



# Building confidence

National Open College Network (NOCN) is the leading credit-based awarding body in the UK. Chief Executive Professor **Jill Brunt** explains the thinking behind their flexible accreditation system for offender learning programmes

## Can you describe your approach to offender learning?

We have been involved in a very successful programme called SkillsTrain. This has been a partnership between ourselves, the Probation Service, the Learning and Skills Council and all six adult prisons in London. Our approach has been to work with the services and the learners, to accredit the learning and skills acquired by offenders, as they took part in jobs and activities within the prison system or in unpaid work whilst serving a community sentence. For example, although an offender may have worked for several years in a prison kitchen, he/she may still find it difficult to get a job as a waiter on their release because they have nothing to show for the skills they developed. The SkillsTrain idea is to certificate these skills using our flexible credit-based qualifications to give them 'proof' of what they had learnt, which they can then take to an employer to demonstrate their employability.

## Why is credit-based learning important for offender learning?

A credit-based learning system is vital if offenders are to take their qualifications with them, not only as they move around the prison system, but also as they move perhaps towards more formal qualifications or into employment.

Our learner-centred approach, starting where the learner feels comfortable and confident, is an important component. The learning and qualifications profile of offenders suggests that many have few or no qualifications. Their school experiences may be negative, they may have experienced a great deal of family and educational disruption and generally have low self esteem when it comes to learning. Accrediting what they are already doing in their workplace or activity in prison/community sentences and building the programme around it, is a much better starting point. We have taken

**“Taking learning and accreditation to their workplace or activity in prison, and building the programme around it, is a much better starting point”**

this situation – where an offender may gain experience in a number of roles in prison or in the community – and built an accreditation system around it that enables the offender to gain qualification credits for that experience and carry that credit in to potential employment. Enabling offenders to gain credit for their work, move towards other qualifications and generally improve their skills, confidence and self esteem can only be good for the offender and society as a whole.

Getting back into education can be a large leap for many learners, and this accreditation system is able to provide a bridge into more formalised learning, further qualifications and hopefully from there into the competitive world of employment.

## How does this provision differ from mainstream learning provision?

The difference lies in the idea that this isn't a course; there is no rigid curriculum, no set hours, and no single qualification at the end of it. It's about looking at an offender learner's everyday activities, at their everyday job whilst in prison or in the community, and asking how that can be matched against learning outcomes in qualification units. It is about getting to the very centre of the learning need, and the learner experience; it is extremely learner-friendly because it is learner-centred.

Classroom-based learning can be a daunting experience for offenders who have probably had a negative experience of school; whose confidence in their ability to take on an academic programme is rock-bottom. With a credit-based approach, learners are able to progress from where they are at that moment, from where they feel comfortable, and from what they are already doing and the end results are certificates that demonstrate their work-readiness and employability. **CJM**

For further information on the National Open College Network please visit [www.nocn.org.uk](http://www.nocn.org.uk), or email [nocn@nocn.org.uk](mailto:nocn@nocn.org.uk) Professor Jill Brunt spoke to Maria Crossan