



**The 3Ds - Disadvantage, Disengagement and Discrimination
Research Project**

Evaluation Report

**A Report for the Steering Committee from the National Institute of
Adult Continuing Education**



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1 *Aims and scope*

The purpose of the 3Ds project which was carried out by the Working Lives Research Institute at London Metropolitan University was to map and analyse projects and initiatives in the London region that aim to enhance the employability of individuals from particular disadvantaged groups or to assist them in gaining direct access to jobs. The three D's of the project title are: Disadvantage, Disengagement, and Discrimination. The project sought to explore their inter-relationships, and how learning and skills provision works to counter their effects. The original proposal referred to a smaller range of disadvantaged groups; this was extended to fifteen groups for the survey but narrowed again to seven groups for the qualitative research.

The project's aims were to produce a database of provision, and to use it to develop an analysis of how learning activities make a difference to opportunity for people in disadvantaged situations or categories. The project methodology had two interrelated strands:

- A mapping exercise was conducted through a questionnaire survey of providers working with certain client groups to offer learning and skills development; information, advice and guidance; and employment brokerage. The combinations of activity vary between organisations: the differences are sometimes determined by whether the client focus or the learning expertise are the defining purpose of the organisation. The aim of this survey was to compile a database website of provision, which would serve as a resource for providers and stakeholders. Initially intended as a catalogue of existing provision, it has developed as an interactive tool, the purpose of which was also to identify examples of good practice which could inform and support both planning and funding decisions, and quality improvement. In addition, it would provide an evidence base to help identify 'critical success factors' and outstanding examples of good practice. The majority of projects entered on the database are either LSC or ESF funded. Others are funded from a range of sources, chiefly either self-funding by provider organisations themselves or small charitable grants. Over half the projects listed in the database are voluntary and community sector organisations.
- Qualitative research to explore in more detail issues relating to labour market disadvantage, disengagement and discrimination was carried out through interviews with representatives of target user groups, learning and guidance providers, social partners, and policy and funding agencies. Through this strand of activity, the project aimed to develop a model of 'critical success factors' for initiatives designed to support labour market inclusion.
- The specific aims relate to the multi-agency context of the field, which sometimes acts as a constraint on the sharing of information and practices. The project outputs were conceived as a resource for adopting good practice across the board.

Many of the organisations included in the project do not have the provision of adult learning as their primary purpose: this is also the case for some of the project partners. Some offer programmes with a single strand of learning, which is likely to be either Skills for Life, elementary use of information technology, or a single field of occupational skill; other projects address a number of occupational, social and/or curricular focuses. Their central concern may be a client group (for example, migrants from a particular culture, or people with a particular physical or mental health challenge), within or spreading beyond a sub-regional base. The relationship between such organisations and the learning and skills agenda can be complex, especially in relation to definitions of quality and the value given to different kinds of outcomes for participants. The decision to narrow the focus, with regard to which disadvantaged groups to include, was sound. The range remained broad enough to maintain awareness that there is no single design of learning programmes that will overcome social division.

Among providers with learning and skills as a central purpose, there is still a range that includes highly focused, expert and experienced organisations with a narrow client and curriculum base, and also organisations with a larger range of client groups whose interventions may include attention to needs that do not fall neatly into a curriculum.

The project decided to address all the above categories, and a major part of its work has been to produce, in the database, a single reference instrument for:

- learning providers;
- strategic and funding bodies;
- service providers working on local cohesion;
- information, advice and guidance (IAG) services (both those focused on learning opportunities and those with a wider brief); and
- referral agencies.

It would have been impossible to attempt such a wide-ranging task without the commitment of the organisations with nominees on the Steering Committee. Its members represent the major funders of post-school learning, covering different sub-sectors, including learning designed and offered in the interests of particular occupational fields. The representation of the voluntary sector overlaps this divide: it includes both the trainers of their own workforce, and contributors to strategic debates and programmes across the regional range.

The membership of the Steering Committee might also be seen as a counterbalance to the possible negative perceptions of locating the project in a University research unit. Such a relationship is not unprecedented in London, and successful partnerships have the potential to sharpen the analyses with which adult learning structures work, as well as offering support for independence in research processes. The focus of the Working Lives Research Institute, which undertakes socially committed research, emphasising equality and social justice, makes it a partner with substantially relevant fields of interest and knowledge. The combination of research rigour and reference to the professional field has made a considerable contribution to the reach and depth of the project's work.

