

Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots

Programme Theory Evaluation

Working Paper 6

Learning Agreement Small Step Progression

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Institute for Employment Studies



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Executive summary

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) carried out research on behalf of the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) as part of the programme theory evaluation of the Learning Agreement Pilot (LAP).

The research focused on small steps within the LAP; the extent to which it was used and was valuable, and for whom it was most beneficial. The research was built around the theory that 'If the young person can be motivated to take a series of 'small steps' they will gradually move closer to their goal.'

Researchers held six focus groups with Connexions advisers and in-depth interviews with 15 young people who were identified as having a small steps component to their LAP. The research was carried out in two regions of England.

Small steps aids progression for a proportion of the LAP cohort

A small steps approach, as defined by taking a series of qualifications, was used selectively by advisers who carefully identified young people for whom the approach might be suitable. Such young people, and those in our sample, had much in common with NEET young people in that they:

- achieved low GCSE grades or grades below those expected
- lacked of confidence and needed support to progress in work and training
- were undecided about their career goals
- needed a practical approach to learning.

Despite these similarities, few had spent time NEET and their experiences at school were generally reasonable. The young people in the research were also highly motivated to participate in learning. The LAP was an ideal solution to the needs of many young people, combining paid work with training and gaining a qualification, and the small steps approach seemed to contribute to providing successful outcomes for a proportion of LAP participants.

A small steps approach is possible within the learning agreement

The research identified three main models of progression for the small steps approach:

- **General to specific:** typically starting with key skills and moving to a vocationally oriented qualification. This model was valuable particularly for young people without clear goals and was used to ease young people into learning and open up opportunities for further learning through giving them a basic qualification.
- **Increasing demands:** typically starting with a Level 1 before moving to Level 2. This model was valuable for introducing young people to a chosen career or sector without committing them to a lengthy period of study. It could give a sense of achievement in a short space of time whilst boosting confidence to take on future, higher level learning.

- **Current role to future role:** starting with training that is relevant to the learner's current role before exploring a potential role for the future. This was the least common model seen in the research. It was useful in engaging employers in an employee's learning and gave opportunities for the young person to widen their career horizons.

Advisers espouse the benefits of small steps

Whilst each of the models served different purposes, many of the benefits of the small steps approach cut across the different models.

Re-engagement, eased into learning: In all cases, young people who, advisers felt, might have been put off learning if the goals were more ambitious, were becoming engaged and achieving qualifications. Starting a programme of learning with a shorter, or lower level qualification, meant that young people were not daunted by the prospect of a lengthy or over-challenging qualification.

Building confidence: Young people gained a sense of achievement from completing the first piece of learning and, for young people with largely negative experiences of learning this quick return was important. Young people gained confidence, rediscovered learning, were able to explore different career paths and were expected to progress to positive destinations.

Raising attainment: As a result, many of the young people in the research had already moved on to higher level qualifications that might previously have been beyond their reach.

Preparing for further learning: These first steps could be useful in preparing young people for learning in the future, both in getting a head start with sector knowledge and skills, or getting to grips with the assessment regimes. Full Apprenticeships became a realistic aim as a result, particularly for those who could complete the technical certificate as their small step.

Advisers shield young people from the bigger picture

Many advisers said that they did not always reveal the longer-term plans to the young people, instead they introduced qualifications one at a time. This was consistent with the young people's need not to be overwhelmed at an early stage by the prospect of a long course, and with the need to give young people immediate benefits.

Nevertheless, young people also reported that they had found the approach successful and made very few negative comments beyond issues that affect many LAP participants, such as long waits between courses or the availability of their assessor.

But the LAP model limits the extent to which it can be used

Advisers felt very restricted by being able to only offer on the LAP qualifications approved under Section 96, which sets out those qualifications that are eligible for public funding. They felt that the steps were not as small as they would like and called for more flexibility to offer unaccredited courses, taster programmes or 'hobby' programmes to engage more young people and encourage further progression.

Young people were less critical, perhaps since they were less aware of the restrictions. Young people generally felt that they had been involved in making choices about their learning so it would seem that advisers are working hard to secure suitable provision for them within the rules of the LAP.

1 Introduction

The Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots were launched in 12 areas of England in April 2006. The Learning Agreements pilots (LAP) were aimed at 16 to 17 year olds in jobs without training (JWT) and operated in eight of the 12 pilots areas. Under a LAP, young people took part in agreed activities, which included undertaking a designated, approved course. If successful, young people may have received a monetary bonus (and in two areas their employer receives wage compensation).

The main evaluation of the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots had three main strands:

- **a quantitative element**, using surveys of young people to measure the impact of the pilots in comparison to a number of control areas
- **a process evaluation**, examining how the pilots have been set up and delivered and the main implementation issues
- **a programme theory element**, focusing on testing some key aspects of the policy to identify what works or not and why.

This paper focuses on the programme theory research.

1.1 What is 'programme theory evaluation'?

Programme theory evaluation is considered a useful tool for conceptualising programmes, guiding evaluations, planning empirical research, and analysing *why* programmes are successful (or not). It seeks to identify the 'theory of change' that lies behind an intervention and assess to what extent, why and how this change has occurred. In doing so, any unintended as well as intended outcomes are considered.

The theories that underpin interventions are informed by assumptions about a) the reasons driving behaviour and b) what might cause that behaviour to change. But these theories are also mediated by individual, social and institutional effects that influence how policy is delivered. Hence, a key focus of programme theory evaluation is to examine how policy mechanisms are *supposed* to work and compare this to how they *do* work. The evaluation can then assess whether there is any gap between the two, and if so, explore the extent, nature and causes of that gap, and resulting impacts on outcomes.

The results of this type of evaluation are *explanatory* rather than providing a clear-cut answer on whether a policy 'works', and can be fed back into the policy design in order to make improvements. The aim is to highlight the components that inform the successful operation of the policy (as well as ones that hinder it) in order to refine the theories implicit within the policy design. As a result it is possible to better articulate what works, for whom, how, and in what circumstances, and embed this learning into any subsequent revision of the policy, or nationwide roll-out.

1.2 Hypothesis and research aims

This paper is based on research undertaken in two Connexions Partnership areas with a sample of young people, who recently completed or were working towards LAP funded qualifications, and advisers. The aim of this particular focused study was to gather evidence in relation to the following theory on progression within the LAP:

Theory 18 (the ‘small steps’ theory): If the young person can be motivated to take a series of ‘small steps’ they will gradually move closer to their goal.

The ‘small steps’ theory was developed in relation to the AA, where incremental progression was prevalent. The LAP was more focused on gaining a qualification, yet during the course of the other LAP focused studies and the process evaluation we have seen that ‘small steps’ was also relevant. For example, advisers and providers talked about breaking qualifications down into smaller elements, or starting with a key skills qualification as a foundation on which to build other qualifications.

For a young person on a LAP, the small steps approach was therefore defined as two or more activities designed to build on one another in terms of demand (level) or size (including the length of programme or scope of learning). Learning might also be facilitated by breaking a single qualification down into ‘bite-sized chunks’.

The aim of the research was to explore the different routes taken by young people on the LAP and elicit whether and how their experience influenced achievement and plans for learning in the near future. The objectives included:

- to establish how advisers motivate young people to progress *within* the LAP
- to understand how important is a ‘small steps’ approach to progression – for which types of young people and in which types of work
- to identify influencing factors on LAP programme design and on achievement, such as prior experiences of learning
- to determine advisers’ views on what factors influence progression
- to determine young people’s perceptions of the small steps approach and why ‘small steps’ might appeal to them.

1.3 Methodology

The research comprised two stages:

- focus group discussions with Connexions advisers
- interviews with young people on or having recently completed, a learning agreement.

The research was carried out in two areas implementing the LAP, one in the north and one in the south of England. The two areas were selected to provide contrasting circumstances, to have large enough cohorts of LAP participants from which to draw research subjects, and to avoid those areas included in the Activity Agreements small steps research. The areas are denoted as Area 1 and Area 2 throughout the report.

IES carried out a series of six focus groups among Connexions LAP Advisers with three groups in each area. Following the groups, staff were asked to identify young people from their current case files who were doing, or had done, more than one course as part of their Learning Agreement. Researchers invited these young people to take part in the research. A total of 15 young people were interviewed across the two areas.

In addition, three young people were interviewed whom we felt, after speaking to them, did not meet the small steps criteria. The interviews were completed and did provide some contrast with the small steps sample and hence some insight for the research which is included in the reporting. However, due to the size of the sample it would be difficult to draw strong conclusions about the non-small steps cohort.

2 LAP Context and Starting Points

In this section we explore young people's educational and employment background including their learning aims and motivation, previous contact with Connexions and the circumstances in which they were recruited to the LAP.

2.1 Profile of the young people

2.1.1 Low achievement and lacking confidence

There were a number of similar characteristics reported by the young people who took part in the research although advisers described a mixed cohort of young people who benefited from the small steps approach. Some were low achievers who had low aspirations while others were reasonably high achievers that had taken a "wrong turn" such as a false start at college. Others had more practical barriers such as accessing appropriate provision in the area and needed help to fund travel costs.

