
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF OLASS AN ASSESSMENT OF ITS IMPACT ONE YEAR ON

Karen Halsey, Kerry Martin, Richard White
National Foundation for Educational Research

Introduction

This document summarises the third and final report from the evaluation of the new Offenders' Learning and Skills Service (OLASS). The evaluation examined the implementation of OLASS in three development regions (North West, North East and South West), prior to a national roll out in July 2006.

For the third phase of the evaluation, representatives from each of the three development regions were re-contacted and invited to take part in a final telephone interview, focusing on the impact of OLASS one year after its initial launch (August 2005). In total 51 telephone interviews were conducted with representatives from a range of agencies (including prisons, probation, LSC, Jobcentre Plus, Connexions, Youth Justice, providers and also Regional Offender Managers (ROMs)).

The interview invited comments on the following areas:

- the main impact of OLASS
- impact on assessment
- impact on monitoring procedures
- impact on information, advice and guidance
- impact on the workforce
- impact on provision for offenders (in custody and community)
- areas for further development/improvement.

Where appropriate, interviewees were asked to assign a rating indicating the extent of improvements in different areas e.g. no change to assessment procedures, some improvement, much improved, less effective and unable to comment. They were then asked to elaborate on their reasons for the rating given.

Main impact of OLASS

The majority of interviewees (41 out of 51) described the main overall impact of OLASS in positive terms. Most commonly mentioned in their accounts were enhancements to the provision available to offenders, improvements to partnership working, a greater integration of services and a raised awareness of learning and skills for offenders.

Whilst most regarded the main impact of OLASS to have been positive, nine individuals (across all three regions) expressed more negative viewpoints. Most often this related to provision which fell short of their expectations (e.g. did not focus on needs of the learners) or had, so far, failed to develop further (e.g. no additional hours or extension of the curriculum). An area for development may be learning and skills provision for offenders in the community: probation staff in all three regions felt that this had not benefited from the OLASS implementation.

Assessment

Just over half of interviewees (28 out of 51) from across the three regions reported that there had been improvements in the assessment process in the first year following the implementation of OLASS. Improvements included the systematic administering of assessments, higher standards of assessment and more assessment personnel as well as the implementation of new assessment tools/facilities and new assessment requirements.

Just over a quarter of interviewees (15 out of 51) expressed the view that there had been no improvements in assessment processes since the introduction of OLASS. Reasons for a lack of improvement included the continuation of effective services and procedures (therefore, assessment procedures had remained the same, rather than declined in quality), a lack of funding to improve assessments, the need for new assessment tools and low staffing levels and the introduction of inexperienced/unqualified staff.

Monitoring

Nearly three fifths (30 out of 51) of interviewees from across the three regions reported that there had been improvements in the monitoring of offenders' progress and achievements in the first year following the implementation of OLASS. Improvements were linked to enhanced Individual Learning Plans, improved data collection and data transfer; more systematic monitoring procedures and increased collaboration and communication amongst key partners. It should be noted here that, whilst interviewees noted improvements, some were keen to stress that the improvements were influenced by the effectiveness of monitoring systems in individual prisons prior to OLASS and that improvements had occurred in some establishments but not others within the same region.

Despite acknowledging improvements in monitoring, many interviewees also acknowledged there was still some way to go until effective and efficient data exchange could be achieved across custody and community. Around a third of interviewees (17 out of 51) who reported monitoring processes as less effective or unchanged highlighted inadequacies in data collection and recording, poor data transfer as well as new provider, staff and procedures as limiting factors.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG)

Over half of interviewees (28 out of 51) from across the three regions reported that there had been improvements in the delivery of information, advice and guidance. Of these, around one third suggested that IAG provision was 'much improved'. Improvements were linked to improved standards and delivery of IAG, increase in staff/hours of IAG provision available to offenders, improved multi-agency working and coordination of IAG services, increase in staff development and training opportunities and greater recognition and prioritisation of IAG.

Nearly one third of interviewees (16 out of 51) reported that there had been no improvements in the delivery of information advice and guidance. The continuation of original IAG services/staff meant the service had remained at the same level in some cases. Where IAG had been found to be less effective, the main reasons were related to a decline in quality of IAG delivered, a reduction in the quality and experience of IAG personnel, funding arrangements for IAG provision and the coordination of IAG services.

Impact on the workforce

Feedback from interviewees from seven different agencies (prison, probation, the LSC, youth justice, Connexions, education providers and Jobcentre Plus) suggested that there was a balance of positive and negative impacts on the workforce as a result of OLASS. Whilst some problems were reported, such as increased workload, a decline in morale and staff anxiety about the TUPE process, these may be perceived as temporary impacts arising from a period of change. Meanwhile, positive repercussions for the OLASS workforce included greater partnership working (facilitated by the regional boards) and increased opportunities for professional development (including for out-of-scope staff, college tutors, workshop instructors and prison officers).

Impact on provision

About a half of interviewees (26 out of 51) in each of the three development regions commented that there had been 'some' or 'much' improvement in the range and quality of provision available to offenders in custody. They attributed these improvements to

reviews of the provision (which led to targeted provision better suited to the needs of offenders), an increase in funding (leading to additional teaching hours), the approach to provision (e.g. more offender led), and greater communication and partnership working (such as links with employers).

Only two interviewees suggested that the provision had deteriorated as a result of OLASS, whilst four (all in the same region) contended that there had been no change. Reasons for a lack of improvement included provision which was provider, rather than offender led, inadequate staffing capacity (e.g. for particular courses, problems with staff cover), and a perceived over emphasis on employability skills (where offenders had other learning needs). A sizeable proportion of interviewees (19 out of 51) felt unable to give a rating due to a lack of knowledge surrounding custodial provision.

