How Can Effective Leadership Assist in Reaching Hard to Engage Female Students (Offenders and ESOL)

Joanne Scott
Research Publication Notices

Research Reports

Many of the documents in this series are prepublication/preprint articles, which may subsequently appear (part or whole) in peer reviewed journals and books. In most cases they are draft documents, the purpose of which is to foster discussion and debate, prior to publication elsewhere, whilst ideas are still fresh. Further information about the research programme and other papers in this series can also be found at the following websites:

http://www.lsis.org.uk or http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/cel/

Citation Notice

Citation should conform to normal academic standards. Please use the reference provided or, where a paper has entered into print elsewhere, use normal journal/book citation conventions.

Copyright

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) owns the copyright for all publications it commissions. Permission should be sought before any materials are reproduced. Short sections of text, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted without explicit permission, provided that full acknowledgement is given.

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service aims to accelerate the drive for excellence in the learning and skills sector, building the sector’s own capacity to design, commission and deliver improvement and strategic change. LSIS is dedicated to developing excellent FE provision working in partnership with all parts of the sector to build and sustain self-improvement.

Disclaimer

This project has been commissioned by, but does not necessarily reflect the views of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service.

Contact Details

LSIS: Learning and Skills Improvement Service
Friars House
Manor House Drive
Coventry CV1 2TE
Switchboard: 024 7662 7900 Enquiries: 024 7662 7953 or enquiries@lsis.org.uk www.lsis.org.uk
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Framework</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methods</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Findings</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions &amp; Recommendations</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

Having worked with offenders since 2004, female offenders have always offered a great challenge, often facing barriers to learning that male offenders do not experience. Female offenders are minority learners within Stockton Riverside College, as are ESOL females. This report is designed to give readers an insight into the challenges faced by female offenders and ESOL females when they try to access learning. The findings demonstrate that key barriers for both ESOL and Offender learners are childcare issues; problems of confidence and low self esteem, and the need to access learning off campus. Barriers specific to ESOL learners were the focus on mixed age group classes as compared to specific classes for older women who did not have the confidence of the younger women. Also, there was a lack of time spent on oral English which could assist more confidence in spoken English. Barriers specific to offenders were the absence of instruction in CV writing, the lack of specific forms relating to formal disclosure of offending to reduce the anxiety of verbal explanations by offenders. The research also found that there were too many different people offering interventions as compared to a preferred one-to-one experience and a benefit system that can impact negatively on finances when accessing education. As a result of the findings from this report recommendations are made to act as a catalyst for change and inform leadership.

Introduction

Stockton Riverside College is a major provider of further education within the Tees Valley, providing education and training to around 15,000 full and part – time students in any single academic year. Offering a broad curriculum, the college delivers to a wide range of learners and is categorised by the ‘Department for Education and Skills’ as a college that reaches challenging markets and has a high widening participation ratio. Stockton Riverside College recently received an ‘Equality North East Award’ for their immense success in relation to their equality and diversity delivery.

Offender Learning and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Learning are key departments that contribute to Stockton Riverside College's good practice in the area of equality and diversity. Keen to maintain this standard, Stockton Riverside College proposed this unique research to add value to their existing provision and quality of delivery. The research will raise awareness in these two minority areas of learning, inform leadership and act as a catalyst for change.
The Offender Learning Team at Stockton Riverside College was established in November 2004. The team offers education, training and support services and bespoke teaching provision to the hardest to reach (offenders) across the geographical areas of Durham and Tees Valley. The team is divided into two delivery arms, those being delivery to:

- The most prolific and persistent Young Offenders across Tees Valley, and
- Adult Offenders under the supervision of Durham and Tees Valley National Probation Service.

The team focus on offenders in the community. However, educational experiences within secure estates are considered whilst offering the offender the seamless transition into society.

The work of the team has raised the college’s profile in the widening participation arena. Nationally the team has been recognised as a top five ‘Quality Improvement Agency’ case study relating to community cohesion. At a regional level the team has received nominations from the North East Justice Assembly and locally has been nominated for awards by the Cleveland Justice Board over the previous three years. The aim of the team is to reduce recidivism and to add value to the main Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) contract in Durham and Teesside in line with the Skills for Life Strategy (2001) and Offender Learning Green Paper 2005.

Low basic skills attainment is often cited as one of the main reasons that people offend:

‘Proportionally more offenders, when compared to the population as a whole, have low basic skills, poor school experience and are without vocational and academic qualifications.’

(Home Office Online Report 14/04)

By offering recommendations as to how these barriers can be overcome, then this research will help inform leadership in all sectors that seek to reduce recidivism. The dedicated team of tutors/advisors have received 1529 referrals since inception, 806 for young offenders and 723 adult offenders. From these figures only 64/806 and 101/723 respectively are female equating to 8% for young offenders, 14% for adult offenders and only 11% overall (Dec 2009). However:
Interdepartmental academic discussions within the college led colleagues to focus upon minority learning groups within the college and how their barriers to learning can be overcome. Female offenders were identified as one of the groups that would be used as a sample within this research and ESOL female learners as the second sample group.