'Everybody's caseloads are very varied, from the easy ones to engage with the little issues and other ones that need a lot of support, ...the ones that really need the support, we spend an awful lot of time on, for whatever reason that would be, whether it's travelling, things like that, and personal home issues.'

Adviser area 1

Low achievement: many had received poor GCSE results ranging from Ds to Us with some young people achieving the occasional A to C. In most cases the young people had expected to get higher grades and they were disappointed by their level of achievement at school.

Lacking confidence: Generally the young people had found their experiences of school reasonable, however one or two of the young people interviewed found their experiences at school very negative. A few had suffered bullying, or struggled through school with a learning disability without receiving sufficient support. As a result, many lacked confidence about their ability to learn.

Prefer practical learning: Some did not like the way the learning was structured in school and wanted learning to have a 'hands-on' approach instead of a traditional classroom setting. Having a work focus for their learning and training was a good solution.

Few career goals: Most of the young people lacked clear career goals when they left school. Perhaps because of this, with only one or two exceptions the young people lived at home with their parents or grandparents. They were not under pressure to support themselves or move out of home, which may have reinforced or perpetuated their lack of clarity about the future.

2.1.2 Motivated to learn and keen to work

Despite some poor experiences of education, the majority of the young people who took part in the study were now reasonably committed to education and had ambitions to have a career, even if they were unsure about which direction their career should take. Many had enrolled in college before leaving school but had either failed to achieve the grades they needed to start the course or felt that the course they had picked was not right for them. Others had not been attracted by the idea of college and wanted their learning to be more practical in nature. Some young people were attracted to work because they wanted to become financially independent.

Many of the young people were looking for ideas about what to do next and, in many cases, were unable to start further courses until the following September. As they were all fairly highly motivated many had got jobs without training (JWT) either before or after leaving school. In most cases the young people did not enjoy these jobs and recognised that staying in them would lead to a 'dead-end'. The young people frequently commented on the importance of training and how it would contribute to a long-term career goal.

Hardly any of the young people had spent any time NEET. Any NEET periods tended to be the summer after they had left school when waiting for GCSE results before they could get a job or start college courses. The lack of reported NEET periods was because the young people would often find a temporary JWT; they felt this to be the more attractive option, rather than doing nothing or applying for state benefits.

Generally the group of young people who took the 'small steps' approach in the LAP did not enjoy academic work or settings so university and other academic routes were not a serious option. However none had totally disengaged with education and they all demonstrated a strong work ethic either imposed on them through their family or the standards they set themselves. As a result these young people were motivated to do some kind of work or training.

Young people in the study described combining work and training as the perfect option for them as they could earn some money while developing skills for the future. The LAP therefore appeared to be an ideal solution. Interestingly, however, prior to taking part in the LAP most were unaware that this option was open to them. Those who were aware of Apprenticeships and other work-based learning schemes had perceptions that they were very rare and difficult to find. For some this was based on their experience of finding Apprenticeships but being unable to access them because of poor GCSE results.

2.2 Contact with Connexions

The majority of the young people involved in the research had some contact with Connexions prior to signing up to the Learning Agreement although most could not remember exactly how their contact with Connexions had started. Many said they or their parents had initiated the first contact and only one young person said they were referred from an external agency.

Initial contact was usually a phone call or a visit from the young person enquiring about what Connexions could do for them. Some of the young people had accessed Connexions provision in the past; including a number that had been assigned to a personal adviser or helped with job searches and college placements. One young person had used a Job Coach provided by Connexions. The fact that the majority of this small group had approached Connexions highlighted their motivation to get help and guidance with finding jobs and courses.

A few, particularly those in Area 2, could not remember having any contact until Connexions got in touch and offered the young person the chance to do a short vocational training course as part of the LAP.

Advisers said that when a young person in a JWT was brought to their attention then an adviser would get in touch to talk about training and offer them the LAP. Advisers also confirmed that they sometimes worked with young people with a view to finding them Apprenticeships. This often resulted in signing that young person up to the LAP.

2.2.1 Signing up to the LAP

The young people often did not remember how they found out about, or been signed up to, the LAP. Many could not remember how their adviser had described it to them or the process involved. A number of young people had not, or could not remember, hearing the term Learning Agreement prior to the research interview¹. Their understanding of the LAP seemed to be fairly basic with many stating that Connexions had helped them get onto a course, had paid for a course, and had worked with their employer so they could complete their learning agreement while maintaining their current job.

Those young people who could remember described two main ways of signing up to the LAP:

- Some young people (with Connexions support) found or were directed to jobs that had Apprenticeships attached. This meant that it was easy to get the learning funded under the LAP and the employer engaged, as the employer wanted the young person to complete training as part of the job role.
- The other method was for Connexions to liaise directly with the young person who might already be at work, or who had just refused or left a course at college. Young people reported that Connexions had initiated contact and offered them the chance to complete some training.

Despite the lack of detailed understanding of how the LAP worked in practice, all the young people reported that it had been an enormous benefit to them. Many spoke of feeling more mature because they were at work and earning their own money. These results suggest that young people can benefit from the scheme without necessarily understanding the policy initiatives or funding streams.

'I've got a lot more confidence and I've grown up a bit. Once you're out there and working with grown ups all day long, you learn, you act a bit more mature than you did when you were at college, when you were in school even.' Young person Area 1

Advisers commented that they would use whatever means were at their disposal to engage young people in learning and training, so more ad-hoc methods may have been adopted to engage young people. For example, advisers from Area 2 highlighted that young people were supposed to be in work before they could be signed up to the programme, however they were concerned that a number of young people were not being offered jobs because of their age and lack of work experience. To overcome this problem advisers got in touch with local employers about the help and support that could be offered to them if they were prepared to employ a young person. This meant that employers were more eager to offer jobs to young people who needed training. However this was usually dependent on the financial and practical support that Connexions could offer.

¹ This may be because branding of the learning agreement varies from area to area.

2.3 Level of involvement in the choice of qualification

There were mixed reports about the level of choice the young people had on the qualification they completed as part of the LAP although no young people said that they were unhappy about their level of choice.

One factor was geographical. In Area 1 the phone call offering young people training tended to involve a choice of a number of qualifications that the young person could do. In Area 2 while there was still a choice of qualification offered initially, young people were usually offered the chance to do a 'Meet and Greet' course or the Customer Service NVQ level 1. These courses were offered because advisers had arranged to have them condensed into two days, making it easy to attract young people with the promise of a quick qualification. Young people were generally happy to do any qualifications that would improve their skills and their CV.

Those who had applied for jobs with attached Apprenticeships had little choice over which qualification they completed as the qualification was often tied into the job and stipulated by the employer. However there were no negative reports since the Connexions adviser had ensured the young person was interested in sector in which the Apprenticeship sat. As a result of this they were happy to complete the qualification on offer.

All the young people stated that they felt that they had enough choice when choosing the qualifications they completed on the LAP. Even those who had little choice on the qualification subject did not feel they were pressurised into taking it. Some young people were reluctant to complete their basic skills qualifications as they had not enjoyed Maths and English in the past. However even they recognised that having key skills was essential to be able to do the further qualifications they were interested in, that having those basic skills qualifications would make them more employable, and would be of benefit to them in the long-term.

It is possible that, given the high level of motivation to learn amongst the sample group, that any qualification would have satisfied them. However, it appears that the young person's involvement in the decision making process helps young people to understand the value of what they are doing.

3 Small Steps within the LAP

This section describes the different approaches for small steps implementation within the LAP and what advisers hoped to achieve through their use.

3.1 Three different delivery models were in operation

IES has recently completed a similar study of the small steps theory for Activity Agreements¹ where small steps are characterised through numerous different activities over the period of the agreement. In contrast, the small steps approach in the LAP was characterised by only a small number of discrete qualifications. The quantitative evaluation of the LAP² identified that 82 per cent of young people on the LAP took only one qualification and a further 12 per cent took two. Figures for the two regions in the small steps study were similar, showing that less than one fifth of LAP respondents follow a small steps model.

Appendix 1 shows the profile of each of the young people in the study. In analysing these profiles, three different delivery models emerge. We have classified these shown below:

- General to specific: typically starting with key skills and moving to a vocationally oriented qualification.
- Increasing demands: typically starting with a level 1 before moving to level 2.
- Current role to future role: starting with training that is relevant to the learner's job before exploring a potential role for the future.

The first and second models overlap in that the first also represents increasing demands. The distinction, described in more detail below, lies in the long term goals that the adviser has for the young person.

3.1.1 General to specific

Figure 1a shows how a young person starts with a general or key skills qualification before specialising. Figure 1b shows a more detailed example of one of the young people in the study. In this diagram the arrows show how an outcome, such as increased confidence, can enable the next stage in achievement and progression.