The ratings given by interviewees suggests that so far OLASS has made a much greater impression on provision available in prison, compared to community. For example, when asked to assess the progress of community provision 15 out of 51 interviewees registered 'no change' (compared to just four for provision in custody). Meanwhile, 16 interviewees reported some or much improvement in community provision, whilst 26 gave these same ratings in terms of custody. Again, a number of interviewees (17) were unable to comment, because they had no knowledge of, or information pertaining to, the provision available in the community. Where developments were reported these were connected to the approach of new providers (e.g. training for staff, tailored courses for offenders). A lack of progress meanwhile was assessed as relating to a lack of funding for community provision, mainstream colleges failing to engage offenders (e.g. inflexibility regarding commencement dates for courses) and no extension of contractual requirements for community provision.

Interviewees were also asked to assess the degree to which provision in custody and community was more employment focused. For custody provision, 25 interviewees considered that it was 'some' or 'much more focused' on employment, whilst a lower number of interviewees (20) gave the same ratings for community provision. Progress was generally associated with an increase in vocational courses, greater employment engagement and new providers which a stronger emphasis on employability.

Impact on the integration of services

Almost three-fifths of interviewees (29 out of 51) regarded the integration of services for offenders (across custody, community and mainstream) to have improved since the start of OLASS. Greater integration was associated with: the development of relationships, links and partnerships (e.g. which facilitated continuity of provision after release), involvement of a lead provider (e.g. enabling a more unified approach to provision), improvements to monitoring (e.g. to assist the continuity of provision, in terms of matching courses to offenders needs once in the community) and increased awareness of other agencies (which promotes the more integrated working).

Where a lack of progress or decline in integration was reported this was attributed to: poor transfer of information between agencies, a lack of integration at an operational level (despite strategic level developments), difficulties stemming from the unitised model in the South West and problems arising from bringing different working cultures together (e.g. mainstream providers working in prison environments).

The future development of OLASS

Interviewees proposed several ways in which OLASS could benefit from further development or improvement. Most often mentioned (by around 60 per cent of interviewees) were developments to the provision available to offenders, especially a greater focus on employability. Similar numbers of interviewees highlighted improvements in relation to the OLASS contract, namely, more attention given to community provision, stronger contract management by the LSC and clarification of different agencies' roles and remits in relation to OLASS. The collection and transfer of data was another aspect pinpointed for development - specifically mentioned was the collection of more comprehensive data on offenders (to assist planning and performance monitoring) and IT systems for enabling the exchange of data between agencies. Other nominations for development included: further integration of services (to prevent duplication), additional funding (for IAG, Connexions, capital equipment and provision in the community), greater partnership working between

OLASS agencies and raising the profile of OLASS generally.

The offenders' viewpoint

The report also summarises data from a short questionnaire completed by 36 offenders during case study visits in order to capture the offenders' experience of OLASS. The questionnaire comprised a mixture of open and closed questions. Researchers read through the questions and recorded on paper the offenders' verbal responses.

This strand of the evaluation sought to collect offenders' views on:

- the assessment
- individual learning plans
- information, advice and guidance
- the courses and training available to them

Generally, offenders seemed content with the service they received, with most assigning a positive rating. Several respondents mentioned a desire to undertake work-related courses but were prevented from doing so due to long waiting lists or a lack of provision generally. The value of vocational courses and training seemed to register quite strongly with offenders.

Conclusion

The purpose of the final report was to establish the overall impact of OLASS one year on from its initial launch. Each chapter examines a different dimension of OLASS, ranging from assessment to the integration of services.

In nearly all areas (with the exception of provision in the community), OLASS was considered to have brought about 'some' or 'much improvement' by over half of interviewees. In addition, when given the chance to nominate the main impact of OLASS, the majority of interviewees (41 out of 51) described that main impact in positive terms. At the same time, for five out of the six areas, around a third of interviewees registered a 'no change' or 'less effective' rating (of these, most reported a 'no change', rather than a decline in standards).

When invited to provide reasons for the ratings given, interviewees pinpointed a number of factors which had either facilitated or hindered the

successful implementation of OLASS. From these factors, a series of recommendations are made:

- Testimonies from the three regions suggest that appointing the right provider (in terms of expertise, attitude, and willingness to work in partnership, etc) is a critical factor in effectiveness.
- With a suitable electronic data exchange system in place, it was felt that there will be a much greater chance that information about an offender will be recorded, monitored and made available to different agencies throughout the criminal justice system.
- In moving forward, interviewees suggested that OLASS now direct more attention towards provision in the community and for young offenders, addressing a perceived imbalance.
- To ensure that relations between partners remain harmonious and productive, it was recommended that contracts/OLASS documentation should be specific about the roles, remits and expectations of the key partners (e.g. in relation to data recording, staff cover, etc).
- Partners in OLASS need to invest time in learning about the work, roles and cultures of each other's organisation. For example, staff new to prisons were felt to benefit from induction and support to acclimatise to a more unusual working environment.
- In order to meet some interviewees' desire to increase the vocational content of provision, steps may need to be taken to ensure the availability of funding and greater engagement of employers, an aspiration already expressed by the Government in its Green Paper '*Reducing Re-Offending Through Skills and Employment*'.
- A specific development for community provision, suggested by interviewees, was to ensure opportunities were geared more towards the needs of offenders. In particular, flexible start times and support to help them progress into mainstream provision were mentioned.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR810) - 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".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB810) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Edward Greatrex, 1F, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

Email: edward.greatrex@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills