National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS) 2007
Early leavers

Research Study Conducted for LSC

November 2008
Introduction

The National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS) 2007 report highlighted that overall satisfaction is strongly linked to learners’ status on the course, with lower satisfaction among early leavers. Early leavers were much less positive – both overall and in relation to specific aspects of the course – as well as being less likely to obtain positive outcomes from their learning. This paper explores this group of learners in more details, to:

- understand the reasons for non completion
- identify the covert factors for leaving early
- identify the type of learners who are more likely to leave early
- review the policy implications

This paper is based on the findings from interviews conducted with early leavers from the further education (FE) system and from work-based learning (WBL)\(^1\). These learners were surveyed as part of the 2007 NLSS which was conducted by Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and included a total of 43,756 interviews with learners. These findings are presented alongside evidence from other studies which have examined early leavers from FE or other adult learning courses (these are listed in Appendix A).

In NLSS, respondents are asked where they are on their course at the time of the interview. In the 2007 NLSS, eight per cent of FE learners had left the course early (the remainder had either completed the course or were still on it). Proportions were similar amongst WBL learners (six per cent). Because NLSS interviews often take place while respondents are still on the course, the survey cannot provide comprehensive data on completion rates. However, NLSS survey data was merged with data on completion status (indicated by variable A34\(^2\)) in the final individual learner record (ILR) database for the 2006/2007 academic year. In total, 13 per cent of learners interviewed are coded as early leavers in either the survey or ILR data, and the multivariate analysis in this report includes all of these learners.

What are the reasons for leaving early?

NLSS asks early leavers what they consider to be the main reasons for leaving the course early. Table 1 shows the top answers for the different respondent groups: FE and WBL learners, as well as learners engaged in FE learning provided by Adult Learning Providers (ALP).

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\(^1\) In NLSS, the Work Based Learning system includes learning undertaking Apprenticeship but excludes Train to gain employees.
\(^2\) A34 is the variable in the ILR that provides an indication of the degree of completion of the learning activities leading to the learning aim. It indicates if a learner is continuing the learning, has completed it, withdrawn from it, or has transferred to a different aim.
In broad terms, learners who left their course early can be divided into two groups. The first group left for reasons related to the course itself – either because they felt the course was not as expected or was not right for them, or because they had problems with the tutor or teaching. The second group left early because of external factors – family, work, health or other personal issues (including changing circumstances). This second group can be further divided into those giving work-related reasons as opposed to other external factors. The main work-related reasons are difficulties combining the course with work commitments (including a lack of support from their employer), and getting a new/different job.

Comparing the three learner groups in table 1, the reasons for leaving FE and ALP were generally more varied than for leaving WBL, where not surprisingly work-related issues were more prominent. A similar pattern was observed in the survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses (DfES Research Report RR849, 2007).

The reasons given for early leaving in the 2007 survey were very similar to those observed in 2004/05, and findings are also similar in the different studies examined in this document. This suggests that the reasons for leaving courses early tend to be ‘generic’ rather than specific to particular types of course or types of learning.

Table 1: Reasons for leaving the course early

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>FE</th>
<th>WBL</th>
<th>ALP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Base: all who left course early</td>
<td>(2,528)</td>
<td>(342)</td>
<td>(141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong course/programme for me</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor poor/problems with teaching quality</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal issues (illness of family member/bereavement)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to combine with work commitments</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health reasons</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to combine with family or other commitments</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/provider badly run/organised</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got a job</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed jobs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support from work/problems at work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial reasons (inc cost of travel)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: the table includes answers mentioned by 5 per cent or more in at least one respondent group

We now examine the different reasons in more detail, with reference to other research evidence:
Wrong course/programme: this was the most common reason given by FE and WBL learners, and it also features prominently in other surveys. In addition, the most common reason for dissatisfaction with the overall learning experience amongst early leavers from FE was that the course was “not as expected”. This has implications for information, advice and guidance (IAG) provided before enrolment (discussed in the ‘Implications’ section below).

Analysis of NLSS shows that this reason was particularly common amongst FE and WBL learners aged 16-18, as well as FE learners studying for a qualification at Level 3 or above (the findings are related, as a relatively high proportion of Level 3 learners are aged 16-18). This pattern is confirmed by the evaluation of Level 3 provision, in which 28 per cent of early leavers said they left the course early because it was not what they wanted to do after all (by far the highest answer). In terms of subject areas, FE learners studying the visual and performing arts and media were most likely to say that their course was wrong for them. Again, this is linked to the younger age profile of those who tend to study these subjects. The survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses also found that this reason was more common amongst learners on long and/or non-vocational courses (DfES Research Report RR849, 2007).

Quality of tutor/teaching: this is a common reason given in NLSS as well as other surveys. In NLSS, FE students of hairdressing and beauty therapy were most likely to say that they had left their course because of tutor problems or poor teaching quality. Otherwise, there is no evidence of variation by different types of course or learner.

Difficulties combining with work commitments: This tends to be more of a problem amongst FE learners than WBL learners or those on other employer-based training programmes. Analysis of FE learners on NLSS shows that this was more of a problem for learners aged 19 or over, while the survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses reported that it was more of a problem for learners working 40 or more hrs per week (mostly men) and women aged 19 or over (regardless of hours).

Got a new job or changed job: this is not necessarily a reason for leaving a course in its own right, so it is important to identify why this resulted in learners leaving the course early.

The following reasons can be identified:

- the new job did not allow time to complete the course. The most frequent reason given by learners on the 2005 NALS survey for not taking up (more) learning is that work commitments did not allow enough time;
- getting the job meant the course was no longer necessary; this was identified as a separate reason in the FE Learners Longitudinal Survey;
the learner had signed up for the course with a particular employer and then changed jobs; this was the most common reason in the Expanding Apprenticeship Programme survey.

Getting a job can also be related to financial issues. In the survey of ALG recipients, a common reason for leaving was that financial pressures meant the learner had to get a job (and therefore stop the course). This is discussed further under ‘Financial reasons’ below.

In NLSS, FE learners studying engineering, technology and manufacturing, as well as business administration, management and professional courses were most likely to have left because they got a job, while WBL learners aged 19 to 24 and studying at Level 3 were the most likely to say that they had left the course because they had changed jobs.

Personal reasons (such as bereavement or the illness of a family member): this was one of the most common reasons for leaving amongst FE learners in NLSS, and was mentioned most frequently by older learners, particularly women. This reason also features prominently in other surveys, although it is sometimes described differently (e.g. as a change in personal circumstances). In NLSS, ‘other commitments (e.g. family)’ was also more likely to be given as a reason by older FE learners, as well as by black and Asian learners.

Health reasons: this was the most common reason given by ALP learners, and generally tends to be more prevalent amongst older learners (ALP has an older age profile than other learner groups). The survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses also notes that health problems were more likely to be a reason for leaving amongst older learners, among learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, as well as those studying below Level 2.

Financial reasons: this issue tends to be more prominent where learners received financial support as part of the course/programme, e.g. Adult Learning Grant (ALG) and the Extension of Education Maintenance Account (EMA) to Entry to Employment (E2E). In these evaluations, learners often needed the financial support to do the course, and in many cases said that they would have left earlier but for the financial support. However, the financial support was often seen as insufficient, evidenced by the learners who left the course to take up a job because they needed the income from work, and the fact that greater financial support was perceived as the measure most likely to have encouraged learners to remain on the course.

The survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses found that finance was more likely to be a problem for learners with no prior qualifications, as well as 16-18 year olds and those on Apprenticeships. This survey also found that early leavers were twice as likely as completers to say they found it difficult to cope financially while studying, despite being less likely to have paid towards course fees, and concludes that it is general financial difficulties that tend to be the problem rather than course fees and course-related expenses.
What other covert factors contribute to early leaving?

As well as examining direct questions on why learners left their course early, we can also compare the answers of early leavers with course completers on their perceptions of various aspects of their learning experience. This helps to identify specific aspects that may contribute to non-completion. To help with this analysis a binary logistic regression was carried out, to identify aspects that were highly correlated with non-completion. Overall, the regression analysis was fairly weak in ‘explaining’ non-completion. That is to say, the models generated were only able to account for a small proportion of the difference between completers and early leavers. In addition, the specific items that make up the models are quite disparate (covering aspects of the course and teaching, IAG and various outcomes). Therefore, while this analysis is useful in identifying specific elements that may have an impact on non-completion, it does not provide a coherent or comprehensive assessment. This is to be expected, as we have already seen that the reasons for non-completion are varied and often not related to the learning experience at all.

Specific issues raised by the regression analysis, as well as descriptive analysis of NLSS and other surveys, are as follows:

**Information, advice and guidance (IAG):** the importance of effective pre-entry IAG has already been noted, as a way of reducing the numbers of learners who leave the course because they decide it is not the right course for them after all or was not what they expected. In addition, the regression analysis of NLSS suggests that information provided as part of the course itself (e.g. disabled access, dangers as part of the course/how to work safely) was a source of criticism for some WBL learners who left the course early.

The survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses examined this issue more closely amongst learners aged 16-18 (the age group most likely to have left their course because it was not right for them, as noted above). It found that early leavers aged 16-18 were more likely than completers in the same age group to say that they would have liked more advice about their suitability for the course and more information about the time commitment involved. They were also less likely than completers to agree that they felt well-informed about what their course would cover.

