

**PROGRESS FILE: AN EVALUATION OF THE DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS**

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**Introduction**

*Progress File* is a replacement for the National Record of Achievement (NRA) which aims to assist learners to manage their own learning by promoting the skills of setting learning goals, action planning, reviewing, and recording achievement. It is intended for use by school pupils, further and higher education students, trainees, and adult learners throughout their careers. The *Progress File* materials exist in a number of forms aimed at users at different stages of their education or career. They are available in paper format or on CD-ROM.

*Progress File* came from a suggestion in the 1996 Dearing Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds. It was initially pilot tested in 1997-98. Following that pilot, ten ‘demonstration projects’ were set up in different parts of England to gain further experience of using *Progress File*. They ran from 1999 to 2002. It is that experience which is the basis of this evaluation report.

**Key Findings**

- *Progress File* has clearly demonstrated its impact in a number of areas related to its national objectives: enhancing knowledge, understanding and skills; encouraging users to plan and manage their own learning; improving their motivation, confidence and attitudes; encouraging the recording and acknowledgement of uncertificated achievements; and enhancing users’ written presentation of themselves.
- *Progress File* can play a key role in assisting users in their transitions from one phase of their education or career to another. For those who are facing such transitions *Progress File* could be of great assistance and value.
- *Progress File* also has the potential to contribute to a number of important priorities in education, including key skills, target setting, action planning, careers education and guidance, and work experience programmes for young people.
- *Progress File* materials, as written, are best suited to school pupils in the middle range of ability, but they are capable of being adapted for both high-ability and low-ability pupils. Those in special schools particularly benefited from carefully adapted materials.
- *Progress File* is particularly helpful to school pupils as they approach points of transition such as changes of school or course choices. Mature returners to education and adults facing career transitions also found *Progress File* helpful for reviewing and planning.
- *Progress File* is delivered much more effectively if the teachers and trainers responsible for delivering it have motivation and commitment to it and have used it for their own development.
- *Progress File* is best implemented in organisations where there is senior management commitment to it, where there is a ‘product champion’ for it, where there is support and training for those who deliver it, and where there is a sense of ‘ownership’ of it amongst its users. The *Progress File* materials are best used in a selective and targeted way, and integrated into the curriculum.
- *Progress File*’s impact on user’s learning habits and behaviour was uneven and inconclusive, and there was very little evidence for it having any impact on user’s attitudes to lifelong learning.
- There was no evidence of *Progress File* having any impact on the levels of certificated achievement of pupils in mainstream schools, as measured by examination successes.
Background

*Progress File* is a replacement for the National Record of Achievement (NRA) which was suggested by the 1996 Dearing Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds. It was initially pilot tested with schools, colleges, employers and training providers in 1997-98. Following that pilot ten ‘demonstration projects’ were set up in different parts of England to gain further experience of using *Progress File*. They ran from 1999 to 2002. The national evaluators were appointed in June 1999 and completed the evaluation in December 2002. The decision has now been taken to implement *Progress File* nationally and it will replace the NRA from July 2004.

*Progress File* places more emphasis on the processes of planning and managing one’s own learning than the NRA did, and is less concerned with simply providing a record of achievement. It has four main objectives:

- To equip young people with the knowledge, understanding and skills to plan and manage their own learning, including making effective and sustained transitions within and between education, training and working life.
- To increase individual motivation and confidence to achieve, and promote a positive attitude to lifelong learning.
- To stimulate learning to gain knowledge and skills, including that not formally recognised in national qualifications.
- To assist people to best present those attributes they have relevant to future education, training and career goals.

*Progress File* consists of a range of materials aimed at different groups. They are:

1. *Getting Started* for pupils in Years 9 and 10
2. *Moving On* for those in Years 10 and 11
3. *Widening Horizons* for post-16 students and trainees

The materials are also available on CD-ROM and are supported by a range of guidance and training documents.

The ten demonstration projects were chosen to represent a range of different types of organisation in areas with differing social, cultural and economic profiles.

Methodology

The evaluation of the *Progress File* demonstration projects involved both national and local evaluators. The demonstration projects appointed their own local evaluators who gathered information about *Progress File* through surveys, interviews, and observations. The local evaluators in turn provided information to the national evaluators, who provided guidance on the conduct of the evaluations through ‘evaluation frameworks’, examined nationally available data on examination results and absence rates, and synthesised all the available information into a national picture.

No single approach to the evaluation was appropriate to all demonstration projects as they had been chosen to represent different approaches to implementing *Progress File* in areas with differing characteristics. Commonality between the evaluations was achieved through the use of the ‘evaluation frameworks’ which set out key questions which each project should address. There were two frameworks: one covered key questions about the impact of *Progress File*, while the other asked questions about the most important conditions and contexts for successfully implementing it.

