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Evaluation of the Impact of the Learner Involvement Strategy: Year Two: Final Summary Report

A report to LSC National

April 2009

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1 INTRODUCTION

Background to Research

1.1 Learner involvement is a key element of the wider personalisation agenda which advocates that services will be improved by putting citizens at the centre of a given service and understanding and acting on their needs. 2007/08 was the first year in which there was an explicit requirement for Further Education providers to develop a Learner Involvement Strategy. Even where learner involvement activity has already been part of the provider ‘offer’, it is expected that the development of a strategic approach will result in benefits for both the learner and the provider. For example, these benefits might include:

- For the learner, a more engaging and responsive learning environment that enables them to shape their learning experience and helps them achieve improved learning outcomes;
- For the provider, more motivated and expert learners; improved information on which to base decisions about resources and approach; and increased performance in terms of participation, retention, progression and achievement for learners.

1.2 The requirement to develop a Learner Involvement Strategy applies to the wide range of further education providers and as such, different approaches would be likely to suit the various needs of learners and providers. Similarly, the suitability and quality of learner involvement activity will be reviewed as part of the overall self assessment reviews and inspection arrangements being developed as part of the FE Reform programme, including through the Framework for Excellence.

1.3 The LSC therefore commissioned an evaluation to understand the impact of learner involvement strategies on learners’ experience and success across the full range of FE providers. In summary, the objectives of the evaluation are to:

- Evaluate the impact of Learner Involvement Strategy on the experience of learners in the FE system, in the full range of providers;
- Determine the extent to which providers have implemented a Learner Involvement Strategy;
- Measure the possible impact of Learner Involvement Strategies on teaching and learning, retention and achievement;
- Assess how providers are evaluating the impact of their Learner Involvement Strategies;
- Establish the impact of the Learner Involvement Strategy Handbook (this objective was completed in the Year One report);
- Set out the elements of the Handbook that are most successful and/or commonly occurring and those that are not, with reasons why;
- Evaluate the place of the Learner Involvement Strategy as part of the strategic planning of the provider agencies;
- Analyse the possible impact of Learner Involvement Strategy on diverse groups including young people ‘looked after’; and
- Determine any further interdependencies with other policies/strategies including the Framework for Excellence and the Common Inspection Framework.

1.4 The evaluation ran between December 2007 and May 2009. A Year 1 report was published in Spring 2008. This is a summary version of a longer Final Report, prepared in Spring 2009.

1.5 The report presents the findings of the surveys and fieldwork undertaken in 2008-09 and is based on data collected in the first year, together with:

- A telephone survey of 2,000 learners drawn from the ILR for academic year 2008/09;
• A longitudinal telephone survey of 700 learners that took part in the Year One survey;
• A longitudinal telephone survey of 650 further education providers that took part in the Year One survey; generically categorised as ‘further education’ (FE) or ‘work based learning’ (WBL); and
• A new cohort of 350 providers that were not contacted in Year 1, to provide comparison with the longitudinal cohort; and
• 20 case study visits to providers of which 12 were return visits to those interviewed in Year 1.

1.6 Learner and provider samples for the telephone surveys were developed separately so there is no presumed connection between learner and provider responses. Survey Fieldwork took place between late October and early December 2008 and case study fieldwork took place between February and April 2009.

Report Structure

1.7 The remainder of the report is presented under the following sections, which reflect the structure of the main report:

• Outcomes and Benefits
• Strategy Development
• Participation Mechanisms
• Influencing Teaching and Learning
• Supporting Learners and Staff
• Conclusions.
2 OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

2.1 Overall, Learner Involvement results in benefits to both providers and learners. These benefits are enhanced for those providers that have a formal programme of learner involvement in place. The most frequently reported results arising from having a formal learner involvement strategy relate to improved staff confidence about involving learners, ability to collate and analyse information about learner involvement activity and to demonstrate changes that have come about as a result of learner involvement activity.

Provider Perspective

2.2 The cohort surveys in Year 1 and Year 2 highlighted a wide range of results and benefits accruing to providers as a result of their Learner Involvement activities. Over two thirds of providers surveyed for the first time in Year 2 and more than 60% of those surveyed longitudinally report a positive impact in relation to all of the measures considered. There do not appear to be any significant variations between FE and WBL providers in the level of benefits accrued through Learner Involvement activities.