The funding for this phase came through ESF and the LSC through the Pan London round.

With reference to terminology: the project moved away from the use of the term 'beneficiary' to describe those accessing the services provided by the projects and initiatives being mapped, and instead adopted the term 'project participant.' NIACE welcomes this change, as being suggestive of activity rather than dependence, and thus uses 'project participant' in this report.

This report has been written after the completion and launch of the current phase of the database, which has followed the production of other outputs referred to during this report. NIACE understands that the Working Lives Research Institute is seeking further funding to be able to extend the project, including the collection and analysis of further data.

2 Project activities

2.1 Data collection: listing learning provision

A wide range of project information has been gathered by the project questionnaire, which was circulated by the remaining Learning Partnerships and some of the other members of the Steering Committee. Ecotec, which manages the LSC Pan London ESF funding in London, circulated information about the project. While NIACE recognises the importance of this co-operation, it also understands that there were constraints, either of protocols or of technical transferability, which made it difficult or impossible simply to share data about current provision.

This difficulty made the construction of the database a longer and harder labour than would seem necessary, given that records of provision and projects were in the possession of the strategic partners, all of whom were represented on the project Steering Committee. It is to be hoped that this issue can be addressed at national level: the implications for both planning and monitoring seem to reach far beyond the boundaries of this project.

The database was designed as a resource that would serve three functions:

- To provide a list of current activity, with evident potential to support commissioning and to review sub-regional distribution.
- To enable the researchers to identify dominant and under-represented learning aims as expressed by the curriculum choices, and the patterns of focus on particular curriculum elements, learner groups and learning outcomes.
- To allow for analysis, both of provider types and of indicators of success: the data includes information about participants' progression to employment or further learning. The aim here was not a 'balance sheet' but the identification of demonstrable good practice, and of critical success factors that enable and support it.

The planned outcomes were analytical - mainly through the identification of critical success factors - as well as supporting course-finding, which has the potential to support as well as supplement the remaining IAG services. This has been an enormous labour for the project team, and the database entries will need to be maintained and updated if the resources can be secured. This puts pressure on the project's ability to shift from collection to interpretation. The analytical work has been started but there is considerable potential for further thematic analysis.

2.2 Provider interviews

Interviews were carried out with a range of providers, focused on teasing out the relationships between the three terms in the project title. The report indicates that providers are acutely aware of the difficulties for learners in relation to the labour market. Effective organisations work with a sophisticated view of the complexities and interlocking difficulties that affect both learning and entry or re-entry into work. Sub-regional variations, affected both by population variety and by local economies, are also clearly identified, as is the interaction between economic and social factors. For example, the report identifies awareness of a strong sense among young men of being labelled with negative identities that obstruct their social and economic inclusion. The overall discussion strengthens the imperative for coherence and synergy between agencies offering different forms of service, developmental activity and support.

2.3 Project participant focus groups

A significant contribution to evidence gathering was the decision to undertake focus groups and individual interviews with people belonging to different categories of project participant.

Learning providers do their best to consult service users, but a group with a core factor in common, and without the need to be polite to people whose services you are using, opens up a space for candid evidence giving. We were able to observe two of these events, and were impressed (though not surprised) by the grasp and lucidity of the participants. Two of the comments that have strategic resonance are the high value set on work experience, and the limitations of a free-to-learners English language learning framework that only extends to level 2. This second point has been raised before, but not often responded to. It is of note that the design of the TUC Train to Gain programme recognises the need for 'progression to, and investment in, skills at level 3 or above'. Particularly in the current context of labour mobility across Europe, this project's evidence adds to the argument for change.

2.4 Employment opportunities and employers' views.

The project aims were not fully met in this area, as it was hard to get sustained engagement with employer organisations. The two exceptions were the construction industry and the voluntary sector itself. Representatives of these sectors were on the Steering Committee and contributed case studies.

It is possible that where strong partnerships existed between employers and trainers, they were in the college sector or in industry-led structures rather than in the range

of provision addressed by this project. It is also not to be assumed that inclusion through work is outside employers' concerns. The project findings do, however, support the conviction that more could be done to enable and support work experience, as an effective and holistic approach to learning: it clearly has a major role in social as well as economic inclusion, and in the integration of migrants and refugees.

