the 'real' reason for drop-out, always supposing that there is indeed one single 'real' reason, as opposed to a constellation of reasons which become more or less overpowering at particular points in time. McGivney (1996) concludes that: 'Students' motivation and the quality of the institutional support they receive have a greater impact on their progress than qualifications on entry' (page 134).

This may well be true, but it doesn't get us much further with respect to analysing the relationship between assessment and motivation, far less improving motivation.

Johnstone and Cullen (1994) review the findings of three separate investigations of retention and withdrawal from Access courses in Scotland, in which they were involved. These studies comprised a structured telephone interview survey (n=150), a semi-structured, face-to-face interview survey (n=100) and Cullen (1994) cited above. They report that discontinuing students' perceptions of Access courses were very similar to those of students who progressed, though low initial qualifications on entry, low confidence and the lack of friends on the course and/or effective support groups tended to be associated with withdrawal. They suggest that adults are unlikely to remain on a course if they 'are unwilling to confide in people they don't know or to bother people they know to be busy' (page 36) and conclude that: 'for former Access students progressing through higher education, a wise choice of friends may be the best recipe for staying the course' (page 38).

Although slightly tongue-in-cheek, this conclusion actually reinforces much of what we have reviewed previously, with respect to the interaction of general social background, immediate social context and perceived educational opportunity and challenge. How opportunities and challenges are understood and engaged with – that is, student motivation to learn – will be a function of initial impetus, ongoing experience and the reservoir of support, both general and specific, on which learners can draw.

Monitoring, feedback and support

Educational institutions can have little direct effect on community and family support for learning (although of course they can contribute to a local sense of community vitality and direction) but the published evidence all points to the importance of course and college-based feedback and support in sustaining motivation and improving achievement. Higham *et al.* (2000) report the findings of a questionnaire sent to college and sixth-form directors of study in Yorkshire (n=82) to investigate the extent and role of target-setting and monitoring in improving student achievement post-16. They state:

none was in any doubt that the process of monitoring students through their post-16 years was improving knowledge, attitudes and examination performance … not one of the 82 respondents in the postal survey doubted the sense and success of setting targets for their students and monitoring them as they progressed. (Higham *et al.* 2000, pages 7 and 106)

Bathmaker (2001), Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) and Ecclestone (2002a) all also report the positive impact of feedback and support on young students, though with the caveats reviewed earlier about the instrumentalism that GNVQ assessment criteria can engender. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) also note that *asking for help*, as opposed to receiving it as a matter of college and course policy, can be stigmatising, depending on college ethos and the perceptions that students have about what it means to be 'independent' (pages 26–7). Bates (2002) likewise suggests that some GNVQ students can flounder, precisely because of the emphasis on independent learning; though of course this negative evidence about lack of support still reinforces the general view that feedback and support are important.

Martinez (2001, with Munday 1998) provides the most complete overview of the importance of feedback and support in the traditional FE sector; and, with Hughes (2003), provides some evidence from the work-based sector. Indeed, he argues that his research reviews and empirical studies provide 'substantial evidence to challenge or disprove … that drop-out is largely caused by the personal circumstances of students' (Martinez and Munday 1998, page 8). Martinez and Munday (1998), in an empirical report compiled from analysis of student questionnaires, college-based student records and discussions with staff and students, note workload (ie coursework) as an important problem and record that those who withdrew were more likely to feel that they did not get enough feedback on assignments than those who remained (page 41). In his review of other studies Martinez (2001) reports that students withdraw because of: 'poor, inadequate or inappropriate advice and guidance … [and] insufficient understanding … of the demands of their course (eg balance of practical and classroom work, assessment requirements) … excessive or poorly scheduled assessment' (page 4).

In so doing he indicates that although coursework assessment may be preferred by many learners (and others) for many reasons, it has to be planned and properly integrated with teaching programmes to bring most benefit. His observations also identify the importance of early needs analysis and proper guidance for students. He further notes: 'paying particular attention to the early stages of the programme of learning [along with] early identification of under-performing students … allied with formative assessment and feedback' (page 6). This accords with Higham *et al.* (2000) noted above.