This model was used in both areas, predominantly in Area 2. It was designed to meet one of two main goals:

- to help young people improve their key skills so they would be eligible to complete a more specific work-based qualification at a later date
- to ease them into learning by gaining a general qualification that could be useful for any job, such as a customer service NVQ. This variant could also test the young persons' commitment to learning and give them a chance to decide which specific qualifications they would like to explore.

¹ Focused Study 5: Activity Agreement Small Step Progression, IES 2008

² Evaluation of Learning Agreement Pilots: Quantitative evaluation, NatCen 2008

Completing a general or key skills qualification allowed young people access to qualifications that had previously been unavailable to them due to poor GCSE grades. Some of the shorter first courses could also be used to keep the young person engaged while waiting for their chosen course to start, or allowed them time to consider their options and then decide what they wanted to do.

Figure 1a: General to specific, outline

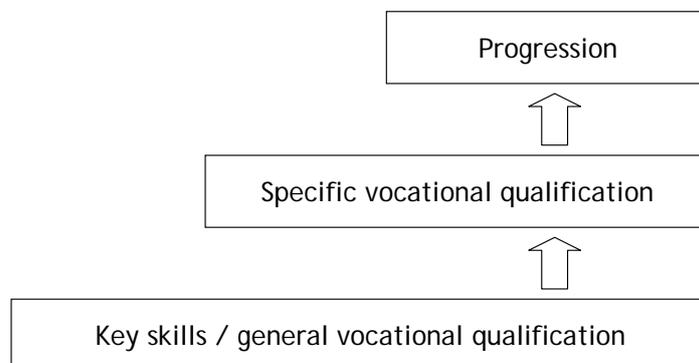
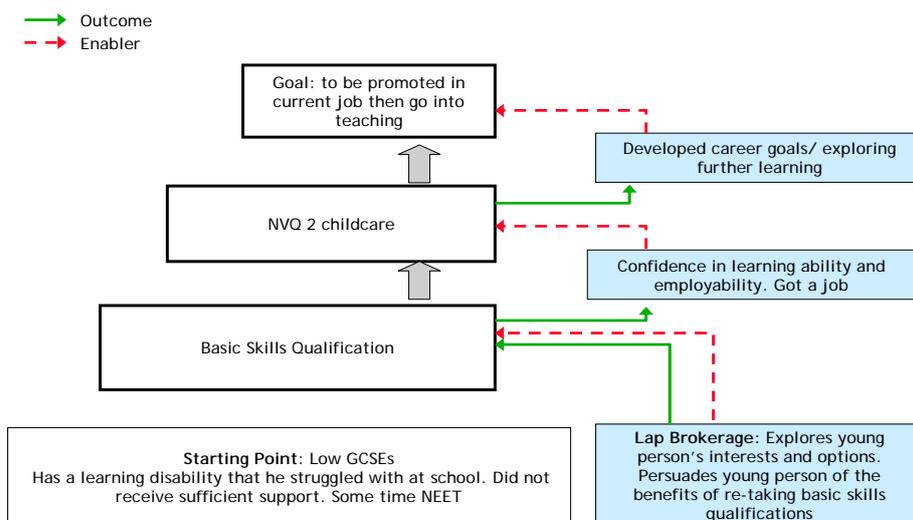


Figure 1b: General to specific, exemplified



3.1.2 Increasing demands: progression through levels

In this model, illustrated in Figures 2a and 2b, young people progress through qualifications with increasing levels of demand, usually starting at Level 1 and moving on to Level 2.

Figure 2a: Increasing demands, outline

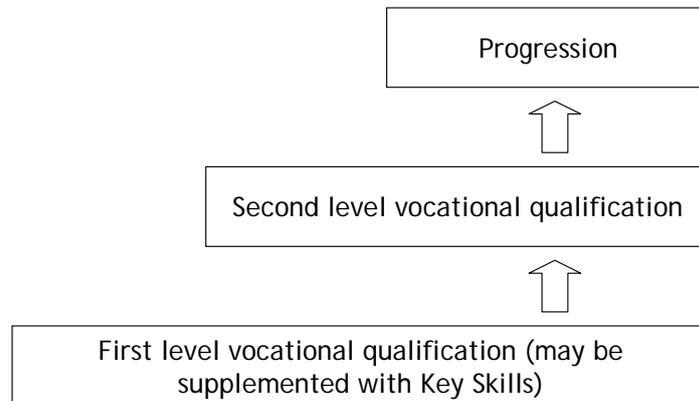
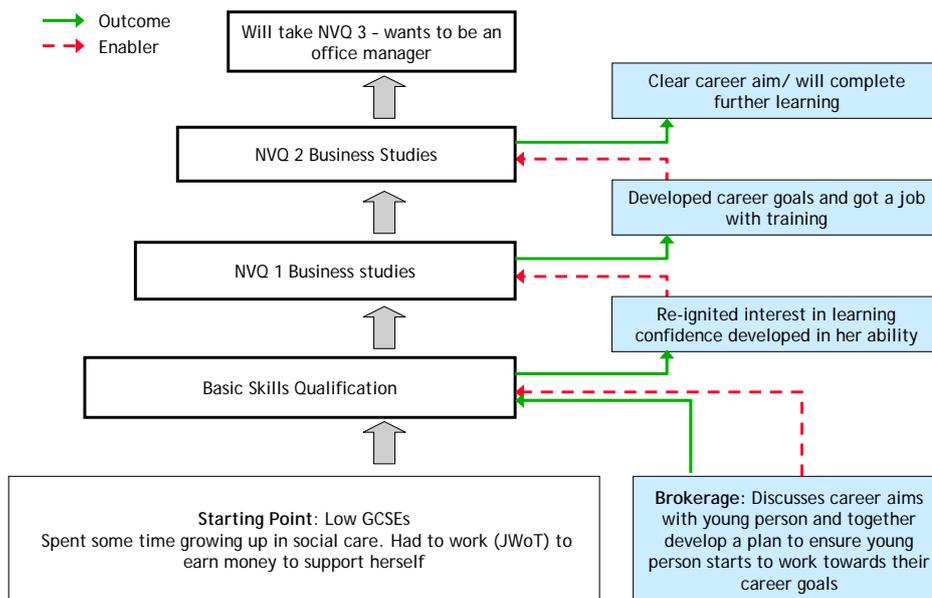


Figure 2b: Increasing demands, exemplified



This model was adopted by both areas but was more prominent (applying to six of the seven young people interviewed) in the Area 1 respondents. Young people who had identified a specific career aim either through their current job or through contact with their Connexions adviser were able to start their LAP on a level 1 or level 2 qualification (usually an NVQ) and progress to the respective higher level. In some cases the initial qualification would have to be completed alongside a key skills qualification. The reasons behind this seemed to be a different approach to engaging young people in the two LAP areas.

- Area 2 wanted to engage young people with short accredited qualifications that would reassure them that they were capable of learning and provide an attractive vocational qualification to employers.
- In Area 1 the approach was taken to discover the young person's long-term career aims and get them to work towards that by doing a level 1 qualification as a 'taster' to see if it was something that they enjoyed and wanted to pursue.

There was no clear evidence from the young people about which engagement method was more successful and young people from both areas felt their Learning Agreement had progressed well.

3.1.3 Current and future roles

Figures 3a and 3b show young people working at the same level for their two steps but progressing through exploring a new vocational area.

This model was only adopted in Area 2. These young people did two same-level qualifications (usually level 2) reflecting firstly their current employment and then future job goals. For example, one young person was working as a cleaner but because her career aims were to work in retail, she had taken her NVQ in cleaning and followed up with an NVQ in customer service.

This model was operated because it allowed the employer to engage with the LAP and support the young persons' learning. It also enabled young people to become more skilled at their current post while working towards becoming trained for their future goals. This would help them in later job searches for vacancies in their chosen field.

Despite young people on this model having to take two qualifications at the same level they were quite happy to do so. There was no sense of standing still by doing qualifications of similar demand. The young people recognised that getting any qualification would help to improve their skills and make them more employable in the future for any job they chose.

