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## NATIONAL EVALUATION OF CONNEXIONS CARD: FINAL REPORT

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The national Connexions Card project is a seven-year initiative that began in September 2001, with the core aims of encouraging more young people to remain in learning, motivating them to fulfil their potential, reducing some of the financial barriers to learning and improving the career and life choices that young people make. This is the Final Report for the National Evaluation of the Connexions Card Project, which York Consulting Limited (YCL), in collaboration with MORI, were commissioned to undertake on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The report pulls together findings from Phase Four of the research to provide an overview of progress made at the end of three years of implementation. The research has involved national surveys and qualitative case studies with Cardholders, Learning Centres, parents, Discount and Reward providers, and other stakeholders; and analysis of management information about the performance of the Card.

### Key Findings of the evaluation are:

- Introduced as an innovative and ground breaking project the Connexions Card started from a zero base and has over the past three years become established in small but significant strands of the learning market. However, the initial ambitions of the Card in terms of both functionality and scale of activity have not been realised for a variety of reasons and expectations have modified over the past two years;
- There has been a significant improvement in engagement of Learning Centres and young people particularly over the past year. As a result, against revised expectations the project is performing well at the end of its third year, with around 900 Learning Centres (1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the target post-16 centres) providing information about attendance and 19% of Cardholders with points redeeming them for rewards (representing 3.7% of the 16-19 cohort). However, numbers are small compared to original expectations;
- Progress has been made on a number of outcomes related to rewards and discounts, website, trial of additional functionality and use for proof of age;
- Benefits to Learning Centres are limited given that the card reader solution did not provide the originally intended improvement in electronic data recording systems. A decision was taken early in the project not to press Learning Centres to use the automatic enrolment function;
- There is no evidence that the original intended impact on participation is yet being achieved, though there is indicative evidence that the Card may be having a positive effect on some Cardholders;
- Cardholders are positive about the potential benefits of the Connexions Card;
- Access and usage tends to be from the more highly qualified and easier to reach young people;
- There is a clear link between the Connexions Card being "embedded" within a Learning Centre and the consequent awareness, usage and benefits for Cardholders. The Card is more likely to be embedded where there is significant promotion, contact and support from the Connexions Card Team; high levels of awareness and commitment amongst staff and students; and an explicit linkage of the Card with learning and attendance;
- The project has now reached a turning point. Recognising that some of the initial objectives are not attainable a decision needs to be taken on whether and how to maximise and build on the positive outcomes that have been achieved. This evaluation provides a valuable evidence base to help the Connexions Card Partnership determine future direction.

## Context

1. The national Connexions Card project is a seven-year initiative that began in September 2001, with the core aims of encouraging more young people to remain in learning, motivating them to fulfil their potential, reducing some of the financial barriers to learning and improving the career and life choices of young people. The project was in essence a new and innovative application in this policy arena, in terms of the product itself (a card using smart technology being issued to all 16-19 year olds to provide a range of practical functions for young people and learning centres) and its delivery by a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) arrangement, the first of its kind for DfES at the time.
2. The first Annual Report for the national evaluation (September 2002) raised a series of issues and concerns during the first year of delivery which needed to be resolved, including:
  - we had no knowledge of specific targets or an explicit strategy for rollout;
  - an emphasis on volume, and specifically the issue of cards to young people;
  - Learning Centres had concerns about the attendance recording solutions;
  - as a result, a fully functioning coordinated model was not being delivered;
  - awareness and usage by young people was low.
3. Whilst the original aims and outcomes for the project have not been formally changed, there has been a recognition over the last two years that the scale and nature of achievement originally intended is not realistic. This was emphasised by the Secretary of State when he reviewed the position of card in December 2003. As a result, there has been a change in the expectation of what the Connexions Card can achieve, apparent through, for example:
  - the introduction of Critical Success Factors (CSFs) in year two and the revision of targets associated with these CSFs in year three;
  - re-negotiation of the contract with Capita designed to maintain the focus on keeping young people engaged;

- a change in emphasis in respect of the overall purpose of the Card which is now considered to be a motivational tool rather than something that can be expected to have a significant impact on punctuality and attendance in learning;
- a change in focus away from achieving purely volumes of Cardholders towards achieving greater usage by Cardholders;
- recognition that the card reader solution was not universally effective for all Learning Centres, nor necessarily the main vehicle for delivery;
- decisions not to focus on particular outcomes, for example by not proactively targeting Connexions Partnerships to help engage the harder to reach groups and not to take forward activities to introduce a facility for automatic enrolment.