The ESOL Team at Stockton Riverside College has been established for over ten years. In that time the team has developed and now consists of seven full time staff and twelve support staff. Last year (2008/09) the college delivered to around 250 learners and will be delivering to approximately the same number this year.

The majority of ESOL delivery takes place at the main college site, although there is some community delivery to complement this. The Divisional Director of the ESOL team is working towards increasing levels of engagement within the community for this cohort. This will enable local ESOL provision to have a greater focus on social inclusion and community cohesion as per recommendations in the ESOL New Approaches Policy (2008). Working closely within the Skills for Life Strategy, the team deliver according to Government recommendations outlined in a range of recent publications such as the Learning Age Green Paper 1998 and Learning to Succeed White Paper 1999, which both aim to lift barriers to learning.

According to the British Council, in the year 2000 there were 375 million English as a Second Language speakers worldwide. (Kenneth Beare, About.com, 2009) This illustrates the growing need for effective ESOL delivery.

During a recent profiling of Stockton Riverside College’s ESOL cohort, to identify hard to reach groups in our local authority area, it came to the Division’s attention that 68% of the learners were males and 32% were female. In many other colleges this imbalance of gender representation is not uncommon (www.equalities.gov.uk/publications/EthnicMinorityWomen.pdf). Using recent research from publications such as Dare to Dream (2008) it has been identified that women who are from minority ethnic backgrounds participate less in organised learning. Bangladeshi, Pakistani

‘Whilst most women are a minority amongst offenders they are not a minority within the general community. Addressing the needs of women offenders is therefore likely to be effective if strategies are closely tied into wider social strategies e.g. child care, poverty, housing, education, employment, drugs, mental health etc.’

(Eithne Wallis, National Director of the National Probation Service for England and Wales, cited in Home Office, 2001:13)
and Somali women are the least likely to participate in learning than other women from minority ethnic communities (Ward, Jane and Spacey 2008).

The aim of this research is to identify and analyse the barriers that the two female groups of learners face, looking at similarities and differences. The barriers may be perceived or actual depending upon the individuals perspective. Upon analysis of these findings the second aim is to identify specific actions and requirements that are needed to overcome the barriers. Illustrations will then be made to highlight how these recommendations can be used to inform leadership, focusing particularly on positively influencing equality and diversity in relation to the Widening Participation Agenda 2003:

‘Widening participation addresses the large discrepancies in the take up of higher education opportunities between different social groups. Under representation is closely connected with broader issues of equality and social inclusion, so we are concerned with ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students, women, men and all ethnic groups.’

(HEFCE Widening Participation, 2009)

The research will develop the area of social cohesion and equality duties, demonstrating the importance of truly involving hard to reach groups in the development of policies.

The project will involve internally the Offender Learning Team and ESOL Team. College staff will be involved in gathering data via the administration of questionnaires and also will be interviewed by the Researcher. The Researcher is interviewing staff as she is keen to identify whether or not barriers outlined by the sample group are reflected by those working with these groups.

External organisations that will be involved in the project will include National Probation Service, Intensive Surveillance and Supervision Team, Connexions, OLASS management, refugee organisations and NIACE. The involvement of external organisations will consist of representatives being interviewed by the Researcher as outlined in Section Three.
Research Framework

The Researcher is of the opinion that literature relating directly to the sample study is limited. It has been determined that information relating to Offenders and ESOL subjects as a whole, is plentiful, but literature relating specifically to female offenders and female ESOL learners is less readily available.

Indeed, Katherine Rake, the Fawcett Society’s director, said the experiences of BME women had been too easily overlooked, since studies focused either on race or gender, but not both (The Guardian 17/2/2005, ‘Ethnic minority women face massive inequalities report).

Lucy Ward offers a startling summary of how she believes ESOL females operate in society:

‘Black and minority ethnic women are poorer, less healthy, less educated and significantly worse represented in the corridors of power than both white women and the rest of the UK population.’

(Guardian 17/2/2005)

However, some of the non specific gender literature is relevant to this research. For example, if 89% of the referrals to the Offender Learning Team at Stockton Riverside College are male then does this equate to National Crime Statistics looking at the comparative genders? In 2006 of the 1.42 million offenders sentenced to criminal offences in England and Wales 80% were male (Office for National Statistics, 2006). However, in direct contrast to this, low educational attainment in Mair and May’s (1997) study 51% of women on probation and 42% of men had left school without qualifications, compared to 42% of women and 34% of men in the general population.

One explanation for this is that education is not a high priority for female offenders. Thus this provides the most pressing barrier to Education Training and Employment (ETE) provision (S.Toor, 2005). They view education as ‘something idealistic rather than realistic’ (S.Toor, 2005).