Employer engagement is a topic that invites further investigation, within the project or elsewhere. It is possible that there is effective low profile work going on in neighbourhoods and without much awareness of London-wide debates. It is highly probable that there are practices within the chains of migration that integrate newcomers with little reference to the publicly funded learning and training systems. It is also possible that training is an unmanageable overhead for many employers, particularly small organisations, and that they expect the learning and training systems to deliver people in a high state of employment readiness. This is a hypothesis but could be tested with further enquiries.

2.5 Stakeholders' views

The project terminology distinguishes between disadvantages and barriers: the first term refers to characteristics of people's lives and social positioning, and the second to aspects of social structures and professional definitions and behaviours that make it harder to progress to social and economic integration. The focus group evidence suggests that project participants, support agencies and providers concur to a considerable extent in what they see as unhelpful to engagement and skills development.

Factors identified include funding that is too rigidly focused to enable multiple disadvantage to be addressed; privileging qualifications as the only valid indicator of gains in skill and employability; and short term programmes to meet complex and entrenched needs. NIACE values the recognition of project participants' own perceptions of the systemic factors which make training and re-training harder for them: among the comments recorded from these discussions, there are a number of cues towards better integration of services across administrative boundaries, and it is hard to see a positive response to the internal barriers identified by the project without a reach across these structures and agendas.

2.6 Summary of suggestions

The list of general suggestions is in many respects familiar, but it is also supported by the evidence we have been reviewing, and it points at least as much to changes in working practice and opening up institutional boundaries as it does to additional and/or different funding. It is not for us to say how an agenda like this should be taken forward, but we hope that the project reports will be circulated widely and made the focus of debate within the agendas of the agencies of policy and of regional policy and funding.

2.7 Critical success factors

This phrase formed one of the aims of the project, and it signals the commitment to making the research useful for practitioners and commissioners. The evidence base for identifying success factors is derived from the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, and notably by the grounded reports from the case study organisations. They have been summarised in diagrammatic form, first as five circles linked by arrows, indicating the necessary inputs by project participant, support agencies, project, employer and learning provider: this serves as an indicator of the high profile given, rightly in our view, to multi-agency approaches and partnership. The second graphic representation is three columns, labelled with the three main strands of contribution (Employers, Providers and Other Support); the columns support a lintel - the project - which in turn supports a pediment - the participants. (See Appendix)

The factors listed in these models are clearly derived from and supported by the evidence the project gathered. Few providers would deny their importance, and yet some of them probably require a higher level, and iteration, of co-working and communication than the current baseline level of integration between policies and agencies addressing learning, skills, induction into work cultures, and economic development. It would be beneficial to identify lasting partnerships and providers that meet these requirements, or even are committed to working towards them. The general emphasis on increasing and maintaining awareness of users' needs, and of their potential for contribution, is of course valid. We suspect that a few worked through and well reported and disseminated pilot initiatives, with solid employer endorsement, could act as ambassador projects, so to speak, for emulation. The question arises as to where the responsibility lies for follow-through actions of this kind.

The project developed five case studies, which cover a range of learner groups, learning needs, partnerships and programmes. They report on the work of: PRAXIS, which works with refugees seeking to transfer high level skills; MENCAP Sutton Pathways Project (Learning Disabilities); Tamil Refugee Training and Education centre, which has a particular focus on supporting skills development among women; BEARS, a youth group in a disadvantaged area in North London; and the construction industry's project, Building London Creating Futures. We share the view that these are all exemplary.

It would be fruitless to summarise them, if only because their emphases are, appropriately, different according to the target group and issues they address, face and engage with. What they have in common is respect for the autonomy and professional skills of the delivery organisation; locating learning alongside other programmes and interventions; attention to local circumstances, both as challenge and as resource; an open mind about what the learning programme needs to be (for example, Literacy, Language and Numeracy are present but not necessarily an end in themselves); recognition of changing a person by changing their situation and responsibility, for example by mentoring programmes or other forms of peer support; and trust. These qualities could be recommended in many other situations.

We hope the full reports will be read: what would also be valuable is some more detail about the professional practices that support successful provision and learner achievement, and relevant progression to work or further study. The working method of the project helps to balance the celebration of success with recognition that, in working with complex social issues, good will needs to be matched with skilled and well informed activity. No-one wants to be led by a 'don't do' list, but a sharp focus on the 'must do' list is needed: these case studies could support developments in other contexts and support funding decisions.