The impact of *Progress File*

*Progress File* was very largely successful in meeting its national objectives. Local evaluators reported that it had enhanced users’ knowledge, understanding and skills, and had been particularly successful in promoting increased self-awareness and understanding of key skills, although it was not the only initiative supporting these aspects of learning. A typical comment was:

‘*Progress File* has provided some support in helping users define, recognise, record and demonstrate the Key Skills they have, both in their educational setting as well as outside it. It has also helped them understand the transferability of these skills to different situations. However, *Progress File* materials have not been used in isolation but alongside other, often long established, documents found useful over the years.’

(Local evaluator’s final report)
Progress File had also supported users in planning and managing their learning. Staff in all projects were reported to be positive about this, with Progress File greatly assisting the processes of target setting, action planning and review.

'Teachers ... consistently reported evidence of the increased ability of students to evaluate their own work.'

(Local evaluator's final report)

Progress File also had a useful role in career planning and helping to clarify students' future career paths and aspirations. It also helped users' transitions from one phase of education to another, for example when they came to make course choices or decide on post-school destinations.

'Staff have reported improvements in the clarity of thinking about what their [i.e. the students'] next steps should be and the appropriateness of their course choices.'

(Local evaluator's final report)

Adult users similarly found Progress File especially useful for reviewing and planning when they faced career changes.

Almost all of the local evaluators reported that Progress File had a positive effect on users' motivation, confidence and attitudes. This was noted in both mainstream education and in special schools. Such negative motivational impacts as Progress File had were ascribed to implementing it in a way which was too mechanistic and repetitive. However, these motivational effects did not necessarily translate into an impact on users' learning habits and behaviours. Any impact in this area was patchy and very difficult for the evaluators to pin down. Progress File appeared to have no discernible effect on the users' attitudes towards lifelong learning.

Similarly Progress File had no measurable impact on users' certificated achievements, insofar as these were measured by examination results. There did, however, appear to be some increase in other forms of certification (such as work experience certificates, and striving towards certification by pupils with moderate learning difficulties), and there was also a greater concern amongst users to record those wider skills and achievements which were not certificated.

All the local evaluators found that Progress File had a major impact on encouraging users to present themselves better. This was particularly evident for written presentation of themselves through CVs, letters of application and personal statements, and it was also showing itself in their presentation of themselves in interviews.

Conditions and contexts for Progress File implementation

The national and local evaluations looked at a number of contextual factors which had the potential to affect the success of Progress File implementation. These included: the range of users of Progress File; the facilitators who helped deliver it; its relationship with other initiatives; organisational factors; and background social, cultural and economic factors.

The Progress File materials were found to be well suited to school pupils in the middle range of ability, and were capable of being adapted for both high and low ability pupils, although in the course of the evaluations, there were only a few examples of such adaptation. Special schools had used the support materials available to them and had been generally very successful in adapting and implementing Progress File. Mainstream pupils in schools especially appreciated Progress File as they approached major decisions such as course choices, changes of school, or progression to further or higher education. The other groups of users who benefited greatly from Progress File were mature students returning to education, and adults facing major changes in their career or life. Progress File gave them a structure within which to review and plan ahead.

Amongst the facilitators who helped to deliver Progress File it was clear that motivation and commitment to it were essential if it was to be well implemented. It also helped if the facilitators had themselves used Progress File for their own self-development. Those facilitators in educational establishments were more enthusiastic about using Progress File than were employers and training providers, many of whom already had their own appraisal and staff development systems. Progress File could complement these, but it was sometimes seen as an unnecessary addition.
Indeed, Progress File often had to co-exist with a large number of other initiatives which were attempting to address similar objectives. This was especially so in schools, where Progress File was used in conjunction with Key Skills, target setting, work experience, careers education and guidance, and a number of other initiatives to which it provided a supportive structure.

Within organisations it was clear that senior management commitment was essential if Progress File was to be implemented successfully. The existence of product 'champions', support and training for facilitators, and the encouragement of a sense of 'ownership' of Progress File amongst users, were also important positive factors. As yet, Progress File had not been fully integrated into the curriculum in most schools, and the most successful forms of delivery involved selective and targeted use of the materials in appropriate contexts (e.g. to support work experience, course choices, or transitions).

There was no evidence that background social, cultural or economic factors had any impact on the implementation of Progress File, with the single exception of those for whom English was an additional language, who could face problems accessing the materials.

**Conclusion**

Progress File has shown that it can enhance users' knowledge, understanding and skills; encourage them to review, plan and manage their learning, cope with transitions from one phase of education or career to another; and present themselves effectively. To the recording function associated with the national Record of Achievement it has successfully added a greater emphasis on the processes underlying learning, and it has done so for learners of all ages.

**Bibliography**


**Additional Information**

Copies of the full report (RR426) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

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