From the literature that exists the following barriers have been identified by O’Keeffe, 2003 (SOVA 2005, Women into Work):

- Becoming and staying drug free
- Finding and securing suitable accommodation
Being a better parent
Accessing counselling
Changing area of residence
Changing their social network

The barriers above can also be classified as priorities that come before learning. In addition to the above, further factors have been identified by Heads of Learning and Skills within female establishments (SOVA, 2005, Women into Work) as below:

- No or lack of qualifications
- Lack of employment experience
- Low self esteem and lack of self confidence
- Fear of failure
- Lack of motivation
- Mental health issues and drug addiction

In relation to the last barrier identified, the ‘revolving door’ group refers to people who are caught in a cycle of crisis, crime and mental illness, whereby they are repeatedly in contact with the police and often detained in prison. Although none gender specific, the mental health problems of this group are highlighted as the core factor for the continuation of crime and the lack of integration within society and learning (Revolving Door Agency, www.revolving-doors.org.uk)

Another factor that should be given consideration when considering why so few female offenders access learning, although not identified as a specific barrier, can be identified by the Corston Report 2007 which found:

Women with histories of violence and abuse are over-represented in the criminal justice system and often can be described as victims as well as offenders. The report also indicates that relationship problems feature strongly in women's pathways to crime and many women in prison had been sexually, emotionally and physically abused (The Crown Prosecution Service).

One in three women in prison had suffered sexual abuse, compared with one in ten men (The Crown Prosecution Service).

A survey carried out in Her Majesty's Prisons, revealed that nearly half of the women interviewed had experienced domestic violence, and a third sexual assault (Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners, London: Social Exclusion Unit.) It was also noted that this figure was similar to a survey carried out in Holloway Prison, where 36% of women disclosed experience of sexual abuse in childhood and 45% had experienced physical abuse.
In addition to barriers as perceived by the female offender, barriers can also be created by society and service providers and exist today. Media stereotyping and mythologizing regarding ‘criminal women’ states that television programmes such as ‘Bad Girls’ have been hugely detrimental in terms of portraying particularly negative images (Frances Crook 1999).

In comparison, according to ‘Dare to Dream’ 2008, the perceived barriers to learning for female ESOL learners can be divided into four major categories, personal and cultural, practical, psychological and institutional, as identified below:

- **Personal and cultural:** the woman’s own husband and family, families and community attitudes and expectations of women’s place and role.
- **Practical:** gender oppression, restriction and violence from families especially husbands, poor health, old age, caring responsibilities and lack of time.
- **Psychological:** lack of confidence and feeling too old or sick to learn.
- **Institutional:** lack of information and advice, classes not being of the right level, located at unsuitable times, fees and lack of affordable transport and childcare. (Ward, Jane and Spacey, R (2008), Dare to Dream.)

The barriers outlined above are further qualified by the ESOL Funding Principles Working Party 2008:

> ‘In some instances female learners may be discouraged from attending college by other family/community members. Single sex classes may be acceptable but community learning in mosques or local community classes may be preferred. Many ESOL learners also prefer morning classes so they can be at home when their children come home from school’

(National ESOL Panel 5c 9/9/09)

Research conducted by the ‘West Yorkshire Pathfinder Project’ completed in Leeds, gave an insight into additional barriers faced by female ESOL learners, which include:

- Commitments at work
- Household duties
- Children
- Transport
- Lack of time
- Health
When analysing current literature the indications are that psychological barriers and aspects of the institutional barriers occur for both sample groups. In response to current literature, barriers identified have been incorporated into the questionnaire designed for both sample groups. The Researcher intends to give the sample a voice:

‘Lady Amos, the Guyanan-born leader of the House of Lords, says a study by the Fawcett Society: "Individuals deserve an opportunity to have their voices heard and to help improve their community and their country."

(The Guardian, 17/2/2005)

The Researcher will consider the opinions raised by current literature and the sample group in order to ignite a catalyst for change, that will commence with the leaders and managers within Stockton Riverside College and its partners. Also, the interviews administered by the Researcher will consider current literature and opinion, whilst still allowing staff the freedom and anonymity to suggest ways of change and improvement of learning for the sample group.

**Research Methods**

The sample size of this project is 80. This is divided into 40 Female Offenders and 40 ESOL Females. The sample is a convenience sample. A convenience sample has been used as the persons for enquiry were readily available. The sample consists of volunteers only. The volunteers have been recruited by the Offender Learning and ESOL teams from Stockton Riverside College, during their interaction with the cohort.

Due to the fact that the sample is a convenience sample, all of the ESOL females involved in the research are currently involved in learning and therefore it can be argued that they have already overcome their barriers. However, they are questioned upon the learning that they have had in the previous three years, prior to their current provision. The research findings will illustrate that for the majority of the ESOL sample, the learning that they are attending currently is their first learning experience.
within the UK and they are therefore able to make an extremely useful contribution to the research.

In direct contrast, the female Offender sample is all currently not in education, employment or training (NEET). However, the Offender Learning Team are engaging with the cohort to progress them into education, training or employment and therefore this sample are also able to make a valid contribution to the research.

In addition to the female participants, staff and leaders from both sectors have been interviewed to gain their thoughts and opinions relating to the barriers to learning for both groups.