Figure 2.1: Longitudinal Sample: Provider benefits

2.3 The longitudinal sample provides evidence that some FE and WBL providers benefitted differently in the early stages of introducing and then stepping up their Learner Involvement activities in relation to:

- The ability of providers to demonstrate change in approach and improved understanding of how different groups of learners can take up opportunities (more prevalent among FE providers); and

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1 Further guidance on model Learner involvement strategies is available for WbL and ACL from LSIS via the following links:
Adult and Community: http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=228873
• More learners achieving their desired qualifications (more frequently cited amongst WBL providers).

2.4 The surveys highlighted a wide range of results and benefits accruing to providers as a result of their Learner Involvement activities – illustrated below in the responses of the Year 2 cohort of providers (Fig 2.2). The implementation of a formal programme of learner involvement has a major impact on the scale of benefits as a result of learner involvement activity. The most frequently reported results and benefits are:

• The ability of providers to demonstrate changes in approach that have come about as a result of learner involvement activity;
• Learner involvement being recognised as embedded in the curriculum by staff and learners;
• Improved ability among providers to collate and analyse information collected; and
• Improved staff confidence around how they can involve learners.

2.5 In other words, an engrained, measurable and coherent response appears to result from the formalisation of a Learner Involvement Strategy.

Figure 2.2 - Year Two cohort: Results and benefits of Learner Involvement activity among providers with and without a formal LI Strategy

2.6 Case study evidence from providers highlights benefits for learners, in particular the importance of learners understanding and taking ownership of the way that they learn. A key benefit for learners from a good programme of involvement is that the learners have a better knowledge of how they learn and have the confidence to apply this in future. Learners taking ownership of their own learning also show greater motivation, leading to better results (success and retention rates).

2.7 Where there appear to be differences in impact between FE and WBL providers, case study evidence suggests that these are often linked to the overall approaches taken to learner involvement, for example:

• feedback and consultation through learner representatives identified the problem and solution to overuse of College PCs for social networking at peak times;
• an idea raised through WBL one to one feedback sessions led to an e-learning option for geographically dispersed learners and improved success rates.

2.8 An observation from an independent provider, working mainly with on-site learners, sums up the incremental impact that learner feedback can have:

“Learner feedback is subtle in the short term and substantial over time”.

2.9 Providers observed benefits for staff in three main areas: being able to develop and manage the curriculum; improving their own motivation and satisfaction; and improved management relationships. Key observations were that it generated a more inclusive approach:

• good learner involvement helped to sharpen the curriculum and make it more responsive, as feedback helped tutors to understand their learners better and how to tailor their approach to meet individual needs;

• involvement activity that increases the motivation of learners, helps increase learner success rates giving trainers and assessors greater job satisfaction;

• learner involvement offers staff the opportunity to talk and develop relationships with learners, which helps staff relate better to learners, understand their issues and communicate with them more effectively;

2.10 Providers also recognised benefits to the organisation through the improved focus on curriculum and decision making processes for responding to feedback endorsed by managers. Providers recognised the need to respond to learner feedback in terms of ‘repeat business’, i.e. that learners may return for other courses, recommendations by learners to others about the provider; and new opportunities for the curriculum offer or to engage groups of learners.

Learner Perspective

2.11 The research uncovered a range of learner benefits and outcomes. Learners reported effects from their involvement that related to improved teaching and facilities as well as recognition that they were taking a more active part in decisions about their learning. Learners appear to find it difficult to articulate how or why their involvement has been beneficial to them; however the majority of learners report that they value and enjoy the opportunities for involvement that they have been given, describing benefits relating to an enhanced overall learning experience, increased confidence and improved ability to make informed choices.

2.12 Feedback from learners in Year 1 and Year 2 supported the view that their views are taken seriously and that a proactive learner involvement programme helps them to feel more comfortable in speaking to staff and talking about their views. Learners report that training in skills such as formulating and presenting ideas is transferable and can be included on CVs.