The major output of the project is the database website; the issues relating to its compilation have been reported above. We repeat here our concern that the balance of responsibility for its updating and development needs to be negotiated, with a view to keeping it current as shifts in funding take place, and not duplicating labour. If the data transfer issues are national rather than regional, NIACE recommends that the regional bodies seek a way to bring about change in the interests of all parties.

2.8 Cross-cutting themes

The project brief included a requirement to address three cross-cutting themes: equal opportunities, sustainable development and ICT. The project addressed these well. The research focused on equal opportunities, looking specifically of the needs of disadvantaged groups and developing a model of critical success factors to address these. The project team and steering committee took a strategic view of these themes and developed policies and practices to address them. Just one example for each theme may suffice. With respect to equal opportunities: the project's interviews and focus groups included members of each of the groups targeted by legislation. Sustainable development was supported through circulation of documents in electronic format to the project steering committee. ICT was well used not only in day-to-day operations but also in the delivery of the research outputs which can be downloaded from the project website.

2.9 Impact, celebration and continuity

The project has collected and presented database information on a Pan-London basis and has included learners and stakeholders from all the LSC London sub-regions in interviews. We are in no doubt that the project will have a pan-London impact as it has both collected information about a range of activity that should be celebrated for its resourcefulness and attention to learner concerns, and also addressed important fault lines in learning, skills and employability agencies and programmes in London. We expect that the project will prove to be of interest to a number of pan-London agencies, including the new Skills and Employment Board, chaired by the Mayor. We consider that the project has provided an analysis which can and should be taken seriously in both policy and practice, not least because of the degree of trust and centrality given to the experiences and analyses of the project participants. Some of them unfortunately do not yet benefit, either by getting the training they need or the jobs they desire and could undertake, if there was more support, from both pre-employment and employer-led structures and practices.

One of the achievements of the project has been to maintain positive relationships between a university research institute, the regional structures supporting adult

learning and training at strategic level, and a network of learning providers, many of them small, some highly specific in their reach and aims, and many precariously funded, but nevertheless, committed to good service and quality training as a way of improving lives and reducing waste of human resources. How such a dialogue can be sustained beyond the end of the project is a critical question.

We understand that an extension of the current project is possible, and we look forward to the further evidence it can produce. Our question is also addressed to the whole range of partners, who will need to continue to identify and respond to prompts for change emerging from the research. The research needs to be picked up as a prompt for action, if it is to facilitate increased effectiveness in provision for the most disadvantaged learners, and for those who still see no point in learning. Extension will produce more information, but the responsive action has to be led from elsewhere. An equivalent of Beacon status for learning providers in this range would be welcome: celebration can be an instrument for spreading good practice and high quality. But many providers would perhaps settle for recognition and worked-through deployment of inter-related and multiple funding strands to address multiple needs, without setting up a tangle of targets; and for longer term contracts to meet long term, ingrained social and learning need.

3 Conclusions

This has been a well-conceived and well run project. The small core team at the Working Lives Research Institute has clearly engaged and drawn down information and practical support, not only from the formal partners, but also from the long list of projects, many of them small and without substantial administrative resources, that have thought it worth while to organise and present the core information they were asked for. The project's findings have the potential to contribute usefully to an analysis of complementary values and strengths across the range of focus and mission.

The heart of the project's value, however, is its determination to put information to use. The analytical phase has been entirely their responsibility and has been attentive to the complex needs of some service users. It is not an original finding that learning and training provision needs to work alongside other kinds of support, or that the first necessity is that learners themselves are convinced that they need to learn. But this project, with its range of organisational purposes and of learner needs and priorities, gives its evidence a particular focus and weight.

We hope that the steering group members will continue to express their support by facilitating the maintenance of the database, and by translating the project's findings and emphases into their practice as planners and funders. The key issue here is sustaining and updating the information held on the database. A research approach has been powerful for the first survey of existing practice, and for its interpretation. For maintenance, updating and development, there is a shift towards an administrative approach. The responsibility needs to move to the places where funding and continuity decisions are made, in order to move from an initial survey to a live and current resource, and the data sharing issues need to be resolved.

In defining what it sees as the 'critical success factors' identified by its trawl for good practice, the project has coded its evidence in the forms of two diagrams. One consists of circles linked by arrows - the labels are: project participant, employer, project, support agencies, and provider.