The paradigm used in this research is commonly known as the ‘Action Research Paradigm.’ The key aim of this model is the improvement of practice with understanding being an aid to this, rather than the end itself. Findings cannot be generalised beyond the situation under review. With the focus of this project being to inform leaders regarding the barriers faced by female Offenders and ESOL learners then this is the appropriate paradigm to use. The intention is that after the project insight will constantly be reviewed following the reflective spiral highlighted within the ‘Action Research Paradigm’ of Action>Data gathering>review>planning>more action>more data gathering>further reviews and so on (Kemmis and McTaggart 1982).

The research methods used for this project are quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative element consists of analysing precise data. This precise data includes age, postcode, marital status, ethnicity, education status, level of prior learning, identification of specific barriers and learning environment. The decision to use precise data within this research was made in order to avoid bias. The intention to avoid bias is embedded in the fact that the Researchers involved in this project are experienced in their field and therefore may have preconceptions regarding their subject area: ‘It is possible that data will be interpreted by a Researcher in relation to their preconceptions when other possible interpretations may be made’ (J Tooley & D Darby, 1998).

The quantitative research tool used in this research is a questionnaire. The questionnaire has been designed to elicit specific responses resulting in specific data e.g. how old are you? The advantages of the questionnaire are that it is easy to operate and can be completed at the participants convenience. A key advantage of the questionnaire to the participants involved in this research is that it is anonymous. The Researcher is aware that offenders are particularly sensitive to disclosure of personal information, hence the reasoning behind the questionnaire. However, the discovery was also made that the female ESOL learners elicited responses that
indicated they were also more willing to participate upon the disclosure to them that the questionnaire offered anonymity.

The questionnaire has been structured in a way to avoid bias. Although the purpose of the questionnaire is to establish if the recipient feels that they are facing barriers to learning and if so what these barriers are. The Researcher has deliberately not mentioned the word ‘barrier’ to avoid creating preconceptions. The questionnaire took several attempts to create. The first draft was collated by the Researcher with a view to the questionnaire being administered by tutors/advisors. However, feedback from professionals involved in the research highlighted the fact that they believed the ‘register’ of the text was too high. This required the Researcher remodel the grammar to a lower ‘register’ of text.

Several members of the Offender Learning Team administered the questionnaires to the 40 female offenders in the cohort. The staff found the recipients willing to engage and share their thoughts and opinions.

The ESOL questionnaires were more difficult to gather due to staff commitments. Therefore, the Researcher administered 31 out of the 40 questionnaires to the ESOL female sample. Due to the fact that the Researchers experience is within the Offender Learning arena, this was an extremely steep learning curve. Also, the Researcher can be stated as being very much an ‘insider’ to the research in practice, gathering both imprecise and precise data which was not the original intention at the start of this report.

The advantages of qualitative research cannot be ignored in a piece of research with an aim to inform and is included in this research. Interviews have been completed to gain an insight from professionals working with female Offenders and ESOL learners, including Tutors and Information and Guidance Advisors. The interview content is comparable to the questions asked on the questionnaire, although with a more ‘open ended’ approach to the questioning. For example, it is not necessary to request age, ethnicity etc relating to the sample as we have already collected that information via the quantitative research methods. However, we are able to ask what the professional believes, in their informed opinion, are the key barriers without actually giving them the prompts to choose from.

The intention of the Researcher was to audio tape interviews for later transcription and analysis. This was in order to prevent the problems of relying on memory: ‘The problems of relying on memory, selective interpretation and a lack of the respondent being able to cross check perceptions mean that validity must be questionable’ (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995).
Unfortunately, due to time restraints, staff teaching commitments, an unwillingness to be recorded and an impending ofsted inspection, the Researcher experienced difficulties creating the situation whereby staff could be interviewed and audio taped and therefore was unable to do this. However, the Researcher was able to gather interviews from twelve staff (six from each cohort) representatives via face to face interaction, telephone interviews and also e-mail responses. The e-mail responses were particularly effective in that the exact thoughts and opinions were transcribed by the interviewees avoiding misinterpretation. The drawback to this is that the Researcher was unable to prompt or elaborate on specific points. The interviews that were completed face to face were more time consuming in that the Researcher was conscious that she must transcribe all that was said by the interviewee, creating gaps in the flow of the interview.

Triangulation can be identified in this research to avoid the reliance on a specific data source and distortion of data through reliance of a specific methodology. Methodological, Investigator and Space Triangulation can be identified with different data sources being utilised including interview and questionnaire, different staff administering questionnaires, interviews and data gathering in various, although relevant locations including Stockton Riverside College, National Probation Service premises and outreach centres.

In view of the sensitive nature surrounding the client groups used in this research, the Researcher had to apply a number of principles to ensure that confidentiality and respect for the subject involved was maintained. The Researcher accepts fully the responsibility for ensuring that confidentiality and respect are maintained by ensuring that all staff involved in the collection of data were informed regarding ethics and qualified within their field. Also, staff have been advised regarding objectivity and the fact that they should not comment upon the answers given, hence avoiding distortion of data.

**The Findings**

The gathering of quantitative and qualitative research is now complete. As stated in the interim report, the timescales for this research have been challenging. Professionals have been under many different constraints affecting participation, hence the Researcher collecting data in addition to collation and analysis.