2.13 Responses from learners citing benefits indicate that, although personal outcomes vary from learner to learner, they have seen a noticeable impact on the quality of teaching, learning and facilities within both FE and WBL (Fig 2.3). Learners interviewed in Year 2 spoke of how they have seen their own confidence improve through taking part in the formal structures in place and that their views have an impact. Case study participants in Year 1 and Year 2 confirmed that the process of being asked for their views helps them to understand more about how they learn.
Figure 2.3 – Year Two cohort: Top ten personal benefits to learners as a result of their involvement in shaping their learning experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal benefits</th>
<th>Percentage of learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The teaching has improved</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that my overall learning experience has improved</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The facilities are better</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am happier with my course/training</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am now taking a more active part in decisions about my learning</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have more confidence generally</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am more confident about achieving my qualification</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learning is more interesting</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer help/support if/when you have problems</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel more motivated</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of respondents: 1694

2.14 For those who responded, a key benefit is that 15% learners feel that teaching has improved; almost as many said that their ‘overall learning experience has improved’ and that they are now ‘taking a more active part in decisions about their learning’. Being involved in feedback, review and decision making through learner involvement activities also contributes to a general improvement in confidence and in their ability to achieve their desired qualification; others also mentioned improved communication skills and making more informed choices about their future career.

2.15 The majority of learners value and have enjoyed the opportunities for involvement that they have been given. The following quotes illustrate some of the benefits expressed by the learners across a range of types of provider:

“I really like it here. We get treated like adults and everyone [the staff in the college] respects us. Being listened to has really helped me with my confidence.”

“The experience has definitely changed my perceptions towards learning – I really feel part of something here…”
2.16 Case study participants in Year 1 and Year 2 confirmed that the process of being asked for their views helps them to understand more about how they learn.

“Learners are allowed to take control of their learning and they know what they can gain from it.”

“Being asked questions about what works best for you makes you think more about your learning style, and helps you to develop your own set of learning techniques.”

2.17 To summarise, the findings appear to indicate that learners who were able to pinpoint the effects of involvement feel more able to influence the learning process and as a result this has led to both tangible and more subtle benefits for them and the provider.
3 STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

3.1 There are indications that the encouragement of a strategic approach to learner involvement is having some effect. All providers taking part in the surveys could demonstrate some level of learner involvement activity. 56% of those aware of the requirement to have a strategy felt that their approach to learner involvement had changed as a result of this obligation and 94% of providers in the longitudinal cohort had maintained their programme between surveys. Both FE and WBL providers engage learners in drafting learner involvement strategies, although FE providers are more likely than WBL providers to involve learners in this activity and to be aware of the recent guidance on consultation.

Provider Perspective

3.2 The majority of providers had a programme of learner involvement in place. Just over half of Year 2 cohort providers with a programme of learner involvement in place said that their programme of activity was well established, having been in place for more than three years. 94% of the providers who were surveyed in both years that had a programme of learner involvement place in April 2008 had retained that programme by the time of the second survey.

3.3 All providers from the Year 2 cohort could demonstrate some degree of learner involvement activity, although not all providers had formalised this into an official programme. The Year 2 cohort survey found that in over 70% of cases programmes of learner involvement activity are directed through a formal learner involvement strategy. Formal Learner Involvement Strategies are more prevalent among FE providers than providers of WBL (84% as compared to 67%).

3.4 35% of providers in the longitudinal study reported changes in approach between our research surveys, including modifications and improvements to their programmes to make them simpler and more effective; and also to widen representation and increase involvement of learners. Of the 646 providers surveyed longitudinally, 605 had a programme of learner involvement in place in April 2008 that was still operational in six months later. This suggests that many providers are managing their learner involvement programme actively. However, FE providers were more likely than WBL providers to have taken steps to widen representation and also more likely to have reviewed their overall learner involvement process or strategy (Figure 3.1).
3.5 The requirement for a Learner Involvement Strategy had a tangible influence on the approach of providers. Among the providers who were aware of the September 2007 requirement to have a Strategy, 56% indicated that their approach to learner involvement had changed as a result of this obligation. When FE and WBL providers are considered separately, FE providers appear significantly more likely to involve learners in drafting the LIS than WBL providers (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 – Year two cohort: Extent to which learners were involved in drafting LIS
3.6 Although a small number of providers from the longitudinal cohort indicated that they did not have a programme of learner involvement in place, when asked whether or not specific activities take place within the college/training provider, all providers could demonstrate a degree of learner involvement activity. In other words, learner involvement activity appears to be a fairly widespread phenomenon, with or without a formal strategy in place.

3.7 Reflecting on the problems in involving some learners in the planning and managing of provision, one provider from the longitudinal cohort commented that “our learner group would struggle if given too much responsibility. They are often from unstable and unsupportive backgrounds and have a number of personal issues so everything has to be geared to developing confidence in an unthreatening and supportive way”.

