



Learner motivation

An international review

- How important is it that young people be interested, excited and motivated to learn?
- How should we seek to motivate learners or enhance their existing motivation?
- How can learner motivation be measured?

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is committed to building a modern, world-class curriculum that will inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future. Talking with those involved in and affected by education as part of the QCA Futures programme, we have found that learner motivation is seen as key if learners are to flourish in the future. Until recently there has not been thorough information available on the learner motivation policies that different countries have in place. QCA Futures commissioned the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) to review key literature on learner motivation and find out about learner motivation policies around the globe through the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks (INCA).

This short paper gives a summary of the findings of the report by Pippa Lord et al, *International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks (INCA): Thematic probe on learner motivation 3–19: An international perspective* (NFER, 2005). The executive summary and full report are available for download from the INCA website at www.inca.org.uk.

International research on how learners are motivated

This report looks at how learners aged 3 to 19 are motivated. The research is part of the Futures programme and was carried out for QCA by NFER.

To conduct the study, we:

- sent a questionnaire to contacts in more than 40 countries around the world. Responses were received from 25 countries¹



- looked at recent international literature.

This summary of the study looks at the following.

- What do we mean by learner motivation?
- How do we measure learner motivation?
- How much importance do governments attach to learner motivation?
- How do we think learners are motivated?
- Key findings on how learners are motivated
- Key areas that affect learner motivation
- The need for a variety of strategies.

What do we mean by learner motivation?

For the study, we initially used this definition of learner motivation:

a range of an individual's behaviours in terms of the way they personally initiate things, determine the way things are done, do something with intensity and show perseverance to see something through to an end.²

However, during our research, a variety of definitions emerged. There were three common descriptions. Motivated students:

- develop positive attitudes towards learning: they are 'interested, excited and motivated to learn', or have a 'zest for learning'

- develop their own learning strategies: they adapt and change the way they learn, they persevere and have an 'energy and drive' to learn

- have ambitions and aspirations: they 'know what they want to achieve and are willing to pursue those goals, even in the face of difficulties'.

Other factors which are sometimes considered relevant to motivation include students' achievement, engagement in the classroom, lifelong learning, and participation and involvement.

How do we measure learner motivation?

Learner motivation is difficult to measure, especially because there is no clear definition. However, we found a range of indicators that are used to help understand learner motivation. These include: attitudes and characteristics of the students, information about attainment and academic progress, behavioural and psychological indicators, and information on attendance/drop-out.

People use a variety of methods to explore learner motivation including observation, pupil/teacher perceptions and motivation tests. Another useful measure is to ask the students themselves. They may be asked if they agree or disagree with statements such as *'if I try hard, I believe I can do well'* or *'when exams and assignments are coming up, I worry a lot'*.

How much importance do governments attach to learner motivation?

Learner motivation is important to many of the responding countries.

However, two-fifths of them do not have a specific central government policy on learner motivation. In some countries, such as Switzerland, it is a regional responsibility. In other countries, such as the Czech Republic and the Netherlands, individual schools are responsible.

One-fifth of the countries, including England, Australia (Queensland) and Singapore do have a specific government policy on learner motivation.

Nearly two-fifths include learner motivation within government education policy, but do not have a dedicated policy. For example, Finnish policies mention the importance of vocational



training, careers guidance and flexible study modules, and the German government has given priority to a number of areas including the extension of full-day schooling.

Some countries, such as Australia (Queensland) and Northern Ireland, have reformed the curriculum to emphasise learner motivation.

Teacher training and professional development, as a means to increase learner motivation, is a priority in some countries, such as Finland and Singapore.

Some countries, such as Austria, have commissioned research into learner motivation. In Hungary the government believes research into and development of educational materials for learner motivation are important.

Other countries target specific groups of the population where motivation is seen as a concern. Hungary gives priority to opportunities for disadvantaged groups such as the Roma population. New Zealand has commissioned a study on Maori students.

How do we think learners are motivated?

Government policy and initiatives, in the countries we investigated, reveal a range of themes for tackling learner motivation. The top three themes, found in eight or more countries, are about the need to:

- improve the personal and vocational relevance of the curriculum
- give greater flexibility and choice in the curriculum
- emphasise differentiation and support for each student.

Other themes, found in five or more countries, are about the need to:

- enhance students' involvement and say in their learning
- broaden the range of qualifications and courses available
- assess learning in an appropriate way



- improve understanding of learning styles and preferences
- encourage gifted and talented learners.

Key findings on how learners are motivated

The study identifies a variety of themes and issues that appear both in policies and in practice. There are several opposing views on the most effective way to motivate learners. One of the main themes is whether students feel motivated from within, or whether they need some external stimulus or reward.

Is it more effective to increase motivation by looking at the way students learn or by rewarding performance?