Interestingly, a recent LSDA review of motivation and participation in post-16 learning (LSDA 2003) seems to be slightly at variance with Martinez's position. This report sought to look beyond simple 'empirically reported' reasons for participation, retention and withdrawal, arguing that they were too dependent on fragmented, poor-quality research. The report summarised reasons for drop-out as 'still invariably the practical ones … income, time … residence … transport' (page 13); ie many of the reasons that Martinez dismisses. However, the report goes on to argue that such superficial reported reasons may mask deeper issues of attitude, expectation and perception of utility and longer term value, which perhaps accord with previous discussion of how motivation interacts with circumstance. While such an argument does not directly undermine claims and evidence for the efficacy of good-quality support and feedback, it certainly renders more problematic what should constitute such support and feedback. On this point Young (2000) is relevant. Reporting the findings of a small-scale study of adults on Access courses, which sought to relate progress to a 'simple self esteem scale' (no information on sample size), Young (2000) found that: 'students varied in their attitudes to receiving feedback, their perceptions of the messages that they were receiving and whether it was important to them that they receive positive comments' (page 409).

Reporting on a telephone survey of 45 work-based training providers, Martinez and Hughes (2003) note 'for work-based learning as whole … [only] 53% of leavers in the year achieved any full qualification' (page 2). However, they continue: 'Areas of good practice associated with successful completion … included: retention-oriented recruitment, assessment and assignment … initial assessment and planning which focuses on understanding and meeting learner needs … effective support … good assessment and verification' (page 3).

This accords with work reported earlier by Kodz *et al.* (1998) and Tolley *et al.* (2003) that attention has to be paid in work-based learning to communicating learning objectives and assessment processes much more clearly to apprentices (and indeed to trainers and assessors) and using assessment procedures much more formatively. There are also echoes of Ecclestone's observations about portfolio completion having to be a dynamic and fully understood educational process rather than a mechanistic one. Further supporting evidence derives from Tolley *et al.* (2003) who found that 'candidates progressed most effectively where workplaces had established formal support structures including a named supervisor to act as learning manager' (page 6). Similarly, Hemsley-Brown (2002) reporting on a small-scale qualitative study, involving semi-structured interviews with training managers in three training organisations notes that: 'staff employed by training providers to support trainees and provide training, are a key factor in reducing the rate of early leaving. Provision of monitoring, support and guidance is a key factor for improving retention' (page 233).

Moving on to evidence from AE settings, Janssen (2000) reports that most students wanted 'detailed, honest and discerning feedback on their progress' (page 15). Trodd (1996), summarising the findings of a pilot project introducing Records of achievement into Hillingdon Adult Education service, based on questionnaire returns from 95 students and 21 tutors, notes that the 'role of the tutor in affecting how many students started and finished RoAs was crucial' (page 190) and further observes that nearly all the students in the pilot found the list of potential learning outcomes included in the record very helpful for focusing their attention. Similarly, McGivney (1996) and Watters (2002) stress the importance of support and feedback. Unfortunately all these four publications are very short reports summarising small-scale investigations. Thus, while triangulation of findings lends weight to the conclusions, they suffer from the data not being available for scrutiny, and in some respects seem to reflect an 'accepted view' in the AE community rather than a properly evidence-based view. Similarly, a policy paper published by LSDA (Marken and Taylor 2001), which stresses 'systematic initial assessment and guidance' (page 11), 'regular reviewing and recording of progress' (page 19) and supporting 'the learner's efforts to identify his/her own progress' (page 20), only presents the briefest of positive examples to support its argument. While ostensibly being based on 'case studies' of '20 schemes' for excluded young adults around the country, the report includes no account of its methodology and virtually no data. It is interesting to note in passing that if 'systematic review' methodology becomes even more of an orthodoxy in policy circles than it already is, evidence such as this will be entirely ignored in the future.

Having said this, however, no articles were identified which suggested *less* support for learners was necessary. And having reviewed those that were positive about support and feedback, we can also note that several sources commented on the negative effects of poor feedback. Thus the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) report for 2002 (ALI 2002) reports that poor initial assessment, poor support and poor ongoing assessment and verification were all associated, separately and in combination, with poor inspection grades. It also notes:

- 'Lack of support for unit-by-unit assessment of NVQs'

- 'An individual learning plan cannot be prepared … without the most careful interview and, probably, well chosen formal testing'

- 'Initial assessment … remains inadequate'

(www.ali.gov.uk/ciar0102/htm/02/2.13htm)

Thornhill (2001) summarising the factors influencing non-completion of NVQs cites changing employer or occupation, insufficient employer involvement and support, and inadequate trainer and assessor support. Faraday (1996) reviewing NOCN accreditation procedures for adults with learning difficulties, from documents and discussion with key personnel, stresses that 'it is essential for there to be a thorough initial assessment process' (page 16). Grief (2002) summarising evidence from five 'case studies' of basic skills and English for speakers of other languages (no other methodological details supplied) likewise stresses the importance of early and continuing 'diagnostic assessment' (page 1).

Progression and preparation for higher education

Some material specifically investigated the utility of GNVQ and Access courses for progression to and work in higher education. In the case of Access courses, progression seemed to be the 'taken-for-granted' default expectation; withdrawal and non-progression is 'the problem' that is usually studied in this literature (as reviewed above). Wray (2000) examined the academic records of 144 mature entrants to higher education (112 Access/Foundation (AF) students and 32 direct entry (DE) students and sent a questionnaire to 170 more mature entrants (131 AF students and 39 DE students). The findings were that:

preparation for higher education through approved Access/Foundation courses is of academic advantage to those taking them, providing a head start over those entering HE directly with no formal academic qualifications, though that value is lost by graduation … significant numbers of those students do not feel adequately prepared for this level of study.
(Wray 2000, page 2)

Rhodes *et al.* (2002) report a study based on questionnaires completed by 85 GNVQ students and focus groups with a further 40 students, investigating transition support in widening participation schemes. They conclude that a close relationship between the information, guidance and reassurance that college support staff provide about progression to university is necessary for successful transition. Williams (2000) conducted 27 telephone interviews with university admissions tutors about GNVQ entrants. She reports that GNVQ was generally welcomed and tutors thought GNVQ entrants were 'lively students' but that they were not well prepared for traditional academic work. They had 'difficulty with longer, more structured pieces of work' (page 358) and 'coped badly with exams' (page 359). She draws attention to the relatively satisfactory 'exchange value' of GNVQ (ie applicants get in) but its relatively poor 'use value' (ie it is poor preparation for HE work). Interestingly, an earlier study by Curtis (1995) reporting an investigation of the author's own BTEC/GNVQ Catering students progressing to higher education, including a questionnaire survey of 29 HE institutions (no further methodological details provided), found that GNVQ was *not* well known or well thought of. But presumably this can be attributed to the fact that GNVQ was only being developed and piloted at the time of the Curtis survey. Five years had made a difference to visibility and acceptance (but also, of course, brought further policy change with Curriculum 2000 moving the goalposts yet again).

Smith (1998) reports a qualitative investigation of the experience of 40 Advanced GNVQ students and 20 former GNVQ students who had progressed to Sheffield Hallam University. Smith concludes, in terms reminiscent of Ecclestone that:

Some aspects of the findings suggest that the bureaucracy of GNVQ assessment may have encouraged rather than reduced dependency on the teacher … [and] *it was clear from the discussions with these students that they had gained far less from these aspects than was intended by the curriculum designers.*
(Smith 1998, page 537 and 546)

More positively, Barry (1997) reporting on a study involving participant observation of his own students, plus questionnaires (n=18) claims that: 'teaching style, assessment procedures and course characteristics associated with GNVQ are more conducive to a deep approach to learning than A-level' (page 52).

However, such conclusions seem to reflect the author's own preferences as much as the evidence. Swailes *et al.* (1998) investigating the marks, quality of work and progress of 125 GNVQ entrants onto their undergraduate Business Studies courses conclude that:

students entering higher education with a GNVQ in Business Studies were not disadvantaged in their first year of study … [and] *students entering business studies courses with advanced GNVQ in Business achieve comparable outcomes to students entering with A-levels in the first year.*
(Swailes *et al.* 1998, pages 211, 217)

Congruence of subject matter from GNVQ to first-year undergraduate study may account for the difference from Williams's findings, or the fact that Swales *et al.* were also reflecting their own commitment to GNVQ-type programmes in applied subjects such as business studies.