## Volume and Usage

4. The number of Learning Centres engaged with the Connexions Card has increased considerably over the last year, demonstrating the effectiveness of the changed approach and focus from the Connexions Card Team.
5. Use of the Connexions card reader solution has fallen across all provider types and the majority of those that have stopped providing attendance information had used this card reader solution. As an alternative approach the Department has contracted to develop automatic interfaces between their registration systems and the Connexions Card database, to help simplify the data collection process for approximately 200 Learning Centres.
6. The level of engagement of young people has improved considerably since 2003. Numerical targets for numbers of young people redeeming points have been exceeded: 54,788 young people had redeemed points at the end of August 2004, 110% of the target for July 2004. However, the relative performance target is clearly not realistic or achievable in the medium term: 19% of eligible Cardholders with points had redeemed them at the end of August, compared to the target of 40% for July 2004<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The Connexions Card Team have recently agreed a new measure for CSF3 which reflects wider usage of the Card beyond rewards redemption.

7. In terms of overall cohort engagement an estimated 9%<sup>2</sup> of the 16-19 cohort might currently be engaged either through claiming rewards or accessing discounts. 3.7% of the 16-19 cohort have redeemed points and 0.8% of the 16-19 population have redeemed five or more rewards.
8. Redeemers have generally higher levels of engagement with other aspects of the Card (discounts and proof of age) than non-redeemers.

### Effect and Impact

9. As seen last year, Cardholders are generally positive about the potential benefits of the Connexions Card. Redeemers are more positive about the Card than non-redeemers.
10. There is no significant evidence of any direct impact of the Card in terms of changes in attitudes to learning. However, some of those participating in the Cardholders survey identified, through unprompted questions, some effects of the Card (though sample sizes are not statistically reliable), including:
  - "encouraged me to get to school/college";
  - "provided useful careers information";
  - "helped me decide to go onto further or higher education";
  - "change in motivation/attitude".
11. As with most schemes of this nature, there is evidence of a considerable amount of deadweight associated with the Card, given that less than half of the Cardholder sample in 2004 agreed positively with statements about the effect of the Card. The Card is more accessible and successful in engaging those who continue their education at school and are comparatively higher achievers, and less so some harder to reach groups.

### Factors Affecting Achievements

12. Between 2003 and 2004, there has been some improvement in the awareness and attitudes of Learning Centres and the extent to which the Card is embedded within a number of Learning Centres. There is, however, considerable

potential to further engage both existing and new Learning Centres in this way.

13. FE Colleges tend to be more engaged with Card Distribution than with the provision of attendance recording data and face more implementation difficulties with the latter.
14. There is a clear link between the Connexions Card being "embedded" within a Learning Centre and the consequent awareness, usage and benefits for Cardholders. The Card is more likely to be "embedded" where there is significant promotion, contact and support from the Connexions Card Team; high levels of awareness & commitment amongst staff and students; and an explicit linkage of the Card with learning and attendance.
15. Commitment and enthusiasm of Learning Centres can still be barriers to embedding the Connexions Card in many institutions.
16. A range of barriers associated with engaging Learning Centres were highlighted by the Connexions Card Team's Regional Account and Attendance Recording Managers. Many of these are associated with communication with Learning Centres, administrative problems within Learning Centres and negative perceptions/attitudes towards the Connexions Card or to Capita.
17. The range and availability of rewards and discounts is much improved. Suggestions to address some practicalities have been made, including increasing the number of each reward in stock and improving local accessibility.
18. Some barriers associated with access to the Card and its functions were highlighted in the Cardholders survey and case studies, including shops not recognising the Card; being refused as proof of age; problems with access to the website; availability of other cards; and decrease in awareness where the Learning Centre are no longer awarding points.

### Achievements in 2003/04

19. The step change in approach reported in the second annual report has continued over the past year. Its effects have been particularly noticeable in the last 6 months when performance against targets for Learning Centre and young peoples' engagement has improved considerably.
20. There is evidence that the model of delivery is achieving the "right first time" principle more

<sup>2</sup> This figure should be used with caution since it is based on a combination of database MI and sample survey proportions.

often which has helped to address a number of the barriers seen in previous years.