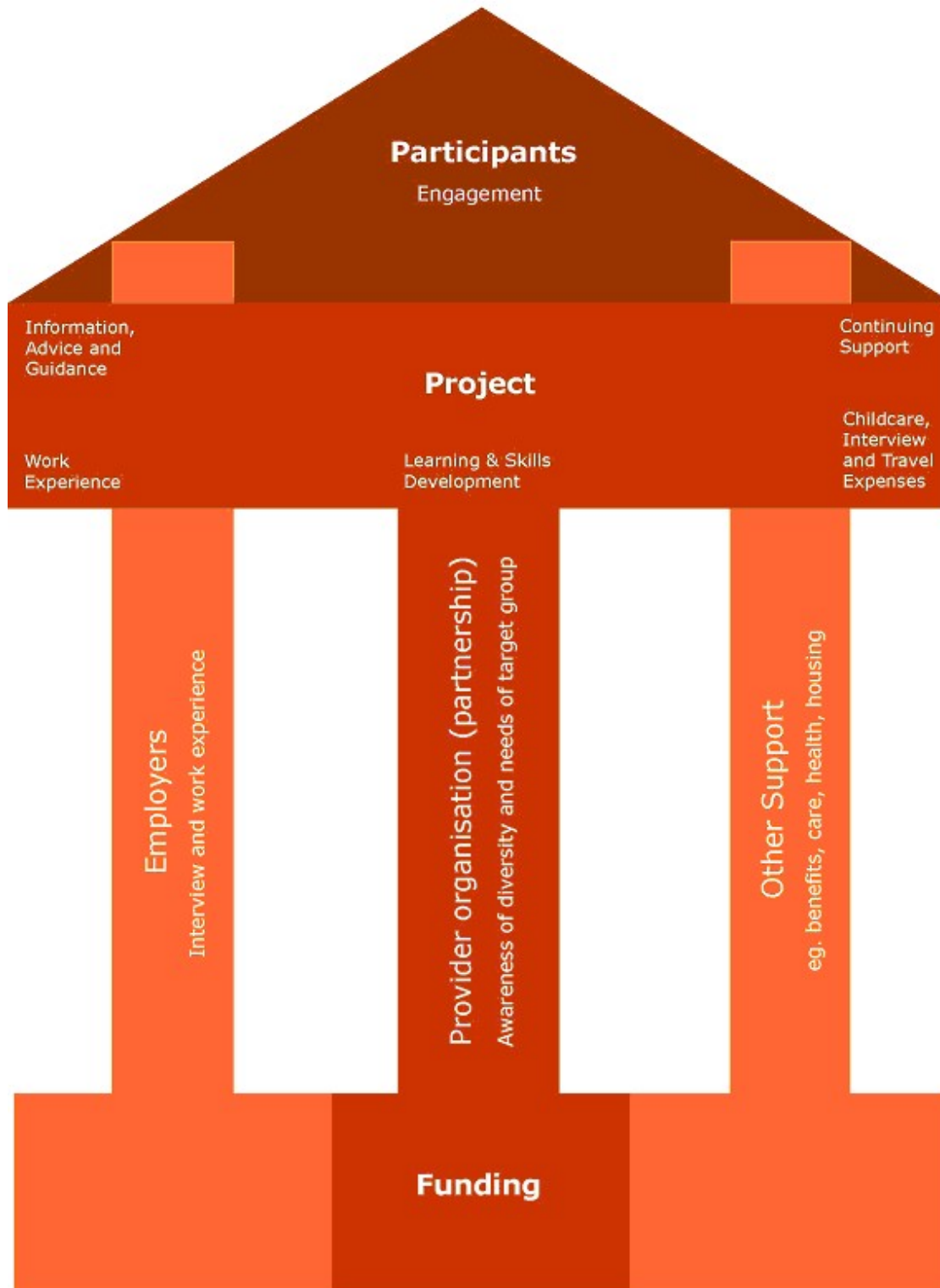
The point of such a diagram is that there is no hierarchy: all the elements have to be working positively before the necessary changes can take place. The second diagram is an imposing piece of architecture: three columns on a solid base and supporting a classical pediment. The base is Funding; the columns are Employers, Providers and Partnership, and Other Support, the lintel is the Project, and the pediment is Participants and their engagement. We see the similarity and contrast between these two representations as setting out the challenge of the work that learning services are trying to do: probably we need both the molecular buzz and the stable and respected framework.

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Appendix

A Model of Critical Success Factors

Tackling Disadvantage, Disengagement, Discrimination



A model of 'critical success factors'