**Support and consultation during the course:** the regression analysis indicates that early leavers from WBL were often critical that extra help promised to them was not actually provided (this was raised by 29 per cent of early leavers from WBL compared with eight per cent of completers).

Early leavers were also often critical of the level of consultation they had from their provider, in particular on being asked for their views on how to improve the learning programme.
Course content: in NLSS, early leavers from FE were more likely than completers to criticise the pace of the course, usually for going too fast. Related to this, early leavers were also more likely to report problems in keeping up with standard of work.

The survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses confirmed that early leavers from FE tended to find the course too fast or difficult, while early leavers from WBL including Apprenticeships were more likely to find it too slow or too easy. This survey also identified differences by level studied: early leavers from Level 2 FE courses were more likely to say they found the course too slow and/or too easy, whereas those at Level 3 were more likely to say they found the course too fast and/or too difficult.

Overall, these findings suggest that a significant minority of early leavers were studying at a course level that they found unsuitable\(^3\). In the survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses, the third highest reason for leaving early was that the course not at the right level.

Tutors, teaching and classroom issues: One of the most frequent reasons given for leaving the course early is the quality of teaching or problems with the course tutor. Analysis of learners’ attitudes on these issues in NLSS confirms that early leavers are often more negative than completers, specifically in relation to:

- knowledge of the subject (WBL learners)
- quality/availability of teaching materials (WBL learners)
- making the subject more interesting or enjoyable (FE learners) and making them more enthusiastic on the subject (both FE and WBL learners);
- how teachers, tutors and trainers relate to the respondent as a person (both FE and WBL learners);
- lessons ending late (both FE and WBL learners);
- other students making a noise during classes (WBL learners).

In addition, early leavers from FE were more likely than completers to have encountered course-related problems (including not being able to maintain personal motivation).

Outcomes: Early leavers from FE and WBL were less likely than completers to value the course as helping them with their work or career. To some extent,

\(^3\) As pointed out in the survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses, this may be related to the fact that a high proportion of learners with no or low qualifications were seeking to ‘upgrade’ whereas most of those with Level 3 qualifications and above were on courses at a level below their existing highest qualification.
this reflects the focus of the course, as early leavers were also less likely to say that the course was “essential for work” or required by their employer.

Overall, it is worth stressing that although early leavers from FE and WBL in NLSS were less positive than other learners in their attitudes towards the course and learning provider, the majority were at least fairly satisfied with their learning experience and said that they would speak highly of their course provider. This confirms that external issues are often the reason for learners leaving a course early. It also indicates that the specific issues noted above may contribute to some learners leaving the course, but are seldom the primary causes of non-completion.

Which types of learners are more likely to leave early?

In order to identify the learner characteristics most closely related to non-completion, CHAI$^4$D analysis has been carried out on NLSS 2007 data (shown in Figures 1 and 2). This identifies the following characteristics as distinguishing early leavers from completers (for both FE and WBL learners):

- **living in a deprived area**: learners in more deprived areas were more likely to leave early than those in less deprived areas.
- **Qualifications**: those without qualifications were more likely to leave the course early.

This suggests that more ‘disadvantaged’ learners are more likely than other learners to leave their course early and may require additional support to help them stay on the course. This is confirmed by the survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses, which found that non-completion (in the 16-18 age group) was higher amongst ‘disadvantaged’ learners (as defined by the ILR), amongst non-white learners and those who were ‘NEET’ before they started the course (not in employment, education or training).

Descriptive analysis of NLSS also shows that the level studied is a factor, with those studying at entry level or Level 1 most likely to leave early (this pattern is particularly strong for WBL). This will at least partly reflect the findings above on level of qualification.

Non-completion was also higher in some subjects and types of qualification. Amongst FE learners, early leavers were more likely than other learners to be studying information and communication, and English, languages and communication (these are courses often taken at lower levels and by older learners – see below for analysis by age), and were more likely to be studying

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$^4$ CHI-squared Automatic Interaction Detector (CHAID) is an analysis technique that interrogates the interaction between variables, in order to identify the characteristics that have the greatest impact on a key question (in this case overall satisfaction with the learning experience).
for a GCSE or Access to HE than other qualifications. Non-completion of WBL was higher than average amongst those studying science and maths, and lower amongst those studying engineering, technology and manufacturing. It was also higher amongst WBL learners on non-NVQ courses.

The CHAID analysis shows that, for FE courses, older learners were more likely to leave early than younger learners, but that the opposite applies to WBL. In particular, the CHAID analysis shows that non-completion of WBL courses is twice as high amongst those aged under 21 who do not have qualifications, compared with other WBL learners.

The CHAID analysis also shows that, within some groups of FE learners, women were more likely than men to leave their course early.