Differential success by award and institution

Some studies of pass rates identify differential success by award and type of institution where the award is taken. Payne (2001) reporting on correlational analysis of data from the DfES Youth Cohort Study gathered in the late 1990s notes: 'The risk of being unsuccessful was lower for A-levels than for either post-16 GCSEs or AS courses … for level 2 & 3 GNVQs the overall proportion of unsuccessful students was similar to A-levels' (page 1).

She goes on to point out that even taking prior achievement levels into account:

A-level students in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges had a significantly lower risk of being unsuccessful than students in FE college … [and] GNVQ students in both sixth form colleges and FE colleges did significantly better … than GNVQ students in school sixth forms.
(Payne 2001, page 2)

So it would appear that institutional ethos makes a difference to success rates – we can infer that GNVQ is not part of 'mainstream' provision and expectation in traditional school sixth forms, in the same way that it is in specifically post-16 contexts.

A-level 'pass rates' are currently running at more than 90%, so we can further infer from Payne (2001) that GNVQ pass rates (ie of those who complete the course) are 'similar'. We have not investigated such rates in detail, nor looked at overall drop-out from A-level and GNVQ courses. This would have taken the review in an entirely different direction of empirical investigation. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a *prima facie* case for concern when we compare these 90% success rates with the report from Martinez and Hughes (2003) that only 53% of work-based trainees in their study 'achieved any full qualification' (page 2). The Adult Learning Inspectorate figures are even lower. According to their 2002 report only 31% of Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, 36% of Advanced Modern Apprenticeships and 46% of NVQs were successfully completed in 2001/2 (ALI 2002). Many possible reasons for these figures have been reviewed already in this report, often revolving around complexity of assessment processes and lack of support. Groves (2002) in a small-scale, interview-based investigation of 'more than a dozen' drop-outs from NVQ courses confirms that nearly all found the performance criteria and requirements for assessment 'hard to understand' (page 18). Further investigation of drop-out and pass rates by award, education and training context and method of assessment would be helpful for developing policy and intervention strategies.

Opinion pieces and emerging issues

A large number of opinion pieces were encountered during the search. A few are included in the 105 titles reviewed since they represent particular positions in the field (eg Clary 2001; Coats 2000; Greatorex 2001; O'Grady 1991; Ogunleye 2002; Smith and Spurling 1999; Tudor 1991). A smaller number still are reviewed here, finally, since they draw on research or extensive experience or are congruent with research findings reported previously and seem relevant to present policy development.

Foster *et al.* (1997) argue that:

formally assessed and accredited education and the national qualifications framework are not appropriate or sufficient for all adults … [learners need to acquire] *the skills of planning, acknowledging and reflecting on a wide range of learning situations in order to become lifelong learners*
(Foster *et al.* 1997, pages 6 and 15)

Taylor and Cameron (2002) similarly claim that: 'Adults who have had little or no contact with education for some time will need flexible and non-intrusive arrangements for assessment and qualifications' (page 20).

McGivney (2002), summarising evidence and opinion in the adult and continuing education field, argues for the need to recognise 'soft outcomes such as increased confidence and feelings of greater self-worth' and suggests:

recorded formative assessment related to agreed outcomes could enrich the learning experience, encourage more self-reflective and critical learners and promote a more equal exchange between tutors and learners … [this would involve] *initial assessment, negotiated learning plans and regular reviews to check progress and record progress against aims.*
(McGivney 2002, page 30)

Such a view certainly accords with the research reviewed in this report, though interestingly it seems as relevant to the work-based training sector as to the less formal adult education sector. Communicating learning objectives and criteria to apprentices and using them formatively in a way that apprentices understand is an issue that appears to demand immediate attention at policy level and empirical investigation to identify ways in which it might actually be accomplished in practice.

Taylor and Cameron (2002) also claim that:

we know that lack of success at school exerts a potent and lasting influence and a number of conditions need to be in place to combat deep-seated negative reactions … the long-term effects of school success or failure demonstrate that how we are taught and assessed or examined early on has a potent and lasting influence.
(Taylor and Cameron 2002, pages 18–19)

This is certainly true with respect to gaining qualifications and pursuing subsequent social mobility, but the implication is that lasting psychological damage is done to individual learners as well. This *may* be true, and some evidence reviewed here suggests that it is, but it is a much more definitive statement than can be justified from present research knowledge.

Ecclestone and Pryor (2003) draw attention to the same issue when reviewing the notion of 'assessment careers' and how prior experience affects dispositions to learning. However, their articulation of the issue emphasises that more research is needed, rather than assuming that the data is already available: 'An important starting point is evidence about how summative testing in the national curriculum and the evocations of past success and failure created by higher education grading and GNVQ assessment tap into and shape learners' strategies for surviving assessment' (page 447).

This position accords with much of the evidence included in Harlen and Crick's (2003) parallel review of assessment and motivation in the school sector, ie that testing can and does intimidate, discourage and demotivate when it comes to trying to encourage the majority of the population to engage in lifelong learning. However, how it does this, and how alternatives might be developed which do not succumb to the same problems of instrumentally driven grade accumulation, is much less clear. Ecclestone and Pryor continue:

teachers cannot change learners' prior experiences of assessment [but] *they can help them to re-evaluate these experiences … if new developments in assessment practice are to do more than just reproduce the asymmetries of the forerunners, then a better understanding of the way that different assessment careers interact with them at different stages of … education and training is crucial.*
(Ecclestone and Pryor 2003, page 484)

This is an important insight and accords with Taylor and Cameron's (2002) call for 'school curricula and qualifications that pave the way for lifelong learning for all' (page 22). Boud (2000) is also relevant here. Deriving his analysis from notions of 'sustainable development' in the field of economics and green politics, he similarly argues for 'sustainable assessment … that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs' (page 151). Thus assessment must assess the task at hand while *also* leaving students 'better equipped to tackle their next challenge, or at least, no worse off (page 151). A crucial aspect of such an approach to assessment would be making sure that assessment criteria were transparent, but also debatable – understandable as social constructions that might change over time, and not a once-and-for-all endorsement or condemnation of individual capability.

Conclusions

Here, then, are important policy issues and a research agenda for the future. Across the compulsory and post-compulsory sectors as a whole it would appear that summative assessment and testing do more harm than good, but we do not have detailed evidence of this across all learning and skills sector fields, far less how and why some learners seem to cope far better than others with such demands. We know that negotiating learning objectives and recording learning outcomes are becoming common practice in less formal adult education settings and that this seems to hold positive potential for other sectors, especially work-based learning. We know that assessment policies and methods that encourage the active engagement of tutors and learners in feedback processes will be more effective in improving retention and raising achievement than those that do not. We also know that much more needs to be done on the professional development of trainers and tutors so that the formative potential of coursework assessment and portfolio completion may be realised.

Definitions of motivation are very rarely discussed in the literature and the term is often used loosely to 'explain' why some learners progress while others do not, when in fact the use of such a term simply begs the explanation. More sophisticated discussions recognise the complex interaction effects of individual drive and interest, social background and institutional provision (including assessment modes and methods).

Such evidence as has been identified suggests learners across all sectors prefer coursework assessment and practical competence-oriented assessment over end-of-course tests. Many fear tests and there is evidence that this can precipitate drop-out and deter progression.

Again, given limited evidence, it would appear that testing probably does more harm than good but we do not have detailed evidence of this across all learning and skills sector fields, far less how and why some learners seem to cope far better than others with such demands.

No evidence exists about what might motivate or deter potential learners who never engage with post-compulsory education – they do not appear in the reviewed literature because they are not included in the sample in the first place.

Coursework assessment and work-based assessment, especially used in the context of summative assessment (ie summarising information for use by third parties including awarding bodies) brings problems of its own, however, especially with respect to workload and understanding assessment processes and criteria.

Often attempts at providing clarity of objectives and processes simply encourage excessive and instrumental evidence-gathering.

Much more needs to be done at local level on the professional development of trainers and tutors in the field of assessment so that the formative potential of coursework assessment and portfolio completion might be realised.

Negotiating learning objectives and recording learning outcomes is becoming common practice in less formal adult education (return-to-learn) settings and this seems to hold positive potential for other sectors, especially work-based assessment where portfolio completion is often practised as an entirely summative, supervisor-controlled procedure, sometimes not involving the trainee at all.

All literature, across all sectors, stresses the importance of monitoring, support and feedback on progress in improving retention and achievement. Assessment policies and methods that encourage the active engagement of tutors and learners in such feedback processes will be more effective in improving retention and raising achievement than those that do not.