'Just having more qualifications under your belt. It's always a bonus.' Young person
Area 2

Figure 3a: Current and future, outline

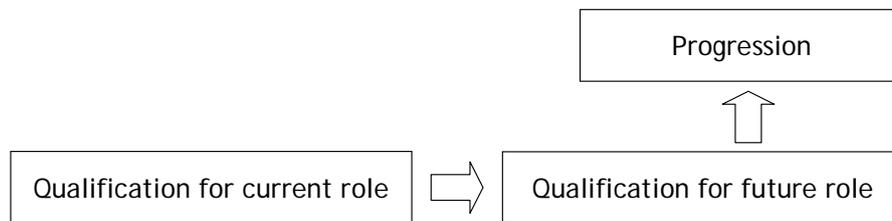
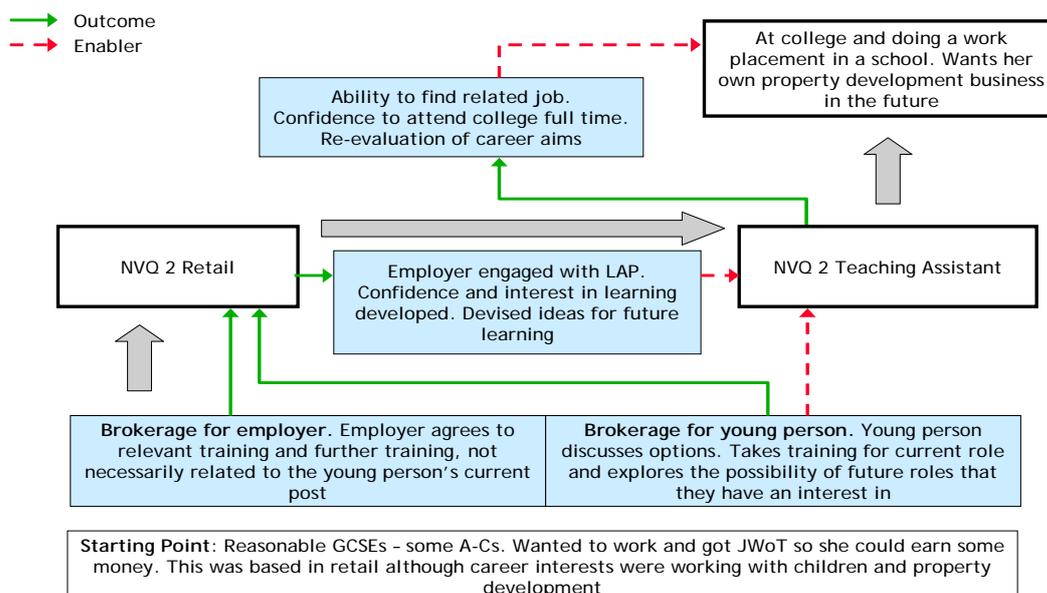


Figure 3b: Current and future, exemplified



3.2 Breaking qualifications down in bite-sized chunks

Another interpretation of small steps would be to consider how the qualifications were broken down in small components of learning. This contrasts with the three models above where qualifications are the blocks which build up to give the learners' qualification profile. Advisers in Area 2 reported that some employers, particularly small employers, were reluctant to take a young person on for an Apprenticeship that lasted two years. Small employers found managing the LAP particularly difficult because they did not have the staff numbers available to cover for the young person while they were at college.

Advisers therefore had devised an innovative solution to overcome this problem. Young people could take short technical certificates that lasted a few months that could be used as evidence towards achieving an Apprenticeship but meant that it had been split into smaller more manageable chunks for both the employer and the young person. Furthermore, some young people were able to complete a technical certificate in a job area they were interested in while working in a different job. This helped them access a job in that sector and complete further training. It also allowed the young person a taster before deciding if they wanted to pursue it further.

'A lot of them do go into employment where it's not what they want to do. So, again, that's where the technical certificate can step in and then if they like to do, say, manufacturing, if they do that technical certificate in the manufacturing sector, it gives them the skills to then go into the career choice they want to do. So we've had a few come through where they're working in call centres, they're working in supermarkets, but they want to go into trades, other trades, like construction or manufacturing.

Adviser area 2

This approach tended to focus on a few specific careers such as engineering, construction and manufacturing. As a result the numbers of young people who undertook a technical certificate were few and none were spoken to directly as part of the research. We have therefore not explored this as a distinct model but it should be noted that the same benefits of this approach can be seen in the current and future model.

Similarly, as will be discussed in 6.2, NVQ provision is typically delivered in modules and providers will often break learning down into small chunks. Although advisers and young people were asked about delivery, this issue did not feature strongly in our research and we have again not considered this as a distinct 'small steps' approach. Research with providers would perhaps give greater insight into this aspect of small steps delivery.

3.3 The wider LAP cohort

As part of the study a few young people who had only completed one qualification were interviewed. There was a discernible difference in the young people who completed one qualification on the LAP to those who completed more under the 'small steps' approach. We cannot draw strong conclusions given the small size of this group and the overall scale of the study. However, the apparent difference between the two groups does provide some insight that could be explored on a wider scale.

Table 4.1 explores the differences between the predominant LAP cohort (ie the 82% who take only one qualification) and those who needed the 'small steps' approach in as far as shown by our small sample. Those young people who did not have a small steps approach were confident with learning and only needed one qualification to help them reach their goals. This group of young people generally had more positive experiences of school and better qualifications than the 'small steps' group, had clearer career aims, and were more confident in pursuing higher level qualifications initially. The advisers described these young people as self sufficient and having the ability to source their own work and training, so the work the advisers were required to do to support them was minimal.

These young people may or may not be representative of the majority of young people on the LAP who only take one qualification. If they are, the small steps approach may be most successful when targeted at a small cohort of young people who do not require the intensive support offered by Activity Agreement but are not as confident as the predominant LAP cohort.

Table 3.1: Characteristics of young people and the approach taken on the LAP

	Area	Preferred delivery model/ qualification type	Characteristics of young person	Benefits of/reasons for chosen approach
Small steps LAP cohort	1	<p>Predominantly increasing demands model, one general to specific</p> <p>1 Key skills ⇒specific vocational qualifications</p> <p>2.level 1/2 (basic skills sometimes integrated) ⇒ level 2/3</p> <p>Generally qualifications focused on the young person's specific career aim.</p>	<p>Poor grades at school (Ds – Plus a few A-C)</p> <p>Lack confidence</p> <p>Need qualifications to enter vocational qualification</p>	<p>Build confidence</p> <p>Adviser support for young person and employer</p> <p>Higher levels of achievement reached than expected</p>
	2	<p>Predominantly general to specific and current and future model</p> <p>1. Key skills / transferable level 1 qualifications ⇒specific vocational qualifications.</p> <p>3. Current job role qualification ⇒ future job goal qualification (usually same level).</p> <p>The transferable skills qualifications tended to be short customer service NVQs or Meet and Greet training courses</p>	<p>May have dropped out /not been accepted to college</p> <p>Experience of JWT</p> <p>Motivated to learn / have career</p>	<p>Secure and interesting employment</p> <p>Can quickly achieve vocational based qualifications</p>
Non small steps LAP cohort	1 and 2	<p>Complete one qualification</p> <p>Related to young person's specific career aim</p> <p>Start on level 2/3</p> <p>Relevant job found by young person</p>	<p>Good grades at school (A–D)</p> <p>Clear career aim</p> <p>Good educational experience</p> <p>Higher confidence levels</p> <p>Independent</p> <p>Lack interest in traditional academic routes</p>	<p>Reach necessary skill level quickly</p> <p>Minimal support required by adviser</p> <p>LAP suits young person and employer requirements.</p>

4 Evaluating the small steps approach

This chapter describes the benefits that a small steps approach was felt to achieve. It also highlights how the LAP model could restrict the use of such an approach.

4.1 Benefits of the small steps approach

Advisers and young people described numerous benefits of using the small steps approach. The research revealed that many young people could be eased into learning, rebuilding confidence that may have been diminished through poor levels of achievement at school or a bad experience starting a college course. Many of the benefits cut across the different delivery models.

Re-engagement

Advisers felt that the small steps approach drew young people back and gently introduced them to learning. Many of the young people had a negative experience of school and missed out on schooling or were educated at home. For these young people a year-long course would be daunting but the small steps approach allowed them to try out a course that lasted as little as two days and be gently reintroduced to a learning environment without a long-term commitment.

Building confidence

Advisers felt that starting on a lower level or key skills not only generated an interest in learning but had helped boost the young person's confidence. Rather than being overwhelmed at the start they had been able to manage their workload. The young people's responses supported this view:

'I suppose one of the benefits is because it's over such a long period of time. If it was overloading me too much then I would forget it, and get it all muddled up, so it's easier if I just learn one thing at a time.' Young person Area 2

The increasing demands model also gave a natural break in the young person's learning and gave them an opportunity to break off without losing the time and effort they had invested.

'If you don't like the first level you can finish there, you don't have to be forced to do another year, or anything like that. Whereas college is pretty much "you've got to do both years", kind of thing. Whereas this is if you want to go further, you can. If you don't, then you don't.' Young person Area 1

Filling a gap

Advisers used smaller qualifications as a stepping stone to college courses or Apprenticeships. This was either to keep the young person engaged while they waited for the main course to start in September or January, or to build up their qualifications to a level where they would be accepted onto courses. Having short pieces of learning that the advisers could use as a small step enabled the young person to start on a pathway and remain focused on learning, meaning that they were more likely to start the course even after a long wait.

'Ones who haven't achieved in school and have got all sorts of barriers to learning, they're the ones who are more likely to think that next September is a million years away and that they need something like next week.' LAP Area 2 Adviser

Facilitating progression

The young people in the study felt that small steps was the best approach for them and had aided progression towards a positive destination. Many felt that without the gentle approach easing them back into learning the qualifications would have been too difficult or too daunting. They may not have completed or gone onto a higher level qualification. This was particularly the case for those on the increasing demands delivery model.

