

# 1 Why Are You Doing This?

This chapter will:

- Explain the benefits of learning
- Examine your own motivation for studying
- Look at the advantages of being an older – rather than a school-aged – learner

Learning is a good thing; its potential to improve a number of things in your life is enormous. Sometimes, though, it is difficult to remember what the benefits of learning are. At ten o'clock on a cold, wet January night when you are driving home after a boring class the benefits are not that obvious. Likewise, on all those sunny Saturdays when you would like to be at the beach with family and friends but instead have to spend the entire day under artificial strip lights in the library those benefits are not that obvious. Just because you have *chosen* to learn does not mean that you will always be keen to do so. The problem for many adult learners is the ever-present nature of the studying in their lives. 'Even when I take time off from swotting I am thinking about what I need to do next and worrying about the amount of work that I still need to get done,' as one put it. There is always the assignment that needs finishing, the wider reading for the project that needs to be done, or the connections that you need to make to your last piece of work, hanging over you like a rain cloud. It never ends. It might even be that you feel selfish in your decision to spend time studying, rather than time with others. To make matters worse, loved ones may even *tell* you that you are selfish – the last thing that you need to hear if you feel that you are already giving up so much in order to do it! So let's not underestimate the downsides of studying as an adult. It is challenging and the emotional, time and financial costs are significant. It is important to acknowledge this right from the beginning so that you do not feel like a failure when you experience periods of dejection and self blame.

Before we look at all the ways that you can improve your ability to learn and to complete tasks we will examine the phenomenal improvements that learning can bring to your life. Refer to this chapter when your morale takes a downturn. Research has shown that there are major benefits to the individual and to society in learning. Here are some of the most interesting ways that learning can enhance your life.

## 2 LEARNING SUPPORT: A GUIDE FOR MATURE STUDENTS

### Benefits of learning

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Research conducted by Hammond (2002) for the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning has found positive correlations between learning, health and well-being. These include the following:

- **Adoption of positive health behaviours, such as reducing smoking and drinking, increasing the amount of exercise taken and adopting a better diet.**
- **Increases in occupational self-direction, self-esteem, self-fulfilment and financial security – all features of occupational success.**
- **Development of autonomy, problem-solving skills, social competence and a sense of purpose and optimism for the future, which promote individual job fulfilment and good citizenship.**
- **Promotion of social responsibility, social values and social skills, which facilitate social cohesion and positive involvement by individuals in the local community.**

The links between learning and life are complex and entangled but it is possible to assert that adult learning has a beneficial impact on our lives. In a separate article, Hammond, writing with her colleague Feinstein (2004) argues that there might be six groups of reasons for these positive effects. There are

- **Changes due to the development of specific skills (such as IT).**
- **The effect of genuine cognitive development through specific learning.**
- **Personal development through learning.**
- **Peer group effects (just mixing with others regularly in a structured learning environment teacher us to be a better group member).**
- **Positional effects (mobility in terms of class and status).**
- **Economic effects ( the old incentive of increased income).**

They put the case for the link between adult learning and well being powerfully (p. 217), 'Engaging in the common pursuit of learning under the direction of an experienced teacher, committed to developing co-operation and open discussion in a supportive environment appears to have all the ingredients for confidence building and raising social awareness'.

Learning can make you happier and healthier because by focusing on learning new skills and knowledge, you are able to think about your life in a fresh way and from a longer-term perspective and this encourages you to reassess other aspects of what you are doing. It could be argued that by imposing the structure on your life, learning shakes you out of old habits. Another school of thought is that the re-rejuvenating effect of learning means that by engaging in a cognitive activity (learning something new) you are literally creating new connections in the brain and that this makes the body behave in a way that it used to do when you were a younger person. Whatever the reason for it, the good news is that it happens.

## Learning and self-esteem

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As well as the physical health benefits, nothing else compares to learning as a way of improving self-esteem, and there is some evidence that, partly because of this, learning can have a preventative effect on depression. Geoff Ford (2005) explains how research into the effectiveness of an initiative that involved medical practitioners referring suitable patients for guidance and learning has shown positive benefits. The patients felt that learning made a difference to their lives, especially in terms of their mental health.

Mental health is closely linked to self-esteem. In order to understand what we mean by self-esteem it is helpful to think of ourselves as being influenced by two elements – the ideal self and the real self. The real self is our perception of where we are now – who we are and how we think that others see us. The ideal self is where we want to be or where we think that we ought to be – now and in the future. This will differ according to our own personal experiences and standards that we impose on ourselves and others. Low self-esteem occurs when there is too wide a gap between the two. Learning works in two ways to help us address this gap. First, it gives us the skills that literally allow us to get nearer to our ideal self. So, if having a degree is part of your picture of your ideal self then clearly by studying for one you will get closer to that view of yourself. Secondly, it helps us to challenge the assumptions that have helped us to create the ideal self in the first place. For example, I know very well that I do not look like a supermodel. I know that I never will look like a supermodel. Luckily for me I did not grow up in a family where physical perfection was regarded as the defining characteristic for excellence in women and girls. Other things were valued. Because of this there is not much space for physical perfection in my picture of my ideal self (although I wouldn't turn it down were it offered!). On the other hand, if I had grown up in a family where physical perfection for women and girls was not only revered but expected and if I then went to work in an industry – say fashion or pop music – that endorsed this view, then I might have a far tougher time in accepting that looking like a supermodel will never be part of my lifestyle! What learning does is that it offers us new perspectives on old assumptions and it offers us new dimensions to an ideal self. So if somebody else, who

#### 4 LEARNING SUPPORT: A GUIDE FOR MATURE STUDENTS

has grown up in a family where looks were valued above all else, takes up a course in combined sciences as an adult and finds out, much to her surprise, that she has something of a talent for physics, becoming an accomplished physicist is then incorporated into her view of her ideal self and suddenly not looking like a supermodel diminishes in importance.

## Your ideal self

Learning adds new ways of looking at yourself to the ones that you have developed throughout your life. Look at the example below. It is from Helen – a student in her late thirties on an education part-time degree programme. She has made these lists in no particular order. Notice the way she has identified things that she is not particularly happy with in her life at the moment and articulated them in the first column. In the next column she has added the qualities that she would attribute to her ideal self – how she would like to be. Finally, in the third column Helen has added in the qualities and real skills that will be provided by her work for her degree – her learning self.

### *Case Study*

#### *Helen's real and ideal self*

<b>Real and perceived self</b>	<b>Ideal self</b>	<b>How can learning bridge the gap?</b>
Average achieving	High achieving	Knowledge that I can complete a course
Career has stagnated	New career direction	Qualification
Intimidated by clever people	Confident in a variety of settings	Meeting people through course
Stuck in a rut	Seeing things differently	Education is a broadening experience

*end of case study*

Identifying for yourself, right from the beginning, what it is that you want to get from the learning experience will help you to think more broadly about what you are doing. People returning to education often answer quickly that their main motivation is a financial, career-based one – they want either to return to work or to change career direction. When questioned more closely, however, it becomes clear that they are also

interested in the less obvious benefits to be found in learning. Ivan Lewis, a Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Skills and Vocational Education in the UK Department of Education, talks about 'the dignity of self-improvement' (2005) in connection with adult learning, and this is of profound importance in the connection between self-esteem and learning. Another very powerful feature of learning is that it allows you to see beyond your own immediate perspective – it allows you to think more widely than just seeing things from your own small viewpoint and to develop an empathy with new ways of seeing the world. On a very practical level it provides you with a change of scene. It also imposes a structure on our lives in a new way that helps us to avoid the formless wallowing of depression.

## Winning friends and influencing people

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A commitment to education for its own sake is linked to a further commitment to make a contribution to society. A recent study of mature learners in London (Reay et al., 2002) concluded that mature learners value the fact that they are able to use their learning to make a difference to the lives of other people by drawing on their own, sometimes painful, life experiences and knowledge. The liberation and empowerment that comes from learning is very important to adult learners and for many this is linked to an altruistic desire to pass those things on to other people.

To put it bluntly, learning can make you a more open-hearted person. You may say that none of this really matters to you but it actually links to the earlier point about mental health. When we retreat into mental illness we tend to see the world as an increasingly scary, forbidding place. By taking up a learning activity and being informed by a community of learners we see more and more connections with our fellow learners and we are able to see more connections between ourselves and the outside world and to feel more hope than fear in our local (or national) context. By widening your perspectives and adding to your understanding of who you are and where you want to be, learning allows you to move beyond the confines of your own identity to a much wider understanding of the world at large. If you let it, the learning process can move you from an ego-bound (self-centred) position to one that is less separated from other people and more in tune with the exciting possibilities offered by the world.

Learning really is good for the mind and arguably it can act as a powerful antidote to mental weariness and illness. This is partly because it increases our ability to be in touch with our fellow humans and this is one of the most powerful determinants of well-being. Humans have evolved to operate in communities and, in general, isolated people are more likely to become depressed than those living and socializing with other people regularly. Learning helps to bring us into contact with new and interesting groups of people.

**6** LEARNING SUPPORT: A GUIDE FOR MATURE STUDENTS

## Learning and the workplace

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Increased likelihood of advancement in the workplace or opportunities for a new job are often the reasons cited by adult learners for returning to study. West (1996) suggests that although mature learners say that these are their main reasons for returning to study, in fact their motivations are more complex and are actually linked to self-fulfilment and advancement in less obvious, personal ways than merely financial. There are certainly greater career development prospects associated with learning. Although in general this is most obviously true of learning that is associated with a particular job (such as management and accountancy courses) it is also true that people who are involved in ongoing learning activities that are recreational or purely academic are more likely to earn more than people who do not take part in such activities. In his account of a study of people aged over 45 who return to learning, Geoff Ford (2005) has shown that learning brings important benefits to people, including: the development of work skills to improve paid employability and equip them for volunteering and active citizenship; improvements in health and self-confidence; opportunities for social contacts; and strengthening of individual networks, including those that may lead to jobs.

### *Case Study*

#### *Ian's story*

Ian had been working in a fruit packing factory for six years. Although he enjoyed the companionship with his friends at work, the job itself bored him. As a reliable member of the team he had been promoted once to head of section, now the prospect of further promotion seemed to be the only way of his life advancing. Pondering the possibility of more responsibility but not relishing the idea of the rest of his life stretching before him in a job he did not like, Ian was in a dilemma. At about the same time that he was offered promotion, he enrolled in a night class in guitar playing. He had always enjoyed playing but had not played in a band since he was at school. He learned the various techniques of slide guitar and blues and set up a new band with other members of the course. Although he did not make much money from his music, his new found passion for it meant that he decided to accept the offered promotion because his hobby helped him to feel less frustrated at work.

*end of case study*

As you can see from Ian's story, the connection between earning and learning is often very indirect and unpredictable – Ian might have decided that the promotion seemed even less attractive as soon as he started to enjoy playing with the band and so he might

have opted for a dip in salary in order to pursue becoming a professional musician. Indeed, you may decide not to pursue promotion or a career change at all but it might be something that you can think about when you need more motivation.

## Learning and resilience

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For all of us, the decision to take part in a new course of learning is enormously empowering. When we decide to do something and we stand by that decision then it has a great beneficial effect on our self-esteem. We can improve our self-esteem and understanding, independence, sense of purpose and hope, simply by taking part in a course that stretches us. And this is the main point: education can help us to solve problems and manage radical change, such as redundancy, divorce and bereavement, because it provides us with the skills we need to have in order to manage the situation as well as how to access help. One of the most enjoyable aspects of learning as adults is the new possibilities it opens up and the intellectual confidence and emotional maturity it brings.

So that is the good news. But if learning is so good for us, then why aren't we all doing it? The reasons are quite simple: it is hard work and it causes anxiety. This means that despite increases in uptake of adult education, you are still among the minority of the population by enrolling on a course – so you should feel proud of yourself for having the courage to do it. If a course does not challenge you then it is really not worth doing because learning is all about change, as we shall see as the book goes on. Learning is particularly challenging when you embark on it after a considerable gap in your life since you last put yourself in a formal learning situation. There is also a connection between the way you worked as a young person at school and the way that you learn as an adult. As such, your memories of school are both a rich resource and a limiting factor. Unlike when you were first at school, there is now no rigid discipline structure in place to force you to study and the consequences of not working are only for you to consider. This has good and bad effects. On the one hand the learning can become a much more pleasurable experience, liberating you from punitive aspects of threats and detentions. On the other hand, it places enormous responsibility on your shoulders – ultimately, only you are responsible for your success or failure.

### *Case Study*

#### *Mary's story*

Mary had been working for 15 years since leaving school with no qualifications. In that time she had been married, had two children and been divorced. She took a part-time job in her local primary school. She decided to enrol on a course for learning

## 8 LEARNING SUPPORT: A GUIDE FOR MATURE STUDENTS

support assistants in schools following a suggestion by the head teacher that she should. Nothing could prepare her for the prolonged period of anxiety that she would encounter from the moment she signed up until after she had passed the first year of her course. She lost sleep worrying about it and her health suffered. All the words of encouragement from friends and family did nothing to assuage her worries. At the back of her mind was the constant thought that she did not deserve to be there and that she was an impostor. This was her belief. It was only after Mary passed all her assessments in the first year of the course that she could relax enough to begin to allow herself to think otherwise. Reflecting on her feelings in her second and third years Mary began to appreciate the insights she had gained into the learning process and it has helped her enormously to empathize with the young learners that she is dealing with in the school.

*end of case study*

Mary's experiences will probably chime with you if you have re-embarked on learning after a gap. Her misgivings were psychological – it was her own sense of doubt that caused her anxiety. For many adults, though, there are real impediments to embarking on and continuing with learning. These are also real and tangible barriers that you may not have had to face as a child. Some of the most often quoted barriers to learning from non-adult learners are:

- **Feeling too old to learn**
- **Feeling nervous about going back into the classroom**
- **Concerned about not keeping up with the work and the group**
- **Feeling out of practice after such a long break**
- **Feeling like a fraud**
- **Feeling frightened of failure.**

All of these are very real reasons, but they are not insurmountable. We will deal with all of these perceived restrictions to learning throughout the book. There are also very real barriers to adults learning, such as:

- **Lack of childcare**
- **Nobody else to look after elderly relatives, disabled loved ones and pets etc. ...**



- **Poor public transport**
- **Lack of disabled access to the college/place of learning (including lack of support for visually or hearing impaired students)**
- **Lack of resources (to buy books or to gain access to computers, for example)**
- **Lack of funds to pay for tuition fees**
- **Intimidating recruitment procedures.**

Whilst not wanting to undermine the importance of these points, I will try to address ways of dealing with them throughout the book and I have included a list of contacts at the end of the chapter that might help with physical and practical impediments. The biggest single challenge that faces you as an adult learner is the sheer lack of time available. Another tangible challenge is that you will need to re-learn some of the study skills that you may have lost over the years. We will deal with these issues as we progress through the book. Given the prevalence of these barriers it is vitally important that you feel secure in the learning situation. Educational achievement can enhance self-esteem which in turn motivates people to learn more. Self-esteem is developed in contexts that are cooperative, challenging, inclusive and varied. In order to help develop resilience in learners, teachers need to give support and advice and to encourage participation and active learning. The safer you feel in your learning environment the more willing you will be to take intellectual risks and to enjoy learning for its own sake.

## Motivation

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Before you begin to think about strategies for success at your new learning activity, it is worth considering the ways in which you are motivated and what motivated you to start to study in the first place. Many things motivate us to embark on new enterprises. Some are external, such as the promise of more money, greater job security or promotion. Others are more particular to the individual, such as the pure enjoyment afforded by the activity itself and the satisfaction in doing it.

Motivation often starts with a need – a need for more money, more love, more security or more recognition, for example. Some of these needs are located at a very basic level and some are at a much higher level of selfhood. However, the need often goes much more deeply than we think. We like to make meaning, and often the things that we are motivated to do and to learn come about because we have a very profound but basic human need to make sense of something that is chaotic, frightening or just confusing. It is a good idea to sort out for ourselves why it is that we do what we do in

**10** LEARNING SUPPORT: A GUIDE FOR MATURE STUDENTS

order to do it in the best way that we can. Complete the following self-assessment exercise and use your answers to determine what type of motivation applies to you and your reasons for undertaking your learning.