However, the Researcher is certain that the findings presented in this section will not only add value to existing research and literature, but also inform leaders and managers to overcome the barriers faced by this sample group. The representation of the findings will be given in different ways. The precise data will be illustrated with charts, data tables and brief comments. The imprecise data will be discussed in
relation to the literature represented in Section Two of this research. The barriers to learning for this current cohort, as supported by current literature, have been identified in Section Two. The Researcher will use the findings from the questionnaires and interviews within the field of Offender Learning and ESOL Learning to compare and contrast the barriers of both and also compare and contrast the findings of this research against current literature. The Researcher will present the findings in both a written and statistical format and will include illustrative charts to represent findings and show data.

The findings for the precise data are divided into the following categories:

- Age
- Postcode
- Marital status
- Has learning taken place in the last 3 years
- If yes, at what level.
- Where – e.g. the learning environment

Chart 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age ranges</th>
<th>Offender Learning</th>
<th>ESOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 1 above clearly states that the majority of the sample group are between the ages of 25-34, with the 18-24 age group following closely behind. It is concerning to see that the majority of the offender sample are of a young age but encouraging to
note that the number of female offenders over the age of 35 are somewhat reduced. This could be an indicator that the older female offenders have been successfully rehabilitated. With regards to the ESOL learners, it is encouraging to see that the number of ESOL females entering education are increasing from the age of 18 – 34 compared with their older counterparts whereby disappointingly low numbers of ESOL females over the age of 45 are accessing education.

Chart 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status Female Offenders &amp; Female ESOL Learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 2 represents marital status data. The Researcher found this data to be very informative. Whilst the female offender group could be identified as single, married, cohabiting, seperated or divorced, the ESOL group can only be identified as single, married or widowed. Almost the same amount of offender females are single (29) compared to the ESOL females that are married (31). This data could portray marriage as having a positive effect in that it has not discouraged ESOL females from learning as per common opinion that the ESOL female is oppressed by marriage.
Chart 3

Figures relating to Female Offenders & ESOL Learners that have accessed learning in the last 3 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Offender Learning</th>
<th>ESOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning in the last 3 years Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning in the last 3 years No</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As stated in Section Two, all of the ESOL females questioned currently access learning compared to all of the female offenders that do not. However, when questioned regarding accessing learning in the last three years the findings were very similar. Chart 3 illustrates that 12 out of 40 female offenders only had accessed learning and 16 out of 40 ESOL females in the last 3 years. This would support the current literature, that the two cohorts have barriers against accessing learning and that learning is not a priority.

The precise data relating to the level of learning that has been accessed in the last three years is also extremely informative (Chart 4). From the 16 female ESOL learners that have accessed learning, 14 have accessed learning at entry level compared to the female offender learners that have accessed learning ranging from entry level to NVQ with the majority of learners (25%) accessing learning at level 2. This is indicative of the fact that whilst female ESOL learners are accessing learning, it is still at a very low level and supportive of the current literature and feedback from staff that ESOL females have a very low prior educational attainment. However, it does not support the theory that female offenders have very low levels of educational attainment, although the Researcher is of the opinion that a much larger sample group would need to be studied in order to draw any firm conclusion relating to this matter.
Chart 4

Level of learning undertaken by those engaged in learning in the last 3 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>level 1</th>
<th>level 2</th>
<th>level 1 &amp; 2</th>
<th>level 3</th>
<th>NVQ</th>
<th>unknown</th>
<th>diploma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offender Learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 5

Learning Environment for those that have accessed learning in the last 3 years for Female Offenders and Female ESOL Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Environment</th>
<th>Charitable Organisations</th>
<th>FE</th>
<th>Prison</th>
<th>school</th>
<th>surestart</th>
<th>work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offender Learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For those from the sample that have accessed learning, the learning environments have been quite varied. Chart 5 represents the learning environments of the cohort. The majority of the females have accessed learning in a FE setting. This may be an illustration of bias in the data in that the sample group are being questioned by a FE organisation. It may also illustrate that local FE Colleges are improving their equality and diversity strategies relating to delivery and also responding to the Widening Participation Agenda:

‘The Government will promote and encourage good practice in widening participation, and will keep the qualifications framework for post-16 learning under close review.’

(DfEE, Further Education for the New Millennium)

Whilst the imprecise data above gives an insight into the sample group relating to learning, it is the data that follows that leads the Researcher to draw conclusions and make recommendations. If a female has not accessed learning in the last 3 years, each of the sample (28 out of 40 female offenders and 24 out of 40 female ESOL learners) are given a list of factors and asked if they feel any of the identified factors contribute to their lack of learning / experience of learning / learner journey. This list incorporates the following:

- Transport
- Childcare
- Housing
- Health
- Finance
- Language
- Cultural restrictions
- Peer Pressure
- Convictions
- Drug/Alcohol issues
- Other

Chart 6 represents in blue the barriers that the female offenders believe that they face and the ESOL females in red.

As previously stated, the barriers identified align with current literature relating to this subject, to enable the Researcher to discount or support theories.
Transport, housing and peer pressure are low on the list of identified barriers and have been acknowledged as a barrier by no female ESOL learners and very few female offenders.

