Foreword to Learner Involvement Strategy Handbook

At the National Learner Panel’s first working panel event on 15th January 2007, the panel members gave a learner perspective on the importance of providers having a Learner Involvement Strategy and discussed the issues it might address. Their views were then crafted into the foreword for the Learning and Skills Council’s Learner Involvement Strategy Handbook, which gives guidance to FE providers about how to implement their own strategy.

“As the newly-established National Learner Panel, we believe passionately in the benefits that learner involvement can bring to many organisations. We are from a broad range of learning backgrounds – some of which already have well-established mechanisms for learner involvement and others currently without – but regardless of our learning environments, we believe that successful learner involvement can play a key role in helping to drive up quality.

We are therefore hugely supportive of the new requirement for providers to develop their own Learner Involvement Strategy, as we hope that it will help organisations to ensure that their delivery is firmly based around the needs of the learner. However, we are wary that it is all too easy for ‘learner involvement’ to be dismissed as a catch-phrase, the latest fad. If it is to work, it has to become an inherent part of a system that feeds back to those who have the power to make a difference and it needs to have a tangible effect. It needs to become a key driver of every provider’s quality improvement system.

We would like to share with you our vision of a provider organisation that has really taken the principles of learner involvement to heart…

It is an organisation in which learner involvement is embedded across the organisational culture, learner representation is strong and responsiveness to the needs of the individual has helped to improve provision. Crucially, we would hope to see:

- **a dedicated Learner Liaison Officer on the Senior Management Team** – someone who is the learner involvement co-ordinator, who brings credibility to the value of the learner voice and whose role is linked to quality and curriculum issues, not just pastoral concerns. Of course in smaller organisations this may not be a whole post but having a named person as a focal point for learner involvement activity can be powerful

- **an independent learner committee or student council**, led by the learners and fully supported by dedicated staff, that allows us to express our opinions and concerns, and to which the provider is committed to responding
an established mechanism for involving learners in review processes (or even inspections), and for feeding back annually on how our views have helped the organisation to improve.

We certainly support many existing mechanisms for learner representation and involvement, such as student or learner unions, learner surveys and elected student governors. We also agree with the recommendation that there should be at least two student governors on every governing body or, depending on the organisation, perhaps learner representation on the board. But sometimes these don’t work as well as they could. For example, student surveys will only remain credible if we as learners feel that our input is taken seriously and that we can track the impact of our contribution, and student governors can only do their job properly if they are properly trained and supported.

It’s very important for us to know that provision is being driven by our needs, and not the requirements of funding. We need to see the evidence that you understand and are responding to our learning needs. We would like to see one-to-one discussions between learners and tutors that are non-intimidating, allow us to define a shared set of expectations and objectives, and are a genuine learning experience for both parties.

Finally, in addition to the suggestions we’ve made above, there are some simple things you can do to support learner involvement in principle and in practice. You can ensure that there are clear signposts for how learners can get involved (e.g. physical signs as we walk through the door and visible noticeboards). You can provide us with welcome packs when we enrol on a course that raise our awareness of the involvement opportunities. You can develop open and honest means of relaying information back through to us – perhaps through a direct address from the principal or CEO.

All of this would result in better two-way communication, enhanced awareness of the issues that affect all of us and a feeling amongst learners that we are truly part of the organisation.

We are aware that many organisations are doing some of these things very well already – and we also acknowledge that different organisations, and the learners they serve, have different needs. We know, for example, that one of the greatest challenges for those in work-based learning is that learners can often feel isolated – and that this will require the training provider to develop ways that enable the learners to feel part of a wider learning community.

But, whatever type of provider you are, we hope that you will view the introduction of a Learner Involvement Strategy as a positive step. And it might seem obvious, but when you are developing your Strategy, we’d suggest that you include your learners in the process and then, once it is in place, ensure that they know how to access it in future! For the benefit of everyone.”