**What is your motivation?**

**Answer A, B or C to each question.**

- 1 Which best describes your thoughts about the course?
  - A It's a means to an end. I should get a new job out of the qualification that I will gain.
  - B I really enjoy the sessions. I haven't thought about where the course will take me.
  - C It's related to what I am doing at work, but that's not really my whole reason for doing it.
  
- 2 What do you most want to get out of doing the course?
  - A A pay rise/new job.
  - B New understanding of concepts and ideas.
  - C New professional skills.
  
- 3 How do you see yourself at the end of the course?
  - A In a better and more well-paid job.
  - B Seeing things differently and understanding the world more clearly.
  - C Doing the job that I am already doing more effectively.
  
- 4 When you hit a bad patch in your learning, do you?
  - A Remind yourself of the career benefits.
  - B Tell yourself that the difficulty is essential to the learning process and remind yourself of the good things about learning.
  - C Understand that you will get over the difficulty and talk to other members of the group for help and support.
  
- 5 What do you most enjoy about the course?
  - A Getting the good grades and passing each module.
  - B The new understanding that I am gaining.
  - C The satisfaction of learning something new and applying it to the workplace.

Count how many answers you have in As, Bs and Cs.

*(Continued)*

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## **Analysis of your Answers**

### **Mostly As – extrinsic motivation**

If you are extrinsically motivated it means that the rewards of learning, such as the pay increases and career prospects that will be associated with your learning, are what have attracted you to the course that you are working on/about to start. The motivation is variously described by psychologists as external to the person or external to the task. Your challenge is to be more flexible about the way that you see these rewards and not to disregard the accidental benefits of learning

### **Mostly Bs – intrinsic motivation**

Lucky you! Some psychological theories of motivation suggest that this is the superior form of motivation because it comes from within and does not rely on shaky external factors for success. Intrinsic motivation is about finding strength within yourself and belief in yourself for what you are doing. You are less dependent on external rewards and are sustained by your own enjoyment and sense of fulfilment from the learning. Don't lose sight of other benefits to be had from learning and we will examine the ways that you can capitalize on these ideas in Chapter 9. Intrinsic motivation is used to describe the motivation for an activity that people engage in and derive satisfaction from the behaviour itself rather than the rewards that are linked to it.

### **Mostly Cs – intrinsic and extrinsic motivation**

Most of us fall into this category a lot of the time and many motivational psychologists would say that both types of motivation interplay in our behaviour in reality, rather than strict divisions of either. Many adults who undertake learning activities tell a story about extrinsic motivation but in fact are much more intrinsically motivated than they realize. In fact, it doesn't really matter either way as long as you can compensate when your own motivation wanes.

It could be argued that an individual's belief in his or her own ability is a very good predictor of motivation. Therefore, in order to be motivated you need to develop your self-perceived strengths. Some people argue that the whole point of a compulsory (extrinsically motivated) education in the school-aged years is to prepare us as adults to embark on intrinsically motivated learning. Others argue that this is far too simplistic and that far from being rigidly divided into 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic', both the type and

**12** LEARNING SUPPORT: A GUIDE FOR MATURE STUDENTS

degree of motivation vary at different points throughout our lives, as Becky's story illustrates.

## *Case Study*

### *Becky's story*

Like most of us, Becky has encountered both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in various points in her life. At school she had an exceptional talent for art. This meant that she completed art homework for the pleasure of doing so and she was always involved and well behaved in art lessons because she was so absorbed with her work. In other words, she was intrinsically motivated to work in art. She went on to work in the marketing department of a chain of supermarkets. There she found many of the tasks that she was required to complete demanding and boring, by turns. She still worked hard, though, because her pay rise was contingent upon good performance and because she did not want her colleagues to regard her as lazy or not a team player. Becky started a course in lithography and commercial art in order to better her chances of promotion and to open up new career choices (extrinsic). There, she found herself enjoying it so much that her old, neglected love of art came to the fore again and she found a peace and satisfaction in working on her designs and mixing her colours that she had long forgotten. Her motivation, therefore, changed again from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.

*end of case study*

## **Reflection and rest**

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As Becky's story shows us, the nature of learning and our reasons for learning tend to change considerably over time. The gaps in learning are not just intervals of time but also have their own important part to play in the overall learning process.

