Framework for Excellence

The National Learner Panel met on 17th July 2007 to discuss the implications of Framework for Excellence from the learner perspective. Berni Henson from the LSC gave an initial presentation to provide the panel with an overview of the information that will be gathered through the Framework for Excellence.

1. Introduction

Framework for Excellence is a new approach to measuring the performance of FE providers which aims to:

- make learning provision more responsive and demand led
- increase the proportion of provision that is either good or outstanding
- reduce bureaucracy
- inform the choice of customers – both learners and employers – about where to “shop.”

The LSC undertook an extensive consultation process for Framework for Excellence during 2006 and published the collective response on its website. In June 2007 the LSC published ‘How the Framework will Work’, which describes the pilot that will be undertaken between September 2007 and March 2008 with 100 providers, before rolling out the full model by June 2008.

As a part of the ongoing development of Framework for Excellence, the LSC asked the National Learner Panel to discuss how learners might use and access the information the Framework will provide to inform their decision-making. The Panel divided into groups to discuss the issues in more detail; in particular they looked at the following questions:

- Which parts of the Framework will learners be most interested in?
- What will make the information credible to learners?
- When and where will learners want to access the information?
- How should the information be presented to learners?
2. Panel Response

Which parts of the Framework will learners be most interested in?

We feel that learners will be most interested in information relating to the following aspects of a provider’s performance:

- **Quality**: The quality of the provision in various areas is important to learners, including facilities and whether learners’ needs are being met.
- **Learning outcomes**: Academic achievement rates are significant for learners, particularly when they have a choice of providers that are offering similar courses.
- **Learner destinations**: Destination information will enable learners to weigh up whether the course will be worth their investment of time and money. Many learners will want to know the likelihood of finding jobs after they have completed a course, particularly if their chosen course is vocational.
- **Use of financial resources**: Some learners will be interested in the way providers allocate financial resources, although they are less likely to be interested in the processes providers use to manage their budgets. In particular, learners may want to know about the allocation of financial resources to facilities such as libraries and laptop provision, where learners really experience the benefits of a provider’s spending.

We feel that this information will complement other important sources of information, rather than replace the need for learners to use other sources. In particular, we want to emphasise the vital importance of ‘word of mouth’ and actually visiting providers in person to talk to staff and students and to ‘get a feel’ for the place where you will be studying.

What will make the information credible to learners?

Our view is that Framework for Excellence will have a level of credibility because it represents the independent, professional opinion of the LSC. This will enable learners to compare the quality of different providers in a way that is more reliable that just using the provider’s own publicity material.

We feel strongly that learner surveys will not be credible if they take place in front of tutors because learners may not feel comfortable enough to give an honest view in front of their tutors. We also feel that surveys tend to be rushed and therefore learners do not put effort into completing them. We suggest that surveying learners would be more effective if an independent interviewer could interview the students and interact with them. We suggest that LSC staff members or a
trained student teams could play this role.

**Suggestions for the LSC:**

- Use independent parties to distribute surveys rather than teaching staff
- Employ independent interviewers to conduct interviews with students. Consider training student teams to carry out this role.

**When and where will learners want to access the information?**

We feel that learners will want to have access to the information provided by the Framework at times when they have a choice to make about where and what to study. It may also be useful for people who are looking for information on behalf of someone else who is thinking about studying or even someone who isn’t thinking about it but might need a helpful ‘nudge’.

We believe that the onus should not be on the learner to go and seek out the relevant information. Instead, the information should be accessible to learners in places where they already go to get information. The first port of call for learners seeking information about courses is often a prospectus, and many learners are unlikely to look anywhere else for information. We feel that the information from the Framework should be included in every provider’s prospectus, in an obvious place near the beginning so that it would be the first thing people would turn to. The other places we imagine learners wanting to access this information include careers fairs, UCAS days, job centres, libraries and workplaces. Some of us suggested that the information could also be made available in those places where people are likely to be waiting and potentially receptive to information. Some examples that we mentioned included waiting rooms in doctor’s surgeries, cash machines, departure and arrival boards, toilets and bus stations.

We suggest that the information should be available on provider websites and perhaps a central website where people can compare different providers. This central website should be independent of any particular provider. Some of us thought that it would be useful to make use of mobile phone technology as well, which might be easier for some people to access than the internet.

**Suggestions for the LSC:**

- Ask every provider to include the information from the Framework in their prospectus and also on their website, preferably in a prominent position near the beginning.
- Make the information from the Framework accessible to learners in the other places where they are likely to go as a matter of course. Some of these places will be directly related to education and careers, e.g. UCAS days and job centres, but it is also useful
to consider other environments, such as doctors’ surgeries, where learners will be receptive to the information.

- Consider developing a central, independent website where learners can compare the performance of different providers against the Framework.

How should the information be presented to learners?

Our primary concern is that the information from the Framework should be presented in a format that is simple, accessible and completely free of jargon words. We believe that this could be a challenge for the LSC, as Framework for Excellence is a complex scheme and could easily be off-putting to learners. As one of us pointed out, most learners do not even read Ofsted reports when thinking about their choices so there is a real risk that they would not use this framework either. We feel that that the LSC will need to work hard to translate Framework for Excellence into learner-facing pieces of information.

We would also like to emphasise that one size does not fit all when it comes to information. It would be helpful to have a few different ways of presenting the data, e.g. as statistics, diagrams, in headlines etc. For some groups of learners, the font size will be an important consideration, as will the colours that are used.

Suggestions for the LSC:

- Work closely with learners to ensure that the information from the Framework is articulated and presented in a way which makes sense to a diverse range of learners.

What are the potential limitations of Framework for Excellence for learners?

We feel that Framework for Excellence will only be useful for those learners who feel that they have a choice of provision, and for many learners this will not necessarily be a reality. One of us pointed out that in rural areas like Cumbria most learners don’t feel that they have a choice because there are very few colleges in a relatively wide area and most people simply go to the ‘local college’.

Another concern we have is that certain types of quantitative data could be misleading to learners if it is presented without any contextualising qualitative data. For instance, drop out rates alone are not helpful because a learner will want to know why people are dropping out. There could also be a risk of learners misinterpreting data about ‘positive destinations’ because types of some positive outcomes might not be recognised within the destination data.
Suggestions for the future development of the Framework

We suggest that the Framework for Excellence could be developed in future to include some additional data that would be useful to learners:

- Pastoral support offered to students by providers
- What the provider is doing to improve those areas where they are not performing so highly
- The ability of a provider to engage people who would not otherwise have thought about going to college
- The partnerships the provider has with employers and universities etc
- Provider specialisms