The most common shared barrier is relating to childcare. 50% of female offenders and 54% of female ESOL learners identified childcare as a barrier. The study, from the Daycare Trust, the National Childcare Charity and the National Centre for Social Research, highlighted that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) families face barriers to using childcare including cost, lack of flexibility and access to information (Mike Berry 2006, www.personneltoday.com)

Unsurprisingly, the least commonly shared barriers relate to conviction, language and culture.

The majority of female offender learners that engage with the Offender Learning Team are white British. All of the female offenders in this report are white British. No female ESOL learner identified having convictions. A central hypothesis advanced by Adler (1981) is that patterns of female criminality differs by race because of the differential opportunities available to offenders. (Young, Vernetta D, Women, Race and Crime 1981)
Apart from cultural and language barriers the female offenders are represented under all barriers, but not the ESOL females that are only represented under the health and finance categories in very small numbers. This indicates that the female offender had a wider variety of barriers which they have to face.

At the end of each of the questionnaires the learner is provided with the opportunity to give their thoughts and opinions relating to learning and many learners seized this opportunity. The ESOL females were particularly keen to give their opinions regarding learning, whilst the female offenders were more reserved. This feedback is detailed in this section and also within the recommendations section.

The female offender sample raised an issue relating to CVs. More than three of this sample group stated that not having a CV or an up to date CV acted as a real barrier to them applying for employment or further learning. This is a useful insight, as it is not an identified barrier in any of the current literature to date. However, a CV can be a very useful tool:

‘The value of a well presented CV cannot be overstated. However, it is all too often viewed as a chore that must be endured. When one considers the potential benefits of a highly effective CV the investment in quality time can be seen for what it is, an investment.’

(www.millarbrunswick.com)

The second barrier raised, in the thoughts regarding learning section, relate to benefits and the complications raised in receiving benefits when learning is commenced. Again, this is a barrier that has not been identified in current literature and suggestions will be made to overcome this barrier in the recommendations section of this report.

The other imprecise data that this sample group identified relates to confidence issues and low self esteem resulting from physical abuse within relationships. Both O’Keeffe (2003) & the Corston Report 2007 have highlighted these barriers for female offenders and they are still very real to this client group.

In contrast to the fact that only three issues arose from the female offender’s imprecise data, several were raised by the ESOL females. This is perhaps because currently being part of the learning process makes them more confident and informed to give opinions regarding learning.
The issues raised that the Researcher had not given consideration to and cannot be found in literature relating to barriers in current research, is that Government rules prevent asylum seekers from accessing free education until they have been in the country for six months or more. This can obviously be seen as an actual barrier, external to the learner but one that has a real impact upon learning.

The second factor raised relating to ESOL females thoughts about learning relates to ‘speaking.’ Many of the ESOL females do not speak English other than at college and would like much more time communicating orally. Quite often the learner will speak their first language at home and may only hear English spoken on the television. One learner stated that listening to the TV was no help in that actors spoke ‘far too fast.’ Other learners stressed how their children are fluent in speaking English, although they themselves are way behind this level of fluency.

Other comments included the following:

- Lack of confidence/shyness
- Depression
- Perceived financial issues – they did not know the classes were free
- Smaller classes – anything over 12 is too big and learners find it hard to concentrate.
- Classes within age groups – older learners felt that they could not learn at the speed of their younger counterparts.
- Flexibility – learners would welcome the opportunity to move between classes so that they could accommodate childcare (the biggest identified barrier or both sample groups) and home responsibilities.
- Maintaining levels of learning – some of the sample group felt that the holidays within the college were too long and therefore after the holidays the learner has regressed as lack of practice rendered them unable to maintain their learning level.

On interviewing staff many of the barriers identified in the thoughts of the learners are reflected by the staff with useful recommendations for improvement. Upon interview the staff were asked their thoughts and opinions regarding the following:

- Experience working with the sample groups
- Whether or not they believe the cohort that they work with have barriers to learning
- Identification of the barriers
- Are the barriers perceived by the individual or actual
- How do the barriers affect learning
- Suggestions to overcome the barriers
• Suggestions to improve learning for the sample group

The suggestions for overcoming barriers and improving learning will be detailed in the conclusions and recommendations section of this report.

The Researcher interviewed six members of staff that have daily contact with female offenders. The experience of the staff ranges from three to thirty years. All of the staff interviewed believed that this client group faces barriers to learning and that these barriers are both perceived and actual. The barriers identified in order of priority are as follows:

• Lack of confidence, self esteem and motivation
• Low educational attainment
• Convictions
• Family commitments
• Drug/alcohol misuse
• Abusive relationships and their consequences
• Income
• History of unemployment

Staff have sited cases whereby learners have been prevented from accessing certain academic courses as a result of their convictions for example, care and teaching making the barrier extremely real to the offender.

The barriers have a negative effect in that female offenders do not ‘bother’ to try and access education and it becomes a ‘very low priority’ as identified by Toor (2005) in Section Two.

Staff have identified that learners worry that their offending history and convictions may ‘put educational/training providers off’. Staff have experienced that unfortunately this is true when they have been in the process of trying to broker appropriate education/training provision for the offender.