'I wouldn't say it was the easiest course but I wouldn't say it was the hardest course either and I think if you're not pressured, then you can do a lot better at it and you can put a lot more effort and time into it and I've never really felt pressured to do it.' Young person Area 1

Although their first qualification may have been well within their capabilities – and could have been perceived as 'too easy' - there were few reports from the young people that their learning was repetitive or that they could have skipped elements of the course.

Raising qualification levels

Advisers used small steps for young people who had not performed as well as expected in their GCSEs, and had subsequently missed out on college or Apprenticeship places, to build levels of literacy and numeracy. This approach could be used to break Apprenticeships into sections, allowing a young person to move from key skills, to the technical certificate and, if appropriate, working towards the full Apprenticeship at a later date using Accreditation of Prior Learning.

Small steps also proved useful in leading up to courses that could not be counted as LAP outcomes, such as moving on to A-levels and GCSES, and young people returning to FE after the age of 18.

Exploring a new industry

Some young people had hopes of working in a different field but were unable, or not confident enough, to commit fully. By taking small steps in their learning, starting with a level 1 qualification, they could start on their way to their chosen career without currently working in that field. They would then look for a different job knowing that they could demonstrate to their new employer that they were serious about that industry.

Understand Assessment

Another benefit of the small steps approach that young people reported was that they got used to the way in which NVQs were assessed at a level where the difficulty of the assessment was not an issue. By the time they came to do NVQs at level 2 or 3 they were used to the style of assessment, portfolio building and recording their skills.

Flexibility

Young people found that the small steps approach on the LAP meant that they could be flexible in their approach to their learning; some had the support of their employer and some did not, so they completed their learning either at work or at home. The regular meetings with their assessors meant that they had deadlines to work to but ones which had some flexibility.

Getting a head start

For some young people in the 'increasing demands' model, building up their knowledge in one field at level 1 and then progressing onto level 2 meant that they had already completed some of the work. It enabled them to get a head start on the more difficult qualification.

'I think it was a more intense course, because it's only three and a half months, and there's quite a lot of stuff to learn if you haven't already done level 1. YP1 Area 1

In fact in a few cases the young people stated that completing the earlier level first had put them ahead of many of their classmates when doing the second tier qualification. This had helped to build their confidence.

'I think level 1 was an introductory course, like a taster... One of my friends that did level 1 with me, we knew most of the things already [in level 2], but there were more bits added to it - so it helped us quite a lot; we were a little bit more forward than the other girls that did it.' Young person Area 1

4.1.1 Benefits for employers

Although employers were not interviewed as part of the research, advisers reported that the employers also benefited from the 'small steps' approach as the young people were better able to meet employers' expectations with regards to work-based behaviour.

Proves commitment

Some advisers reported that employers could be hesitant in committing to an Apprenticeship that could last up to 4 years, whereas supporting the young person through the smaller step of the technical certificate was something more manageable. The young person also proves to the employer that they are committed and worth the employer investing in.

'The technical certificate adds to that approach where they can be more flexible doing parts of it, and it obviously performs best if the young person does achieve the technical certificate. It's improved productivity in the workplace and the employers can say, right, we can move onto the next step.' LAP Area 2 Adviser

Absences minimised

The shorter length courses offered as part of the LAP also appeal more to small businesses or sole traders as they can provide flexibility. The young person does not have to take as much time off work, where a full training programme could mean one day a week at college. The work-based nature of the learning means that they do not lose a member of their workforce.

4.2 Progression

Progression requires the support of the LAP adviser, the tutor and often the support of the employer. Progression can encompass professional, personal or academic gains; for example, the young person;

- becomes better at doing their job
- gains confidence
- meets new people

- goes to new places
- looks to the future and decides on goals
- moves on to a higher level of qualification
- completes the same level of qualification with less support or more quickly.

Progression can be seen in the context of the models of delivery that were discussed earlier.

General to specific

Many young people on this model were disappointed with their GCSE results or who had problems at school and need to get back 'on track'. These young people use the multiple Learning Agreements to get to a standard where they can go on to further learning.

For the young people in this model, progression means starting to work towards long term employment and learning goals that may not have seemed possible at the beginning of the Learning Agreement. This approach was useful for advisers as the young person could progress into the first piece of learning immediately, without the risks of drop-out that waiting for a specific course could have brought. The momentum of progression could be maintained and channelled into new work and learning goals. The progression was tangible for learning providers, this quote from a learning provider was shared by a LAP Personal Adviser:

'As a training provider, I see small steps as a crucial offer for young people, particularly those that have previously had a bad experience in learning[...]Short courses can give them a boost of self-esteem and confidence which in turn, quite often results in them rethinking their future and opening their eyes to other possibilities.'

(cited by adviser LAP Area 2)

For some of the young people, the support from their LAP Personal Adviser and the positive experience they have when starting a piece of learning can give them the confidence to go and get a job they want in a new field, which they can then pursue under a second Learning Agreement.

'She did the meet and greet, and whilst she was doing that, it gave her so much confidence she went out and looked for a job for herself in nursery nursing, [and] found herself one'

LAP Area 2 Adviser

Increasing demands

For the young people under this model, progression is incremental; the young person starts their first Learning Agreement at one level and then move on to a higher qualification for the second Learning Agreement. Advisers want the young people to succeed but recognise the danger that young people may stop after the first piece of learning if they perceive it to be 'too hard'. Increased chances of success when following this strategy were also recognised by the young people who were grateful that their learning started at an achievable level and continued in increments.

'I think if I would have done it all in one hit, then I think - I don't think I would have got through it'

YP10 Area 1

Some of the young people for whom the small steps approach on the LAP is most successful are those that are some distance from being able to undertake an Apprenticeship; they do not have the grades, the employer or the commitment to be able to complete it, despite suiting the learning method. By steadily increasing the level of demand of the courses, the young person has a chance to develop their relationship with their employer and instil confidence in them so that they would support them to build up to a higher qualification. Very few of the young people interviewed had come to the end of their second Learning Agreement although a significant proportion had completed their first piece of learning and were about to embark on their second. The young people were confident that they would also achieve the next piece of learning and there were many who were ambitious, planning on going up to level 3, even planning to start their own businesses in the future. They saw that they would either be required to have, or it would be beneficial for them to have, higher qualifications to move up in work.

'I would like to go onto other things after that, to move up after NVQ 2; it'll be a big help getting more qualifications.'

YP3 Area 1

'I'm going to get as much training as I can in everything, and make the most of it, because the more training you get the better, because it's the less you'll have to do in your next job'

YP1 Area 2

Because of the increase in levels it is possible to be clear about the progression in this model. Whether the level of the qualifications has increased or not, advisers can see the progression that young people have made in personal development themselves, but by having each step more demanding than the last the young people have some tangible evidence to show that they have progressed.

'It's more for young people to actually see the progression, rather than from my point of view really. We can see the progression'

LAP Area 2 Advisers

Current and future

In the small sample size in this research there were far fewer young people that came under this model than the other two, but it is possible to draw some inferences about the progression that young people who fit this model may make.

While progression under this model may not mean raising levels of qualifications, progression may come personally and professionally. As with the 'general to specific' model progression for young people under this model is about formulating long term goals and starting to work towards them.

This model includes those young people who go back into full time education. One young person in this research gained a level 2 qualification in retail which was based on the job they were doing at the time. While they were doing this they realised what they wanted from a long term career and, later, started a new level 2 qualification in a new area under a second learning agreement. It is likely that if they only had one chance at learning through the LAP, they may not have progressed to their desired career.

The learning for young people under this model did not necessarily occur in the order related to 'current' then 'future' goals, sometimes they worked on a piece of learning that was related to their future goals then did a qualification based on their current role. In these cases it was harder to see progression, other than the gain in confidence that the young person had from

completing their learning agreement, rather they were consolidating their current role, looking at immediate goals, such as staying in a job or increasing hours, rather than long term job goals.

4.3 Other outcomes

Young people gained confidence using a small steps approach and were better able to decide upon a career path. The young people were often very well aware when they were asked what they had gained:

'More insight of what I'm going to have to look at to get more qualifications basically.'
YP12 Area 1

Advisers see success as starting a course, enjoying it, and then the young person moving on.

'We can see a young person when they first come to us for training and then, once they've completed, that person is a totally different person. They are confident and everything and learning and working, everything. They are a totally different person.'
LAP Area 2 Adviser

Although the research did not formally measure the tangible outcomes, we did meet and hear about young people going on courses they would not have been able to afford without the LAP, or getting permanent jobs and getting pay rises.

'The qualification, when I applied for this job, that was one of the criteria, so I wouldn't have had as much chance of getting the job if I hadn't have done it... it made me a better candidate for the job, because I had it.' YP8 Area 1

Young people recognised that the success which they had had on the LAP had changed their lives, without the LAP they would have been in 'dead-end' jobs and would still lack direction.

'I probably wouldn't have gone to college, I probably would have just ended up working in [a large supermarket chain] or something, or wasted a few years.' YP4 Area 1

4.4 Limitations and restrictions

Advisers reported a number of limitations they felt hampered a small steps approach in the LAP, most notably constraints which dictated the choice of courses that could be funded. The LAP can only fund courses defined under section 96 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000. This left a number of useful, vocational courses, short term or taster programmes or modules of larger courses, that could not be funded by the LAP. Advisers cited as examples in this context courses in child care, plumbing, cake decorating and beauty.