21. Young people that are engaged remain positive about the Connexions Card, with an increase being seen in the awareness, usage and benefits for redeemers in particular. A gap is emerging between redeemers and non-redeemers in terms of both awareness and attitudes to the Card. The research suggests that the link between embedding the Connexions Card within the Learning Centres and with learning is critical to success.

## Conclusions

22. There has been a significant improvement in engagement of Learning Centres and young people particularly over the past year. Progress has also been made on a number of outcomes related to rewards and discounts, website, trial of additional functionality and use for proof of age.
23. However, the Connexions Card project has a considerable way to go to achieve the aims and outcomes originally set:
  - there is no evidence that the original intended impact is yet being achieved, though there is indicative evidence that the Card may be having some effect on some Cardholders;
  - in terms of numbers of young people using the Card, considerable progress has been made over the last 12 months, though numbers remain small compared to original expectations and initial CSF targets;
  - access and usage tends to be from the more highly qualified and easier to reach young people;
  - benefits to Learning Centres are limited given that the card reader solution did not provide the originally intended improvement in electronic data recording systems and the automatic enrolment function is not available.
24. Although we are not aware of the details of the contract between the private and public sector partners we believe that it may have distorted the style and direction of Connexions Card roll-out; in particular, the initial emphasis on volume rather than quality embedding. There was also a political commitment to deliver cards to young

people in 2001/2002. In hindsight it would have been better to devote the whole of the first year to developmental activity; more extensive piloting and testing.

25. The highly innovative and experimental nature of the Card perhaps required a greater flexibility in approach and delivery than can be easily captured in a performance related contract.
26. The initial identification and then revision of Critical Success Factors by the PPP Board was recognition that the original targets for the Card were not feasible. There is therefore a need to formally review and revise the aims and outcomes for the Card. This is especially the case given that the views of the Connexions Card Team of the purpose of the Card have themselves changed.
27. The question that remains, however, is what would be the realistic expectations for the Card in this new context? The negotiations on targets seem to have focused on what is achievable, which is appropriate, but there is also clearly a need to consider whether what is achievable meets policy and value for money objectives. What is the critical mass in terms of volumes, usage and functionality required for the initiative to be considered a success? What would represent value for money in policy terms?
28. However, irrespective of this question, there may be little incentive for the private sector partner to do anything other than deliver the contract. The contract may still, therefore, remain a barrier to targeting the product in the most policy effective way, given that there appears to be no incentive for risk-taking.

## Recommendations - Issues for the future

29. In addition to the questions about success and value for money, there is a series of issues that we recommend should be considered in taking forward the Connexions Card project, including:
  - Continued effort and significant resource will be required to:
    - maintain the commitment of the more "successful" Learning Centres and engage others that still face some barriers;
    - focus on the awareness, usage and attitudes to engage more of the non-redeemers;
    - access the harder to reach and NEET target groups;

- The Connexions Card Team have to an extent been playing catch-up over the last 18 months due to a slow start to the Partnership and delivery - there are some key lessons associated with this type of partnership/initiative that have been highlighted through the delivery of Connexions Card that might be helpful to other/future government initiatives, including, for example:
  - clarity of purpose, outcomes and critical success factors from the outset;
  - piloting, testing and implementing a quality product in one region before rolling out nationally;
  - considering in full and addressing the implications of previous pilot evaluations;
  - the resource, negotiation skills and complications associated with initial contracting and on-going contract management.
- There are also lessons regarding the operation of public private partnerships and level of risk-taking, when delivering an initiative whose development, impact and profile are unclear. The Connexions Card project perhaps provides a useful case study for future operation of PPPs with initiatives of this nature;
- There may be benefit associated with conducting some focused research in some of the more successful Learning Centres to, for example, collate records of punctuality and attendance and conduct surveys of learner attitudes and motivations. This may provide more specific evidence of impact of the Connexions Card in a successful environment;
- There should be a final wrap-up evaluation in 2006/7 linking this assessment to the final outcomes.

#### **Additional Information**

*Copies of the full report (RR614) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

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*Copies of this Research Brief (RB614) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at [www.dfes.gov.uk/research/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/)*

*Annexes and sub-reports produced to inform the full report can be accessed on the evaluation website at [www.yorkconsulting.co.uk](http://www.yorkconsulting.co.uk)*

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