The staff have identified the same barriers as current literature and many of the same as the female offender. However, staff did not prioritise the barriers in the same way that the offender did, illustrating that practice can be further improved relating to this sensitive area of learning.

The Researcher also interviewed six ESOL staff members with experience of working with ESOL females of one to eighteen years.
As with the offender females, childcare and carer responsibilities was seen to be the biggest barrier that ESOL females face. Again, as with the offender learning staff, barriers were seen as being both actual and perceived depending upon the individual’s experiences. The following barriers were also identified in no order or priority:

- Predominately male classes within college with females very much in the minority. Females can often misinterpret male attention. Also, spouses may be reluctant to allow females to engage in the predominately male setting.
- Signage – female ESOL learners may struggle to get around college due to the fact that they are unable to read the signs.
- Prior educational attainment – as with the female offenders, low educational attainment can serve as a barrier in that it can make progress slow.
- Cultural barriers – learners may be absent for periods of time when certain cultural requirements take priority
- Finance – some learners may not be aware that they are able to access free education due to the fact that predominately males were educated first. This is a perceived barrier.
- College timetables/class times – due to the family commitments, ESOL females are unable to access learning as class times and college timetables are not flexible enough to accommodate need.
- Age – older learners who no longer have young children to rely upon for support may find learning is now a necessity and may struggle due to their previous lack of learning.

Both staff groups clearly believed for both female offenders and female ESOL learners education was not a priority. The Researcher recommends that further study would be beneficial to establish whether education was not seen as a priority in the first instance or whether this view was made after all of the barriers have been perceived/faced.

Many useful suggestions have been made by both learners and staff relating to how barriers can be overcome and how improvements for learning can be made within both of these minority learning groups. The Researcher, from being so involved in the research in practice, has also established many ideas for improvements and the thoughts from all three are summarised in the Conclusions and Recommendations Section of this report.
Conclusions & Recommendations

It can be overwhelmingly concluded that the largest barrier faced by both sample groups is childcare which in a society moving towards equality of opportunity for all is most disappointing. However, this may actually be a problem faced by women in general and may not be specific to female offenders and ESOL learners as it is the only obvious shared barrier. Perhaps there would be value to be found in initiating a study for females as a whole relating to their issues surrounding childcare?

Another area of study the Researcher found herself considering on more than one occasion whilst undertaking this research, related to ethnicity and female crime. All of the female offenders questioned were white British and none of the ESOL sample were identified as having convictions. Is this a cultural issue or could it be related to marital status as overwhelmingly ESOL females were married compared to female offenders being single? This may be an area of study to consider that could possibly help in the reduction of white British female crime?

Many of the barriers and issues identified for this cohort already exist in current literature. However, this study has identified some that do not which can only add value to current findings. Examples of the new findings include the lack of CVs and benefit complications for female offenders with ESOL females identifying Governmental barriers and the need to speak more English within College.

As a result of the findings within this report, recommendations regarding addressing the barriers faced by the cohort within this study are identified below:

- Childcare issues – Governmental departments and learning providers should give more consideration to this issue. Classes should be flexible allowing for childcare responsibilities. Females should be given ‘Plan B’ when faced with a sick child or general childcare issues, so that learning is not impeded in any way. This is a big issue that will take some time to redress but should be placed as a priority.
- Confidence issues/low self esteem – Prior to learning agencies involved with the female should adopt a multi agency approach to assist in tackling the issues related to the low self esteem. During learning, a more holistic approach should be adapted to learning. Perhaps tutorials should be used to build confidence and self esteem?
- CV writing – There are many agencies currently offering careers advise to potential learners, although unfortunately they are often restricted to specific delivery relating to paid outcomes, and are unable to assist the learner in CV writing and updating. Again, a multi agency approach may help. The learner should be issued with contact information by Probation Officers, Jobcentre
Plus (JCP) advisors, schools, community centres etc where they can receive free CV guidance to enable them to make their first steps without facing an immediate barrier.

- Disclosure and rehabilitation of offenders – Criminal convictions as an actual barrier has been identified in several of the questionnaires completed by the female offenders. Individuals feel that this prevents them accessing learning as explaining about an offence can be time consuming, complicated and most importantly ‘embarrassing.’ Education providers should ensure that disclosure policies are transparent and ‘user friendly’ for the offender. The Researcher has determined that when looking at local provider’s disclosure policies, that this is not the case. The Researcher recommends that a government initiative is proposed to advise that all education, training and employment agencies use one standard disclosure policy to enable the offender to become familiar with it regardless of the education provider. Staff that deal with offenders should also be equipped with knowledge necessary to aid disclosure.

- One to one interventions – Current literature and the Researcher’s own experience in practice indicates that the offender is often faced with different people offering different interventions and therefore confusing the offender. Projects offered to the offender may often be only funded on a short term basis and therefore the offender is just getting used to a provision when it changes. This could be avoided by appointing an appropriately qualified and experienced member of staff to an offender throughout their learning journey to offer advice and guidance on all aspects of education, training and employment. The Researcher would recommend that this support should continue after probation as a supported progression for a fixed period of time which could be extended according to the needs of the offender.