Recommendations

Overall, we know very little about how assessment procedures and processes are operationalised and experienced by learners (and indeed tutors) in action, and a key finding of this review is that more research is needed to:

- identify what actually happens in practice
- learn specific lessons about what sorts of support make a positive difference in what circumstances
- explore how assessment policies which underpin rather than undermine lifelong learning ambitions can be developed in practice at local level.

More work on drop-out and pass rates by award, institutional context and methods of assessment employed would underpin such detailed investigation of assessment practices and learner experience.

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Some of these sites are open to registered users only.

1 **British Education Index: www.ovid.bids.ac.uk**
   1197 titles identified from search and 123 potentially relevant

2 **Education Line: www.leeds.ac.uk/educol**
   4297 titles identified from search and 509 potentially relevant

3 **ERIC: www.ovid.bids.ac.uk**
   593 titles identified from search and 7 potentially relevant

4 **IDOX (Planning exchange):**
   www.planex.ndirect.co.uk/validate2.asp?url=default.asp
   404 titles identified from search and 34 potentially relevant

5 **Journal hand searching**
   78 potentially relevant

6 **Word-of-mouth**
   Some potentially relevant reports were also identified by word
   of mouth; these are included in the totals below

Total titles identified 6491; with 751 potentially relevant

From the 751 potentially relevant abstracts and titles
of research reports, **105** papers/articles/research reports
were identified for reading and summarising: **52** of the
papers were identified as 'empirical' (in the loosest sense
of the word ie likely to be empirical reports of research studies)
and were systematically summarised using a template
(see Appendix 4).

The other titles were identified as empirical but less likely
to be directly relevant, and/or policy reviews, opinion pieces
or general reviews of the field based at least in part on research
or reviewing the research of others; they were read and
reviewed for inclusion in the final report but not systematically
summarised by template.

Appendix 2	**Key search terms**

Search terms

Measurement	**Motivational terms**	**Sector/types of programme**
Assessment	Motivation	Training
Summative assessment	Self esteem	Further education
Tests	Self efficacy	Adult
Testing	Attainment	Adult learning
Key skills (tests)	Achievement	Adults
Core skills (tests)	Early leaving	Adults learning
Portfolio	Drop out	Vocational education
Profile	Failure	Vocational training
Coursework	Retention	Modern Apprenticeship
	Staying on	Informal learning
	Leaving	Post-16
	Withdrawal	16–19
	Completion	Post-compulsory education
	Progression	A-level
		GNVQ
		NVQ
		Access courses
		OCN

Study name	Relevance to research question?	Type of study	Scale of study
Bathmaker, Ann-Marie. (2001). 'It's the Perfect Education': lifelong learning and the experience of Foundation-level GNVQ students. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 53(1), 81–100.	Low/medium	Qualitative interviews with seven Foundation-level GNVQ students	Small

Any other key descriptions of the study

This was a study of what Foundation-level GNVQ students say about their learning experience. Seven students were interviewed in order to explore students' perceptions of their GNVQ programme.

Findings/conclusions

The author argues that the most important thing for the student is the transition from being disaffected learners to becoming accepted as students within a college. The relationships with teachers proved to be crucial in achieving this. 'A key element in helping students to succeed where they have previously failed is their relationships with teaching staff' (page 91). All seven foundation students interviewed lacked confidence in their ability as learners. 'Although they now wish to succeed, they equally wish to avoid any further possibility of failure. Foundation GNVQ offers a safe option, doing something they can succeed at if they work at it' (page 89). The students build up their confidence by succeeding in their GNVQ and this alters their expectation of failure based on past experience. The author concludes that the students complete GNVQ work because they have to and because the tutors persuade and cajole them to.

Summary of overall relevance to research question

This again brings up the point (although not explicitly) about the lack of learner autonomy in gaining GNVQ qualifications. There is no direct mention of assessment and motivation.

Any other comment on study relevance, quality and credibility

This paper has limited relevance but is interesting in that the abstract focuses on the success and overcoming of failure of GNVQ students the main finding is that the relationships with teachers are the significant factor.

Appendix 4 Templated research references

Research references summarised by template (52).
For full details see the reference section.

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Young P (2000)

How to contact the LSRC

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interaction with researchers
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