3.8 The following examples of how activity promoting ‘collective involvement’ has developed are drawn from the longitudinal case studies:

- One education and training college commented that the learner involvement programme has been developed from what was in place before. The main addition has been a Student Parliament which allows students to speak more freely and is seen as a good forum for students to meet with senior management.

- One college who specialises in vocational learning highlighted a more structured approach to learner involvement. College Governors are aware of student contribution through Learner Voice reports and students are now involved in the recruitment of staff. Other mechanisms for learner involvement which have led to increased transparency include ‘hot seat’ events where student representatives may ask the Principal and Vice Principal of the college questions.

3.9 In terms of levels of awareness of obligations to consult learners, the Year 2 survey found that 52% of providers were aware of the guidance published by DIUS for FE providers on consultation with learners and employers. FE providers were more likely to be aware of this guidance than WBL providers.

Learner Perspective

3.10 Learners appear to value that they are asked their opinions and 95% agreed that they are treated with respect by their provider. There is a strong association in both FE and WBL between learners who can describe opportunities to be involved in decisions relating to learner support, facilities and courses and also state that the provider seeks their views. WBL learners are more likely to believe that their learning providers always seek and respond to their views: a higher proportion of WBL learners ‘strongly agreed’ that their provider asks their opinion on how to improve courses, teaching and facilities.

3.11 Learners surveyed longitudinally were also asked to comment on opportunities for involvement offered by their providers (Figure 3.3).
Figure 3.3 – Longitudinal sample: Opportunities for learners to shape provision

3.12 Learners perceive that their providers offer significant opportunities for them to be involved, particularly in relation to courses and teaching. It would appear that providers are slightly less likely to consult learners widely on issues around improving facilities. These findings are in line with those of the year two cohort, which highlighted similar levels of agreement. There is no significant difference between FE and WBL learners’ responses.

3.13 Eighteen percent of learners who indicated that they had been involved in specific learner involvement activities have become involved in some or all of these activities since April 2008. 33% of this group stated that they were only recently approached by their provider and asked to become involved. A small number of respondents indicated that they were given more opportunities to become involved since April 2008 or that they now felt more comfortable with their provider and wanted to become involved. There is no significant difference between FE and WBL learners.

3.14 Learners who believe that their provider responds to their views are more likely to report overall satisfaction. Learners appear to value the fact that they are asked for their opinions on such matters: 95% of respondents ‘agreed’ or strongly agreed’ that they are treated with respect by staff from the training provider. Over 80% of FE and WBL respondents in the Year 2 cohort feel their providers respond to their views (Figure 3.4).

3.15 Less than 1% of learners from the Year 2 survey who reported that their provider always or sometimes responds to their views were dissatisfied with provision. Although the percentages should be treated with caution, as relatively few learners within the sample are dissatisfied, 30% of learners who reported their provider rarely or never responded to their views were also dissatisfied with provision.
3.16 Opportunities for involvement were separated into three categories to consider the extent to which learners feel their provider seeks their views on decisions around:

- **Course delivery** – giving feedback on the quality of teaching; the courses and qualifications on offer; and arrangements for coursework and exams;
- **Facilities** – access to IT facilities; library services (FE only); and the kind of facilities that are available to learners (canteen, lockers, parking, sports facilities etc); and
- **Learner support** – help for learners to understand the subject they are studying; advice on future options; available financial support; and the kind of support available to learners with disabilities or learning difficulties.

3.17 In relation to course delivery WBL learners are significantly more likely than FE learners to believe that their providers involve learners in decisions around the courses/qualifications that are available to learners and arrangements for exams and the completion of course work (Figure 3.5).
3.18 It is clear that FE and WBL learners feel most involved in decision making around the support that is available to them to help them understand the subject they are studying; opportunities to give feedback on the quality of teaching; and the advice and support they receive when considering their future options.

3.19 In summary, formal and informal involvement is a fairly widespread occurrence across the FE and WBL network and there is evidence of the evolution and refinement of strategies amongst the longitudinal sample. Providers are facilitating opportunities for learners to shape provision, involving them in decisions and responding to their views (particularly around their courses, teaching and future options) more often than not.
4 PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS

4.1 Feedback from learners and providers highlighted that a wide range of approaches were used to encourage learner participation in involvement activities. The use of surveys and questionnaires remains the most widely recognised means of learner involvement. Almost two thirds of providers reported offering learner parliaments or forums; and involvement of learners as peer support or as mentors was also widely encouraged. FE providers appear to use a greater range of learner involvement methods than WBL providers.