Both approaches seem to produce positive results. Motivation is increased through policies which focus on the learner, such as pupil choice, learner involvement, self-assessment, self-reflection and peer collaboration. In England and Liechtenstein, for example, learner motivation is encouraged by ‘assessment for learning’. Motivation is seen as an intrinsic part of looking at the student as a whole, through frequent evaluation, assessment and discussion of mistakes and how to improve.

Learners are also motivated by external

goals and rewards related to performance. In Poland, for example, the government gives monetary rewards to students. More than 5,000 students a month are rewarded for achieving top marks.

Some countries suggest they are trying to move away from ‘performance’ culture. However, the literature implies that there is a strong link between the performance-oriented approach and learning-oriented approach. It may be important to find a

balance between the two different approaches.

Does assessment motivate or demotivate students?

Class tests and feedback may motivate some students, but may have a negative effect on the students who fail to reach a certain standard. This is especially important for assessments that have high

Intrinsic motivation – concentrates on learning	Extrinsic motivation – concentrates on performance
<p>Students motivated through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ targeting individual learning styles ■ becoming involved through group participation and collaborative evaluation ■ choosing how they learn ■ assessing their own performance and adapting the way they learn. <p>Strategies successful if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ students can develop their own learning strategies ■ students can regulate their own learning. 	<p>Students motivated through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ rewards and incentives ■ grades and assessments ■ potential social status. <p>Strategies successful if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ they reflect students’ interests ■ they are implemented consistently ■ students believe there is a chance of success.

stakes attached. Governments may want to think about adopting measures that do not rely on testing or results achieved.

Is it more important to motivate students for a lesson or to create a passion for lifelong learning?

The way learners are motivated to engage in a lesson or task is similar to the way they might be inspired to learn throughout their lives. However, creating a passion for learning also seems to need extra attention, for example through relating topics to real life and encouraging learners' self-esteem and aspirations. It is possible that striving for lifelong learning might encourage classroom motivation. Certainly, a number of governments are encouraging lifelong learning and see this as a key policy in their education strategy.

Key areas that affect learner motivation

The literature highlighted several areas that may have implications for policies on learner motivation.

Teaching methods

Motivation can be increased through student involvement and say in what they learn. A study of 15-year-olds at one high school in Australia showed students' confidence increased when they negotiated their own curriculum. They achieved more and showed more courage, respect, personal growth and responsibility for their own learning.

Other teaching methods which increase motivation include:

- using ICT in teaching and learning
- practical and learner-centred teaching and learning such as hands-on learning, investigative approaches and using learning journals
- learning that is individually tailored, differentiated and supportive.

The role of the teacher

Several studies show that teachers are not aware of the influence they can have on learner motivation. Continuity of teaching, teacher enjoyment, teacher role in mediating challenge and teachers' awareness of their pupils' motivation, all have an effect.

Strategies that support teachers might be just as important as those that support learners. Indeed, teacher training and professional development was seen as a priority by some of the countries we looked at. In Finland, for example, teachers are given support to encourage learning through a positive school ethos. And in Singapore, the initiative 'Teach Less, Learn More' allows teachers more time and space to develop innovative teaching methods. It encourages teachers not to overload students with homework, revision lessons and tests.

Curriculum and assessment

About one-tenth of the literature focussed on the curriculum and assessment. The most important areas for learner motivation include:

- the need to make learning relevant to real life, young people's interests and the world of work
- 'assessment for learning', which includes the tools and techniques that help students to evaluate their own learning and progress
- the enriched curriculum and extra-curricular activity, particularly for gifted and talented students
- thinking skills, creative development and the arts.

Characteristics of the learner

Motivation is affected by gender, academic self-belief, self-esteem, preferred learning styles, and goals and ambitions. Boys in particular were shown to need pastoral support and help in areas such as planning, study management and perseverance.

Classroom climate

Classrooms that feel safe, non-controlling and that support learners' autonomy, wellbeing and self-esteem seem to encourage learner motivation.

Site of learning

Out-of-hours study in sports centres or study centres, community-based programmes, and flexibility in the site of learning, particularly for older students, were all found to be beneficial.

The need for a variety of strategies

Our international research shows that governments in different countries have common areas of concern, but they also adopt a variety of approaches to motivating students. The literature review reveals that there are many small-scale projects and studies on learner motivation.

The study shows how learner motivation is linked to other policy areas such as assessment for learning, the personalised learning agenda and lifelong learning. It also shows how different teaching approaches, learners' own attributes and the curriculum can all have an effect on learner motivation. Given this melting pot it is likely that no one single initiative, theme or strategy alone would improve learner motivation. Countries are likely to adopt a variety of strategies and adapt them to suit the particular circumstances of their own students.

Notes

- 1 Responses were received from Queensland (Australia), Austria, British Columbia (Canada), the Czech Republic, England, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Kentucky (USA), and Wales.
- 2 Coles, M. and Werquin, P. (2006) (forthcoming). *Role of Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning*. Paris: OECD.