Furthermore courses such as first aid training, health and safety and manual handling were not eligible since they are considered by the funding authorities to be the responsibility of employers under their duty of care. Advisers in Areas 1 and 2 had managed to persuade employers to run the courses without LAP funding.

'I remember we did an employer led course about first aid, it was definitely manual handling and first aid, and it was done when we were looking at eligibility. It fitted in and it had obviously been employer led and we can't fund it. But the take-up of those was really good.' Adviser Area 2

These restrictions were very frustrating for advisers in both areas and many said that they struggled to find enough appropriate provision for young people. They reinforced the concerns young people had over the long waits which resulted from the colleges only offering September starts. In some cases courses that the young people had wanted to start the following September had been withdrawn from the college syllabus. Another 'gap' in the provision reported by both areas was the lack of opportunity for young people to retake GCSEs.

'There are so many gaps in provision, there's loads. The provision is there [in] the colleges, but because there's no need for it in that particular year, the courses are dropped.' Adviser Area 1

This left advisers struggling to keep the young people engaged for what could be as long as a year. To overcome this advisers would sign young people up to 'hobby' or other short courses to try and keep them engaged, often through mainstream Connexions funding although this was sometimes difficult. Furthermore the highest drop-out rates of young people from the LAP was said to be those who completed 'hobby' courses, which may be a result of the circumstances that led them to be offered such courses rather than the quality or suitability of the course. However advisers also commented that the LAP had helped to improve provision available to young people in the area, particularly lower level provision.

The main limitation reported by the young people was that in a few cases there was a delay between finishing one course and starting another. In most cases this was not a problem but for one or two young people the wait had been quite long. Sometimes this was out of the adviser's control as it depended on when college courses started or when NVQ assessors became available.

One young person stated that he would have liked the option of the LAP explained to him earlier. By the time the programme had been explained to him he had missed the deadline for September college starts. This had not affected him directly but he raised it as a potential concern for other young people.

'The courses started in September and [training provider] came to me in November. If somebody did want to go to college I think it's a bit unfair, because they've got a job and are expecting to go to college, they'd have to get all the things themselves whereas I think the people should come to them to tell them quicker.' Young person Area 1

Another point for improvement suggested by a young person was that there should be opportunities to complete more than two Learning Agreements. She had just completed both a level 1 and 2 qualification and was exploring further learning, both a level 3 qualification in the same subject and short professional qualifications. She was unhappy that she was unable to do these future qualifications under the LAP. Fortunately she was under 19 and the future courses she had enrolled in were still free of charge for her to access, but she felt she would miss out on essential support provided by the advisers on the LAP.

Other reports on the limitations of the LAP were few and far between from the young people. Generally they felt that there had been enough choice in the courses that they could have chosen, that their adviser was there to support them, and they were happy with how the LAP had progressed.

5 Operating a small steps approach

The next section explores the support provided by advisers and employers and how the young people combined work and learning. Many of these issues apply to the LAP generally rather than being specific to the small steps approach.

5.1 Role of the adviser

5.1.1 Adviser strategy

Many of the young people were not aware that they would be undertaking more than one piece of learning when they signed up for the LAP - although others, particularly those on the increasing demands model, knew they would need further qualifications to reach their career goal. They also stated that they felt their adviser had not given any thought to them taking more than one qualification, yet discussions with advisers showed that this was unlikely to be the case. Advisers stated that in almost all small steps cases there was a longer term strategy looking to the young persons' future goals, even if the plans altered.

Advisers had an excellent ability to identify the young people who needed the 'small steps' approach and were wary of telling the young person too much about the amount of learning that would be required at the initial stages. Some advisers talked about deliberately not telling the young person about the higher qualifications they would have to do because it might scare them off taking the smaller steps that they are capable of doing. Through their experience of working with young people advisers knew that when a long journey to end points might be daunting.

'We have talked about university but as somewhere far, and we're not really concentrating on, because if we concentrate on university now we'll never get the GCSEs out of the way and A Level.' LAP Area 1 Adviser

This type of strategy also occurred in the 'current and future roles' model where some young people started with a qualification based on their current circumstances. The process of IAG was critical in helping the young person gain a clearer idea of where they wanted to be and so move on to another piece of learning. There had to be a balance between short-term achievement and long-term goals.

For some advisers, mainly in Area 2, it was very much their 'style' to sign up the young person to a generic level 1 course and then when they have achieved that, refer them to level 2. Advisers had a key role in deciding the level of the learning that the young person would undertake, with some deliberately aiming low so that the young person would quickly get a sense of achievement from successfully completing a qualification. For many young people they had never felt a sense of achievement in education so it was important for them to see that they could succeed.

'They're so used to the feeling of failure, the fear of failure and the feeling of failure, to them that's what everybody comes to expect... So you take them back down to a level where they can cope with it, where they can get the answers right and cope with the level of work, and you just coax them gently up and then they manage to get slightly higher.' LAP Area 1 Adviser

Advisers take into account the young person's learning style. They appreciate that an Apprenticeship can be difficult to tailor to the young person, but by breaking it down into basic skills, key skills and the technical certificate the young person gets a more individualised learning plan.

5.1.2 Information, advice and guidance

There was a distinction between Area 1 and Area 2 in the amount of information, advice and guidance (IAG) received prior to the first piece of learning. In Area 1 the young people had a lot more contact with their adviser, were often helped to find a job and then supported in finding the right learning in a related field. The support and guidance then continued throughout the learning.

In Area 2 many of the young people interviewed were in work already when they were contacted by the LAP adviser and they were offered a piece of learning that they could either accept or decline. For these young people the IAG started after they had agreed to take-up the learning.

IAG helped the young people to formulate their long-term goals. The young people in this group who received small steps were often undecided about their future and were in jobs without training or unable to take their chosen path. The advisers helped to steer the young people to set out a plan in manageable chunks, which could help them to go on to more learning than they would have previously considered. As one Area 1 adviser stated, their approach was to give the young person *'manageable aims and targets, for them to achieve more'*.

In some cases the young people did not know how to get to their future goal, in these cases the role of IAG was find out what the young person wants and then give them some options.

'If we weren't around to help them with the advice that we can give them, and able to offer them what we know is available, they wouldn't have a clue about it.' LAP Area 2 Adviser

'It's not only that they want to be in a particular place; it is the journey of how they're going to get there.' LAP Area 1 Adviser

5.1.3 Continued support

The young people cited the support of the advisers as one of the key reasons for their success in their learning. While this far from unique to the small steps approach it is likely to be particularly important for this less confident, less qualified but well motivated group. The level of support varied but was very much individualised. For some with greater needs such as learning disabilities, this meant that the advisers helped them with the work involved in the actual qualification, but for most the support took the form of regular phone calls.

'So I don't always get too involved after they go over to the trainer, but I am always there and they know that I'm always there if there's ever any cases of them wanting to speak to me.' LAP Area 2 Adviser

The continued support of the advisers kept the young person on track and supported the employer. This role was important when the qualification that the young person was doing was not directly related to their current role.

'A PA's work is a brokering role and a support role for both sides and I think that has been pivotal to the whole agreement because the young person has someone they can talk to, they can go to if there's a problem, and so can the employer as well.' LAP Area 2 Adviser

5.1.4 Support for employers

The advisers acted in an advocacy role for both parties. They helped support the young person with the qualification and ensured that they could fully understand the employers' expectations of them - the young people reported that the support provided by the adviser was essential. They also provided advice to the employer about accessing free training and how to provide it. Advisers felt that employers were therefore much more open to engagement on the LAP because this support was part of the agreement.

'We sat and actually just rang employer after employer, almost on a cold call basis, to make these relationships with local employers. And some of them are quite open to it, but they do want the extra freebie bit. They want the 'training for the future' bit, they want the hand-holding for the young people.' Adviser Area 2

5.1.5 Support from employers

Young people reported that their employers were almost always positive and offered a range of support for the young people involved in the LAP. The support included being allowed to see assessors during working hours, support with the work itself including helping to answer questions and providing company policies and other relevant documents for the portfolio, and in some cases being allowed to have some study leave.

'[Employer] has helped me out with a few things I've been stuck on, with the course work. Because like she said, anything I ever get stuck, I can always just go in and ask, because she's done it all before.' Young person Area 1

Support from employers was also evident for those young people who were completing qualifications that were not related to their current posts. Examples included young people allowed time off work to complete exams. Advisers were pleasantly surprised by the amount of support employers offered to young people completing qualifications that were not directly related to their current employment. However this support usually only extended to qualifications that had a number of clear transferable skills.

'I've had some surprises. They have let a young person attend college, key skills or something like that.' Adviser Area 2

Condensing NVQs and other courses into one or two days allowed the young person to take annual leave and get the course completed quickly – particularly important if an employer was less supportive of training related to future goals. The other option was for the young person to complete the qualification at night classes.

'So things like, we've had a technical certificate in customer service that rather than being delivered over four or five months has been fast-tracked into two full days. So for those young people who maybe didn't have their employer's support, have taken two days leave, or if we've got people who are in jobs where they're on rota, they've asked for the rotas to be fixed so that they're off those two days.' Adviser Area 2

5.2 Managing the LAP

Young people reported that while managing work and learning had sometimes been difficult it was something that they had managed to do. All young people had to maintain high levels of motivation in order to complete their Learning Agreements. This was particularly true for those young people who were unable to complete their qualification during work time; either because the qualification was not relevant to their current job or a lack of available time due

to the demands of their job or other issues such as childcare. Most were happy to complete the work in their own time despite finding it quite difficult on occasion.

'Obviously, with the late nights and stuff, you get home and go to bed...but I work it around it, really, weekends and days off.' Young person Area 1

The way the learning was structured to support this. The training providers managing the qualifications often broke the LAP into smaller sections, usually based on the modules of the qualification, and gave the young people short-term deadlines to complete a particular piece of work. This helped to keep the young person focused and a series of short-term deadlines meant that the qualifications were kept to a tight timeframe. Additionally this helped to increase the understanding the young person had about the qualification they were doing.

'It's broken down into modules, which are told to me first. [My adviser] just broke it down for me really well, so I just understand it so well now. When [training provider] came in, some of things like, how he was phrasing things, I didn't really understand, but because [adviser] said it before, and broke it down for me, I understood it.' Young person Area 2

This structure was not necessarily something that could be attributed solely to the 'small steps' approach since NVQs are modular qualifications and splitting up the learning into modules within an NVQ is common practice. Nevertheless it reinforces the effectiveness of the theory behind the small steps approach and confirms its value in the right circumstances.

6 Conclusions

The theory at the heart of the research, 'If the young person can be motivated to take a series of small steps they will gradually move closer to their goal', appears to be borne out through the evidence, particularly through the comments of advisers, but requires some qualification.

It appears that a small steps approach is suitable for a significant minority of the LAP cohort that could broadly be described as sitting between those who are borderline NEET and those who are confident, able learners: motivated to learn but not yet confident learners; capable of achieving but who may have underachieved in the past. Many have the potential to achieve Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications but need some support to get there and might need to take one step back, work at a lower level initially, before taking two steps forward. Others have yet to find a career option that suits them and the small steps approach can be used to help them change direction.

The young people in our sample appeared to be well motivated and we do not know to what extent this is typical of the whole cohort. Nevertheless, it appears that for many young people the small steps approach gently reintroduces learning through building confidence and shielding them from daunting, long-term commitments. The confidence they gain through early achievement, however small, spurs them on to explore new occupational areas or attempt higher level qualifications.

It is also reasonable to assume that adopting a small steps approach can contribute to raising participation in post-16 learning since it helps engage and maintain engagement in learning for a number of young people. This contrasts with larger qualifications which may be off-putting and encourage some young people to seek jobs without training.

This research shows that the Learning Agreement can facilitate progression to further learning through building up a profile of qualifications, usually starting with a general, low level qualification which can be completed quickly. There was some evidence that single qualifications are also broken down into small, bite-sized chunks of learning. However, this aspect did not emerge particularly strongly and would be better explored with research with providers.

The LAP as it is currently framed limits the extent to which the small steps approach can be used because of the restrictions on eligible qualifications. This creates some frustration for advisers who would like to offer a much more diverse, perhaps unrelated, range of courses to their young people, similar to the model possible in Activity Agreements. It may not be desirable to allow an unlimited choice with regard to choice of course under the LAP, but increased flexibility, perhaps via different sources of funding, may satisfy and support advisers in their search for suitable LAP provision.

Appendix 1: Young people profiles

Area 1

Model	Prior qualifications	Recent and current courses	Future plans
Increasing demands	Low GCSEs (Es)	Level 1 and 2	Seeking a relevant placement for Level 3 course early 2009. Long terms plan to set up own business.
Increasing demands	Good GCSEs	NVQ 2 possibly moving onto a level 3	To finish all professional qualifications to become a fully qualified.
Increasing demands	Poor results in GCSEs (Ds, Es)	NVQ 1 and 2 plus English and Maths	Future plans include level 3 qualifications and management role.
Increasing demands	Poorer than expected GCSE results (D's-U)	NVQ1 and 2	NVQ3, exploring night courses and has plans to open own business.
Increasing demands	Mainly Cs and Bs	Level 2 and 3	Complete NVQ3 alongside further in-house and external training
Increasing demands	B-Ds	Level 2. Just dropped out of Level 3.	Currently working part-time and would like a full-time position
General to specific	Low grades D-U)	Completed English and Maths. Currently doing NVQ 2	Complete the level 2 then move onto the level 3. Ultimately wants professional role within the sector

Area 2

General to specific	GCSEs, Es + Fs.	Keys skills and employer-led learning plus Level 2 NVQ	Complete current Apprenticeship
General to specific	Mainly Ds, one B and E and Cs.	Level 1 plus personal skills and other qualifications.	Waiting to start another course and will apply for jobs when finished in July. Seeking Apprenticeships when old enough to work in the sector
General to specific	Good GCSEs and NVQ 1.	Key skills and level 2	Would like to do more training but is unsure of what.
Current and future roles	GCSEs Bs and Cs.	Two Level 2 NVQs	Will apply for jobs when qualified. Career goals to be self-employed in different sector
Current and future role	Passed 3 GCSEs.	NVQ 2, about to start second NVQ 2.	Would like a paid job in the new sector
Current and future role	Cs and Es at GCSE	NVQ 2, about to start second NVQ 2.	Would like a paid job in the new sector
Increasing demands	Cs, Ds and Es at GCSE.	NVQ 1, starting NVQ 2	To get qualified and then work
General to specific	GCSE results not known.	NVQ 2 plus employer led qualifications	Looking at jobs with training in other sectors.

Appendix 2: Topic Guides

The main aim of this study is to find out about the young person's experience of in terms of progression on the Learning Agreement Pilot and how breaking down learning into smaller components helped them to reach their goal and positive outcome. **The main focus of the interview is the Learning Agreement and what the young person thinks about it (specifically whether it helped them build ideas about what they wanted to do), NOT the young person him / herself.** However, there are some early questions about the young person's background, household circumstances, attitudes etc. in order to get the interview moving and to provide important contextual information.

The section timings are guidelines only and should be viewed as a maximum rather than an average. Interviews might last up to an hour using this guide depending on the number of activities the young person did and how long they were on the learning agreement.

A. Introduction (5 mins)

This section is to set the young person at ease and give them some background about the research. Please reassure them about confidentiality and ask permission to record the interview.

- Introduce yourself and IES - emphasise we are an independent research organisation, so we are not related to Connexions or the government.
- Tell them about the research project: It is about young people involved in learning agreement, their experiences of the activities, and whether these helped them to build towards the positive outcome following the learning agreement.
- Emphasise everything they say in the interview is confidential and will be reported anonymously - which means it will not be linked to them by name.
- Specifically let them to know now that nothing they say in the interview will be shared with their adviser or employer.
- They can refuse to answer a question if they'd rather not do so and they can stop the interview at any time.
- Do they have any questions to raise now? They can also ask questions at the end of the interview, if they want.
- Ask permission to record the interview

B. About the young person (5-10 mins)

The aim of this section is to get some background information about the young person including a little about their education and employment background, and current circumstances. This should set the scene and provide context for the rest of the interview, as well as making the interviewee feel more at ease.

1. Current circumstances

Are you still on the Learning Agreement or has it finished now?

- PROBE for details: e.g. when they started, how long they were doing it, how recently it finished
- IF UNSURE, describe the learning agreement and check understanding.
- Are you with the same employer you started your learning agreement with?

(if appropriate) What are you doing now? e.g. working, studying, training, or something else?

2. Previous experience of education

What did you think of school?

- When did you leave school? What age were you? How old are you now?
- Did you get any qualifications at school?
 - EXPLORE subjects / grades in broad terms.
- Were you happy with these?
- What did you do after you left school? *PROBE: work, courses, NEET periods.*
- Would you do anything differently if you had the chance?

What did you plan / hope to do when you left school?

- Were you mainly hoping to find a job or do some further education or training?
 - PROBE for any ideas they had about types of work, education and / or training.
- Did you think about combining work and training?
- What was appealing about each option (work / education / work and training)? What was unappealing?
- Did you get much help or advice in thinking through your plans? e.g. from family, friends, school careers advisers, Connexions

Have these plans and idea changed in any way since leaving school?

- In what way? What do think has changed things?
- Do you feel any differently about education and training now?

C. The Learning Agreement (10-15 mins)

In this section we focus on their experience of the learning agreement. What did they do, their motivations and outcomes.

1. Entry to the learning agreement

How did you first hear about the learning agreement?

- Who talked to you about it? What did they say about it?
- What did you hope to get out of the learning agreement?
 - PROBE for all drivers - work, skills, current job or future career, ideas about what to do in future, getting a foothold in a particular industry

What was the main thing that attracted you to the learning agreement?

- How did you think it would help to achieve your goals?

Describe your learning agreement for me.

- CHECK structure of learning agreement: sequence of learning (timeline if helpful)
- PROBE nature of work and training: eg who got them the job, previous contacts or experience in the sector
- Did you do any short courses or tasters before starting the learning agreement (or job) e.g. certificated courses such as first aid, health and safety, food hygiene?
 - CHECK for any activities or courses which may be 'fillers' e.g. before formal start of the agreement, before more substantive course, before starting the job
- Was the training you did broken up into sections or was it done in one block?
- Did you do any maths, English, IT or other qualifications, including GCSE retakes?
 - CHECK formal and informal programmes, if possible identify non-accredited courses, what was certificated and what was not?
- Did you complete all of the learning/training or did you leave any courses early?

Was this what you expected or wanted?

- How much were you involved in making decisions about the things you were doing on your learning agreement? Were you happy with this level of involvement?
- How did you think the courses and activities could help you? e.g. do the current job better, progress within current role, move to a new job, develop skills to help in a range of different jobs

- Was your employer supportive? *If yes*, in what ways e.g. paid time off for learning, arranging shift system to accommodate learning, talking to you regularly about what you were doing at college?
- What kind of support did you get from your adviser? e.g. frequency of contact, nature of support offered
- Could your employer or your adviser have done more to involve you or not? If yes, what could they have done?

2. Focusing on small steps

CHECK understanding of whether they perceive a stepped approach and clarify what the steps were e.g. basic skills qualification followed by NVQ, or L1 to L2 qualification (likely that YP will only do 2 or 3 different learning activities).

Was it helpful to do your learning or training in steps like this?

- How did it help? PROBE confidence, getting basics first, getting essential qualifications, less daunting programme of learning
- Are there other benefits in doing your learning in small steps? e.g. fitting around working hours, getting back into learning, showing employer that they were worth investing in.
- Did you know at the outset that you would be doing more than one qualification?
 - How did your adviser describe what you would do?
 - Did you move straight from the first qualification to the second or was there a period in between? Why was this?
 - Did doing the first qualification encourage you to go onto the second?
- Was the stepped approach suitable for you or would you have preferred to go straight to your main qualification?

Do you think the different types of learning or training that you did were related?

- To what extent did the programme of learning hang together? Do you think the courses you did fitted together well or not so well?
- Do you think your adviser had a long-term plan or did it feel like they were just picking things at random?
- Do you feel that the steps built on one another or could they have been done in any order?
- Did the learning activities become more demanding as you went through the steps or not? e.g. in terms of skills, knowledge requirements, length of time

Did you feel like your adviser structured your learning well?

- Was everything you did important or could you have skipped any of it?
- Could your learning or training have been structured any better? What would you do differently and why?
- Would you have liked your learning agreement broken down even further?

D. Reflection on Activities and Progression (10 minutes)

1. Progression

What did you do (what do you plan to do) after the learning agreement?

- How did your learning agreement help you?
 - PROBE on current job, future career, future learning goals, personal and social factors such as confidence.
- In particular, do you think that being able to do the learning agreement in small steps helped you to progress? Why / why not?

When starting the learning agreement, did you have a clear idea of what you would achieve as a result? Why do you think this was?

- Did you get regular contact with your adviser before, during or following your learning agreement? What did you get out of it?
 - Probe links to progression e.g. more responsibility / confidence at work, promotion/ higher pay, thinking about moving on to a different / better or more relevant job linked to the training they have done.

What do you intend to do over the next 3 years in terms of work and learning? e.g. stay in the same job, move into a new sector, do further training

- How has the learning agreement helped you develop ideas for your future
- What will you need to do to achieve your goals? What kind of support do you think you might need?
- Have you done anything as a result of doing your learning agreement that you wouldn't have done otherwise?

2. Wider Reflections

What has been your overall experience of the learning agreement?

- Looking back, what do you think you got out of the learning agreement? How far do you think the learning agreement has helped you progress?
- If you hadn't got involved in the learning agreement - what do you think you would be doing now?

On the whole, do you think it was worthwhile? Why / why not?

Do you think that breaking the learning down into small steps is a useful approach for people in your position?

- What kind of person would it work for?
- When is it not suitable? What kind of person would it not work for?

If you could improve anything about the learning agreement what would it be?

Closing the interview

Thank them for their time. Ask if they anything else to add.

Describe what happens next - their comments combined with about 20 other young people and discussions with advisers to produce a report about the learning agreement. Reassure about confidentiality.

Any other questions?

Give them the voucher and ask them to sign receipt for it.

Thank and close

LAP advisers group discussion guide

A. Introduction (5 mins)

- Introduce yourself and IES - emphasise we are an independent research organisation commissioned to evaluate the Learning Agreements.
- Outline purpose

The main aim of this study is to find out about young people's experience of the Learning Agreement Pilot (LAP); specifically whether and to what extent a series of small steps can help them to reach their goal and positive outcome

- establish the nature of small steps provision in the LA
- discuss its suitability for different learners
- determine the extent to which a small steps approach is successful in supporting learners.

At the end of the discussion advisers will be briefed about providing contacts for interviews with young people who have had more than one course as part of their LAP.

- Emphasise that the discussion is confidential and will be reported anonymously. Young people are also guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity in the report.
- Invite questions
- Ask permission to record the interview.

Start with a round of introductions covering for each person at the meeting:

- Name and job title
- Role and their responsibilities within:
 - The Connexions Partnership / Local Authorities
 - The management and delivery of LA

Understanding small steps provision (20 mins)

What are the characteristics of the different types of young people you have encountered on the LAP?

- Is it possible to classify young people within the LAP into sub-groups? PROBE on goals, learning background, family and social background, other characteristics
- What type of steps are needed to help these young people achieve positive outcomes?

What are the main influences on provision for these young people?

- E.g. prior learning, preferred learning styles, availability of provision, job role, long-term goals, employer needs
- To what extent is provision determined by supply (provision available locally) rather than demand (employer or employee needs / wants)?
- How much input does the young person have in these discussions?
- How much input does the employer have in these discussions?
- What else influences provision? PROBE other restrictions or drivers

How do advisers try to motivate young people to progress *within* the LA?

- Is this planned from the start or ad-hoc?

What does small steps mean within the LAP?

- What proportion of learners follow a single course or programme? What proportion do more than one? What determines these choices?
- For those who do more than one, PROBE on examples - what kinds of steps do young people take? What kind of programmes and how long do they last? Examples might include short courses and tasters, key skills, non-accredited programmes
- To what extent do the rules on provision for the LAP help or hinder provision PROBE qualifications on Section 96, courses of less than 10 guided learning hours
- To what extent does this kind of provision provide a 'filler' while waiting for another course to start or for the opportunity to train at work?
- Is the whole programme determined at the start or are subsequent programmes arranged during review of the initial provision? (is it planned or ad-hoc?)
- Are follow-on programmes designed or selected to build on previous activity or to broaden experience?

Implementing small steps provision (15-20 mins)

Are some types of learners more suited to a small steps approach than others? If so, how would you describe them?

(IF NOT, probe / confirm using sub questions 1 and 4 then move on)

- e.g. relating to prior experience of learning, aptitude for learning, occupational sector or job role
- How important is a 'small steps' approach for these young people?
- What specifically do they gain that they wouldn't otherwise?
- For which learners is the approach unsuitable? Why?

What are the issues for delivery of a small steps approach?

- What are the enablers and what are the barriers to implementation? e.g. costs, workload / caseload, intensity of employer and adviser support?
- What influence can and do employers have on the provision?
- How do advisers assess progression, and (how) do they relay this to the young person?
- How often do you meet with the young person to review progress and plan next steps? Is this any different to the approach where small steps aren't appropriate?
- How important is it to offer young people information about the potential outcomes of the different provision? What sort of information do they need?

Small steps and achievement (10-15 mins)

To what extent does the 'small steps' approach work?

- What does success look like e.g. progression, desire for learning, attitudes and confidence, competence at work?
- What factors influence progression (for example, being able to learn at their own pace, employer support or otherwise, successfully completing part of a qualification)?
- What kind of problems occur with a small steps approach? e.g. brokering suitable training, lack of coherence, greater dropout, employer or learner concerns. How damaging can these be and how are they addressed?

What are the key outcomes for young people resulting from a small steps approach?

- Probe for examples - what would have happened for these young people if you hadn't taken this approach?
- How relevant is a small steps approach to establishing a progression path for young people? How does it do this?

Wrap up and recruitment briefing (5 mins)

- Summarise key findings and check back with group
- Invite further comments

Next steps for the research: See briefing sheet

- Advisers to identify young people on their current caseload (or recently finished) where a small steps approach has been taken.
- Hand out recruitment sheets for YP - stress research aims, confidentiality, CRB checks. Incentives are available for YP taking part.
- Highlight timings and contact details.

Thanks and close

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