Provider Perspective

4.2 Providers in the Year 2 cohort were asked to comment on the range of involvement mechanisms employed by their organisation. FE and WBL providers make wide use of:

- Surveys and questionnaires; used by 99% of FE providers surveyed and 98% of WBL providers;
- ‘Learners acting as mentors offering peer support’; used by 88% of FE providers and 96% of WBL providers.

4.3 FE and WBL providers in the longitudinal survey mostly felt that the use of surveys/questionnaires was effective, with 49% of WBL providers and 34% of FE providers taking this view. Representation and other active approaches emerge – in relative terms - as the least used approaches among both samples. The longitudinal survey shows that:

- 78% of FE providers use course representatives to promote learner involvement;
- 70% of FE providers use learner governors to promote learner involvement;
- 66% of FE providers use Student Unions to promote learner involvement; and
- 17% of WBL providers use Learner Board Members to promote learner involvement.

These findings are consistent with responses to the survey in Year 1.

4.4 Other mechanisms with a reported difference in use by FE and WBL providers are shown in Figure 4.1.
Figure 4.1 – Longitudinal cohort: use of mechanisms of LI by FE and WBL providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism for learner involvement</th>
<th>Percentage of providers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner Representatives</td>
<td>43% (FE), 55% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating through regular newsletters</td>
<td>43% (FE), 54% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners acting as ambassadors of involvement</td>
<td>39% (FE), 43% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-forums and websites</td>
<td>35% (FE), 43% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner Parliament/ Forum</td>
<td>35% (FE), 43% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing learner voice agenda item in committees</td>
<td>35% (FE), 43% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner/ management liaison committee</td>
<td>25% (FE), 50% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner Advocate</td>
<td>20% (FE), 43% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site/ learning area council</td>
<td>11% (FE), 33% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner Conferences</td>
<td>18% (FE), 74% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner Affairs Committees</td>
<td>10% (FE), 28% (WBL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of providers</td>
<td>0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FE (n=228) WBL (n=418)

Number of respondents: 646

NB: Only those methods where there is a statistically significant difference between FE and WBL are shown.

4.5 One to one contact and wider communication (through both ‘passive’ means such as surveys and questionnaires and more ‘active’ means such as ‘learners acting as mentors and offering peer-support’) are the most widely used approach to learner involvement, used by almost 100% of providers in both samples and mentioned most often by learners during focus groups (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 – Longitudinal cohort: Provider approaches to learner involvement
4.6 WBL learners and FE learners reported the same three most common means of participation (one to one contact, wider communication and governance). FE learners most frequently cited ‘discussions with staff’. The largest percentage of WBL learners said they had been involved through ‘completion of surveys about their learning or training’ (61%) and 58% said they had been involved through ‘discussions with staff’ at the training provider.

4.7 Representation and more ‘collective’ consultative methods emerge as the least widely used approaches among both samples. A statistically significant difference between FE and WBL providers was found in relation to ‘ensuring that all learners are represented’, with a fifth of FE providers indicating that this is something that they have attempted to achieve, compared to 9% of WBL providers. That said, 37% of learners in the longitudinal survey indicated that they had been personally involved in decisions around how their provider could improve their learning experience.

4.8 Both main types of providers reported changes and progress with their learner involvement programmes, and although a higher proportion of FE providers reported changes in approaches to increasing the range and depth of involvement opportunities available to learners, more than half of WBL providers indicated that they had made such changes (Figure 4.3). This finding may further highlight the need for additional support for WBL providers to raise awareness of the range of learner involvement activities open to them and to tailor the approaches to suit their business needs and structures.

Figure 4.3 – Longitudinal cohort: Changes in the range and scale of LI activity since April 2008

Learner Perspective

4.9 Over 70% of learners in the Year 2 cohort were able to comment on some specific mechanisms employed by their provider, and 37% of the longitudinal cohort indicated that they had been personally involved in discussion about how the provider could improve the learning experience. It is worth noting that for a significant number of respondents these mechanisms included active approaches such as discussions with staff as well as completion of surveys, which we described in the Year 1 report as a more passive measure.