Contrary to what many of us were taught at school, some of the most useful learning insights happen when we are at rest and at play, rather than immersed in the task itself. In his important book *wise up*, Guyclaston writes about the importance of 'soft thinking' 'One can learn to be more creative by cultivating states of mind that are relaxed and patient, yet quietly attentive and receptive to impressions, patterns and associations' (p. 154). Learning doesn't always happen in the immediate situation; usually it happens in the space and time after the class or course. This is why some of the best ideas occur to us after a class when we are in a supermarket or driving home. That's when we think, 'I wish I had said that in the class.' The point is though, that it was the discussion in the class and your conscious and unconscious reflection on what was said that led you to think

that thought and have that insight. It is worth considering how you can integrate time and space for reflection into your life away from the formally taught parts of the course.

## Age and experience

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We live in a culture that celebrates youth to the extent that middle and older age groups often feel marginalized. Youth sells. Look at any typical slot of television advertising or at the way that blockbuster Hollywood and Bollywood films are cast and you could be forgiven for thinking that young people represent not only the majority of the population but also the only part of the population with money to spend. Of course this could not be further from the truth. The demographics in Western, capitalist countries typically mean that there are more and more older people with cash to spend – the direct opposite of the picture that we are presented with on our screens. Part of this myth of the power of youth is that only young people have the energy and mental agility to keep up with the rapidly changing world of information which we inhabit and that no other sort of knowledge counts any more. What rubbish! One's ability to understand a situation or a text, far from being diminished by age, is enhanced by it. All learning is based on experience and therefore the more experience we have the better equipped we are to deal with life and learning. This is the main benefit of being an older learner.

The main thing to remember is that the research shows that it is never too late to start to learn again. Lifelong learning offers opportunities for you, whatever your early experiences in the classroom were, and the good news is that you can develop new approaches to studying now that may not have been presented to you at earlier stages in your life.

## Further Reading

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- For more information about motivation you might look at Maslow's half-century-old but still relevant work on motivation as the pursuit of self-actualization (Maslow, A., *Motivation and Personality*, London: Harper and Row, 1954).
- There are plenty of sources of help available to you if practical impediments are preventing you from learning. If problems with childcare arrangements are preventing you from studying you might want to explore open, distance and flexible learning options. The advice that you will find at [www.learndirect-advice.co.uk](http://www.learndirect-advice.co.uk) and the adult learning section of the government's main education site, [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk), should point you in the right directions.
- For students with special needs I strongly recommend that you visit the SKILL website at [www.skill.org.uk](http://www.skill.org.uk). Skill is a national charity that promotes opportunities for young people

## 14 LEARNING SUPPORT: A GUIDE FOR MATURE STUDENTS

and adults with any kind of disability in post-16 education and training across the UK. If you look at their website before you enrol on a course you can use their search engine to find your nearest college, check the level and quality of its disabled facilities and it will even give you the name of a disability advisor you can contact if any of your questions remain unanswered.

- You can read more about the wider benefits of learning research in the report by Hammond, C., *Learning to be Healthy* (London: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, 2002) . If you are particularly interested in the benefits of learning to the health and employment of people in middle age and older you should look at Geoff Ford's 2005 report *Am I Still Needed? Guidance and Learning for Older Adults* (Derby: Centre for Guidance Studies). This comprehensive report examines the policy situation surrounding adult learning and give some good case study examples of places where learning opportunities work best.
- For more details about the Prescriptions for Learning initiative, in which patients were referred by medical practitioners for guidance and learning, look at Hughes, D., Bosley, S., Bowes, L. and Bysshe, S., *The Economic Benefits of Guidance* (Derby: Centre for Guidance Studies, 2002) and James, K., *Prescriptions for Learning: Evaluation Report* (Leicester: National Institute for Adult Continuing Education, 2001).
- If you are interested in reading more about motivation theory you will find the following collection of essays informative: Sansone, Carole and Harackiewicz, J.M. (eds), *Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation: The Search for Optimal Motivation and Performance* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2000). In particular you may want to look at the chapter by R.M. Ryan and E.L. Deci entitled 'When Rewards Compete with Nature: The Undermining of Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Regulation'.