- Benefits – Systems should be more ‘user friendly and transparent.’ Females should be given the confidence that any progress they wish to make within the education system will not have a negative impact on them financially.

- Learning in the community – For both cohorts it appears that for various reasons the individual needs to be ‘close to home.’ Community learning would help break down this barrier although the Researcher acknowledges that research would be required in each locality regarding need. Also, ESOL staff have expressed issues relating to community learning, as quite often it may be all female and females will then treat it as a social gathering rather than a learning experience. This issue would have to be considered if community learning was to be increased.

- Class age groups – ESOL females particular felt mixed age groups within classes created barriers to learning. A recommendation at the recruitment of learning stage would be to try to create classes accroding to age groups wherever funding would allow.

- Levels of learning – This also relates to the previous recommendation although ESOL learners in particular felt that their learning was being pitched
at the wrong level. Perhaps more assessment of learning levels more frequently may improve the learner experience?

- Flexibility to move between classes – This recommendation was identified between both staff and learners relating to ESOL females. The logistics of allowing learners to access more than one class for part sessions in each may prove very difficult, although perhaps should be given consideration?
- More oral lessons – A clear message coming from ESOL females was that they required more opportunity for speaking English as they are often unable to do this outside of the learning environment. Perhaps classes should be dedicated purely to oral sessions?
- Non threatening environments for both groups expressed a shyness and reluctance to attend colleges and main education providers. Off site provision should be extended whilst still offering the same opportunities to learners as those experienced by on site students.

The Researcher is more than satisfied that this report has produced findings that will inform and influence leadership to improve future delivery. The report will be submitted to relevant divisions within Stockton Riverside College and also to external agencies involved in the delivery and involvement of progressing both female offenders and female ESOL learners. Relevant staff will use these finding to inform their policy and decision making for the future benefit of this sample group.
References


Department for Business Innovation and Skills, (2008) English for Speakers of other Languages

DIUS (2009) Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS), Ministry of Justice


DIUS (2008) Reading for Pleasure, Ideas to inspire ESOL Learners, NIACE

Driscoll DL. (2008) Conducting Primary Research: Ethical Considerations in Primary Research, Allen Brizee

Equal (2001) Innovative Approaches to Working with Ex-Offenders, ECOTEC

Gelsthorpe L. (1989) Sexism and the Female Offender, Ashgate Publishing Ltd


Lifelong Learning (2008) *Breaking the Language Barriers*, www.lifelonglearning.co.uk


Office of National Statistics 2001 Census Data


Stockton Riverside College (2009) *About us* www.stockton.ac.uk


University of Surrey (2009) *Widening Participation – an Overview*, portal.surrey.ac.uk


**Acknowledgements**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the females that volunteered to complete the questionnaire as part of this research and gave their valued thoughts.
and opinions relating to the learning process. These females shall remain anonymous.

I would also like to thank the colleagues and staff that were interviewed throughout the term of this research and gave the benefit of their time and experience.
Appendices

Appendix 1
This questionnaire has been designed for Stockton Riverside College to gain your thoughts and opinions regarding learning. This project has been funded by the learning and Skills Improvement Service. If you require any help or assistance in completing this form then please speak to your tutor/advisor.

1. What is your postcode please? ........................................

2. What is your age please? ..............................................

3. What is your marital status? ...........................................

4. Have you had any learning in the last 3 years? yes [ ] No [ ]
If you have ticked yes please go to question 5, If you have ticked no please go straight to question 7.

5. At what level was the learning please? Please tick the relevant box(es)

Pre Entry Level [ ] Entry Level [ ] Level 1 [ ] Level 2 [ ]
Level Three [ ] Other, above level 3 [ ] Don't Know [ ]

6. Where did this learning take place please?
..................................................................................................................
..................................................................................................................

7. Please tick any of the reasons below that you believe have contributed to the fact that you have not had any learning in the last 3 years (you can tick more than one if appropriate)

Transport [ ] Childcare [ ] Housing [ ] Health [ ]
Finance [ ] Language [ ] Cultural Restrictions [ ]
Peer pressure [ ] Convictions [ ] Drug/Alcohol Issues [ ] Other [ ]

"The content of this Project does not necessarily reflect the views of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service." J Scott SRC 11/09
8. Would you like to give any more details about your thoughts to do with learning? If yes then please give below:

...........................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................

Many Thanks.
**Appendix 2**

Interview Template

LSIS Research

Interviewer – Joanne Scott

Interviewee:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your job title?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you briefly tell me what your job involves?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you worked in this profession?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where are you based?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to talk to you about ESOL Females/Female Offenders please. (note which)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your experience, do the female ESOL/Female Offenders that you have worked with face barriers to learning? If yes then what would you identify as barriers please?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think these barriers are perceived by the individual or actual barriers? Please comment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you feel the barriers that you have identified affect learning?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What suggestions do you have to overcome these barriers please?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any suggestions as to how learning generally can be improved for this sample group?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Thank you for your time!*