Figure 4.4 – Year two cohort: learner awareness of activities used by their provider
4.10 Thirty seven percent of learners surveyed longitudinally indicated that they had been personally involved in decisions around how their provider could improve the learning experience (Figure 4.5). Analysis found no significant difference between WBL and FE learners.

**Figure 4.5 – Longitudinal cohort: learners’ personal involvement in shaping decisions**

4.11 Learners were considered by FE and WBL typology to explore in greater detail the nature of their involvement with their learning provider (Figure 4.6 below). The three most common means of participation among WBL learners were the same as those recorded for FE learners FE learners most frequently cited ‘discussions with staff’ (63%), followed by ‘completion of surveys’ concerning their
course (62% FE learners) or their college (58%). The largest percentage of WBL learners said they had been involved through completion of surveys about their learning or training (61%), with 58% involved through ‘discussions with staff’ at the training provider and 52% having completed surveys about their provider.

4.12 Less than 10% of respondents indicated that they had been involved as a learner representative; sat on a student/learner committee; sat on a committee with provider staff; or been involved as a representative on the board of the organisation. However, this figure is not unreasonable given that these are elected/representative roles undertaken on behalf of the wider learner/student body.

**Figure 4.6 – Longitudinal cohort: top five means of involvement among FE and WBL learners**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means of involvement</th>
<th>Percentage of learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had discussions with staff at the training provider</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed a survey about the learning or training</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed a survey about the learning or training provider</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave feedback at learner discussion groups</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Became a learner representative</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of respondents: 700

**Evaluating Learner Involvement**

4.13 In terms of formal arrangements for the evaluation of learner involvement, the majority of providers (56%) have an evaluation programme in place to monitor progress and impact: formal processes are more common among FE providers (68%) and WBL (51%) in the Year 2 cohort. However, this was not consistent with the Year 1 cohort where there was no difference between WBL and FE activity. In the longitudinal cohort, over 70% of providers reported that they had evaluation methods in place and almost 20% had put these arrangements in place since April 2008 – this could be a further indication that the requirement for a more strategic approach is having effect on the approach of providers.

4.14 Respondents who had collected evidence to assess the impact of learner involvement activity were asked to comment on any changes that they have made to their programme as a result of this evidence (Figure 4.7).
4.15 Positive outcomes were reported where evaluation structures are in place. FE and WBL providers both reported that collection of evidence had led to changes to improve accessibility of involvement methods; ensure that support is provided for learners to be effective; and improve individual aspects of their learner involvement programme.

4.16 Overall, across the provider network there is a mix of active and passive approaches, the use of collective and individual involvement mechanisms and varying degrees to which informal and formal structures are in place. Providers that had more formal structures have been seen to be better able to observe benefits from their learner involvement programmes.

Number of respondents: 329
5 INFLUENCING TEACHING AND LEARNING

5.1 This chapter explores in more depth the extent to which learner involvement has been able to shape teaching and learning in provider organisations, including influence of both the overall strategy and direction of teaching and of course content.

Shaping Learning Content

5.2 The Year 2 cohort survey found that 56% of providers involve learners, in some way, in the development of course content. Over half of providers (51%) also indicated that they involve learners in shaping the overall strategy and direction of the organisation. Although both main types of providers are very active, FE providers are significantly more likely to inform learners about the actions they are taking than WBL providers (97% FE, 87% WBL).

5.3 Use of learner feedback to review and evaluate courses and asking learners to evaluate their courses are considered valuable as:

- Feedback can be used to make improvements in the content and delivery of courses;
- Providers can gain the learners perspective;
- Providers can better tailor courses to suit the needs of learners;
- Learners can provide direct feedback on their experiences of the course and the learning they gained; and
- It allows providers to understand what learners want and need from their course.

5.4 Telling learners about the actions taken is considered valuable as:

- It lets learners know that their comments are valued and taken seriously;
- It is important that providers respond to the issues raised by learners and communicate changes clearly;
- It can encourage further participation and involvement by learners; and
- It allows students to take ownership of their own learning plans.