Descriptive analysis of NLSS also indicates that learners with a disability were more likely than other learners to leave early (this applies to both FE and WBL). This has also been reported in other studies (such as the Evaluation of Level 3 and the survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses). As noted above, many learners leave their course early because of health reasons. It is therefore not clear to what extent the higher non-completion rates amongst disabled learners are linked to deteriorating health during the course, as opposed to existing disabilities.

Figure 1: CHAID analysis of characteristics of early leavers from FE

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Figure 2: CHAID analysis of characteristics of early leavers from WBL
Implications

This section considers what can be done to reduce the number of early leavers, given the findings that have been highlighted above.

Pre-entry IAG
In NLSS and other studies, one of the main reasons for leaving the course early was that the course was not seen as appropriate to the learner, and in NLSS early leavers’ main reason for dissatisfaction with FE learning was that the course was not as expected. This suggests that pre-entry information and guidance is particularly important in reducing the drop-out rate. The type of advice required by learners is relevant to current government planning: the Government has recently announced its intention to introduce a new joined-up advice service, to help people move into work and learning (DIUS and DWP, 2007).

As well as providing information about the course and its assessment, findings from WBL learners on NLSS indicate that, for work-related training, the relevance of the course to the learner and their current or future job should be stressed.

The priority groups for this type of advice are younger learners (aged 16-18) and those studying at Level 3, as these are the learners most likely to leave the course because they felt it was not right for them.
Support and consultation during the course

IAG is also relevant to problems encountered by learners during the course. While it is important to provide information to pre-empt these problems as early as possible, advice and support needs to be available to learners during the course.

The survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses highlighted the importance of information and guidance on a wide range of issues, including the option to defer (rather than dropping out altogether). It found that “almost one-third of acknowledged early leavers had looked for some form of information or advice about ways of transferring, deferring, or otherwise changing the way they were doing their course. However, only one-third of these had actually received any. Of those who had not looked for information, a further one-third reported that they would have liked some”. The Evaluation of Level 3 survey also found that greater support from the provider was one of the main things that could have encouraged learners to complete their course.

This advice will often relate to the course itself: some early leavers in NLSS were critical of the pace of the course and reported difficulties keeping up with the standard of work required. In addition, early leavers often felt that they were not consulted about ways of improving the learning programme. However, advice and support also needs to cover external pressures. According to the survey of early leavers from FE and WBL courses, “those who cited circumstantial or time/workload-related reasons for leaving were generally more likely than average to have been satisfied with the pace, level, and quality of their course. This suggests that it was the balance of the course with other commitments that was the source of such problems, rather than the amount of time that the course itself took up”.

The type and range of difficulties reported by early leavers (e.g. on financial issues and conflicting commitments) indicate that advice needs to be informed and wide-ranging.

While this type of advice and support may be relevant to all learners, support is most likely to be valuable to ‘disadvantaged’ learners and those with low qualifications (who are most at risk generally of dropping out), as well older learners and those in work (in resolving conflicts with external commitments).

Course format and learning mode

While it is generally difficult to alter the format of a course to suit individual learners, some flexibility may be beneficial. For example, the Level 3 evaluation found that having more time to complete the course overall would have helped some learners to stay on the course, while NALS found the option of working at home on course work via the internet an attractive option for some learners with childcare restrictions and who cited ‘lack of time’ as a barrier to learning.
This will be most appropriate for learners with particular barriers to attending courses (e.g. disability, childcare and caring commitments).
Financial issues
In evaluations of programmes where learners receive financial support to take part in training (for example ALG and Extension of EMA to E2E), many early leavers felt that greater financial support would have helped them to stay on the course. At the same time, respondents said that they would have left earlier but for the money they received. This suggests that unless they are substantially higher than at present, financial support may help people to start courses that they may not have been able to start otherwise, but may not reduce the drop-out rates. This indicates a need for better signposting of learners with financial difficulties to sources of discretionary financial support.

Employers
The NLSS findings for early leavers from WBL suggest that consultation with employers could be useful. A number of the reasons for leaving early concerned the employer (including difficulties in combining the course with work commitments and a lack of support from the employer); information aimed at employers, and greater discussion between providers and employers, may help alleviate these difficulties.
Appendix A: Other studies included in the analysis

Evaluation of Extension of EMA to E2E and PLA Learner Questionnaire (source: LSC)
http://ema.lsc.gov.uk/evaluation-reports/

Level 3 evaluation (wave 1) (source: LSC)

ALG recipients survey 2008 (source: LSC)

Potential for expansion of the Apprenticeship programme (source: LSC)
http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/Research_into_Expanding_Apprenticeships_for_release.pdf


FE Learners Longitudinal Survey Wave 1: Findings from Quantitative Research, Coleman N, Naylor R & Kennedy E, DfES Research Report RR768, 2006
http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectid=14940&resultspage=1

http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectid=14422&resultspage=1