5.5 There is less engagement in more consultative/innovative approaches to involvement (Figure 5.1). For example, less than half of the providers indicated that they have provided training for learners to enable them to better evaluate their courses; and just over a third of providers allow lesson/training sessions to be observed by learners as part of the evaluation process. In broad terms, with the exception of ‘telling learners about the actions taken’, there were no statistically significant differences in the use of these engagement methods between FE and WBL providers.
Despite the relatively low numbers of providers providing training for learners discussed above, using learner feedback to review and evaluate courses and asking learners to evaluate their courses are more widespread and are considered valuable approaches (Figure 5.2):

- Feedback is used to make improvements in the content and delivery of courses;
- Providers are gaining the learners’ perspective;
- Providers are better tailoring courses to suit the needs of learners;
- Learners are providing direct feedback on their experiences of the course and the learning they gained; and
- Learner involvement allows providers to understand what learners want and need from their course.
5.7 Most providers reported that they consider it to be valuable to tell learners about actions taken. In addition to the importance of letting learners know that their views have been taken seriously, providers felt that this communication was likely to encourage further participation and involvement by learners and to allow students to take ownership of their learning plans.

Shaping Overall Strategy and Direction

5.8 Over 80% of providers report that learner involvement activity is closely integrated with wider management processes. The longitudinal survey found that half of WBL providers and 40% of FE providers integrate learner involvement activity with their Equality and Diversity policy, although FE providers were more likely than WBL providers to involve learners in the development of their E&D policy.

5.9 Case study evidence suggests that in general the larger the provider the greater the emphasis on promoting detailed polices and procedures to maintain consistency in provision and to acknowledge the need for differences in approach in relation to different types of learners. For example, one college observed that their Learner Involvement Policy sits alongside their Young People’s Plan, Communications Strategy, Learner Support Policy, and their Equality and Diversity Policies.

5.10 The case studies provided several examples of actions addressing under-representation and to achieve equality of access, in provision and support for learners –most commonly in relation to disability. Actions range from holding an equalities conference, to setting up a disability involvement group and setting in place recognised procedures for responding to concerns from individual learners.

5.11 Providers within the longitudinal sample were asked to comment on the characteristics of groups of learners that they perceive to be under represented within their learner involvement programme (Figure 5.3). Overall:

- Over half of providers (54%) feel that no groups are under represented;
- 9% of providers feel that ethnic minorities are under represented;
- 7% of providers feel that learners with a disability are under represented.
5.12 Comparing the broad provider types, there is a statistically significant difference between the percentage of providers who feel that under represented learners may include:

- Ethnic minorities: 4% of FE providers and 12% of WBL providers feel that ethnic minorities are under represented.
- Females: 1% of FE providers and 9% of WBL providers feel that females are under represented. This may reflect the nature of sector specific nature of learning supplied by these providers; and
- Part time learners: 8% of FE providers and 0.2% of WBL providers feel that part time learners may be under represented.

5.13 Practitioners may find it helpful to profile under-represented groups when tailoring their learner involvement strategies to help develop improved approaches.

5.14 Using learners ‘to spread the word’ is recognised as effective. For example, following a college based Equalities Conference the 42 learners who attended have drawn in support from three times as many other learners. An inner city WBL provider commented on the value of raising issues through group discussions in terms of group dynamics and mutual support:

“...when groups come together for discussion, equality and diversity is often raised by learners. They often speak about how different issues affect different people in the workplace and how they can support each other - there is a lot of learner involvement in this respect on an ad hoc basis – it happens naturally.”

5.15 WBL providers are particularly aware of the need to persuade and convince employers to buy into learner involvement processes alongside their commitment to training. Although this helps in building relationships with clients and learners it can mean tailoring a bespoke involvement approach for each employer:
“Our programme is constantly reviewed – something that may work for this company may not work for that one we were with yesterday.”

5.16 Adapting policy and practice to the circumstances for work based learners is happening in colleges too:

“With work based learners, particularly those that do not come onto site, we tend to use more surveys to get learners’ views and we have to emphasise to employers that they have a responsibility to support their learners and to seek their views.”

5.17 In summary, providers that are involving learners in shaping course content and shaping the overall strategy and direction of the organisation have found the experience to be of value as it has helped to improve and tailor content. There is also value in ensuring that learners are informed about the actions that have been taken as this can encourage further participation and involvement and allow learners to take ownership of their experience.
6 SUPPORTING LEARNERS AND STAFF

Resource and capacity

6.1 Evidence from the surveys reflects the reality that providers have adopted a rich mix of learner involvement approaches and activity. For example some providers (more likely to be FE rather than WBL providers) include learner representation within their LIS and then actively work to raise awareness among learners of the role of learner representatives and provide training for this. Other providers place greater reliance on one to one feedback and some provide training for learners to make good uses of such processes.

6.2 The majority of providers are confident that they provide sufficient time and resources for learners to be involved and that they help learners with difficulties to participate. From the case studies, it seems that providers are becoming more aware of the benefits of support for staff and learners in making the most effective use of learner involvement processes.

6.3 For example, a college that emphasises further staff training to promote and secure willing participation of learners is also developing support for learners that sit on committees. Some WBL providers are seeking ways to introduce group discussions, for example as elements of group training sessions, to complement regular one to one contact with assessors.

6.4 In broader terms, less than one third of providers in the Year 2 cohort provide training for learners to be actively involved, for example as a learner representative (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 - Year Two cohort: support provided to learners to enable them to provide feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support provided to learners to enable them to provide feedback</th>
<th>Percentage of learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We train learners to be representatives or advocates</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We raise awareness among learners of the role of learner representatives</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We provide resources including IT facilities and space for discussion</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We provide sufficient time for learners to be involved</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We help learners with difficulties to participate</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of respondents: 355

Supporting Learners

6.5 Many providers feel that they have increased the amount of support available to learners to assist them in feeding back on their experiences since April 2008 (50% of FE, 40% of WBL providers) (Figure 6.2). This may be a further indication that the development of more formal learner involvement strategies is increasing focus on this area and increasing the resources committed to
learner involvement. From the longitudinal sample, although FE providers are more likely to have designated staff to lead learner involvement, in the past 12 months there has been sharp increase in such staff in WBL providers.

**Figure 6.2 – Longitudinal sample: support to learners over the last six months**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider Type</th>
<th>Percentage of Providers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FE (n=226)</td>
<td>52.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased overall amount of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintained overall amount of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decreased overall amount of support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.6 From the case studies it is clear that providers of all kinds are exploring and implementing a range of opportunities for extending the range and depth of learner voice. For example one college (in this case a sixth form college) has used tutorial time firstly to introduce independent learning plans and then to make these available on-line to learner and tutor as part of the on-going updating process. Responses from WBL providers illustrate that **individual and collective approaches** are necessary for building relationships; motivation; confidence and learner voice.

6.7 The case studies also illustrate how **some providers are adapting practice to accommodate new approaches** or developments. For example a WBL provider offering a range of types of training across the IT field has recently taken on a Student Support Officer to complement the existing Employer Support Officer. In another example, a sixth form college is feeding aggregated data from learner surveys directly back into staff appraisals and course action plans as part of its management and review processes.

6.8 A large percentage of learners indicated that support from staff and peers had helped them become involved. From the learner perspective, although 57% of learners surveyed longitudinally had received support to get involved or make their voice heard from another learner and 38% from student services or student liaison team staff, less than half had received training from their provider in learner involvement processes and less than 20% had received training from an outside agency.

6.9 Interestingly, WBL learners reported significantly higher levels of support through training to help them become involved, which contrasts with the providers' reported offer of training. This may reflect the nature of engagement between WBL learners and their tutors/assessors or the nature of learner forums or other mechanisms used by WBL providers.

6.10 It is also clear that simply **asking learners to be involved can have a big impact**. Of the 18% of the longitudinal sample that had started to participate in involvement activities in the past 12 months, a third said it was because they had recently been asked to do so by their provider. Conversely,
amongst the 14% of the longitudinal sample who said they had not participated in any learner involvement activities, the most common reason was that they had not been asked.

**Staffing**

6.11 Analysis of the longitudinal survey shows that prior to April 2008 65% of FE providers already had designated staff in post to lead on learner involvement, with a further 10% identifying relevant staff in the period since April 2008 (Figure 6.4). WBL providers were more likely to have designated such staff in place since April 2008, increasing the percentage of such posts in WBL providers by a third. This shift appears to reflect flexibility to redeploy staff and resources to address changing priorities.

**Figure 6.4- Longitudinal sample:**
Dedicated liaison or support staff as part of the Learner Involvement strategy

![Dedicated liaison or support staff as part of LI strategy](chart.png)

6.12 Most training for staff on learner involvement appears to be informal, including that staff are made aware of an expectation on them to promote learner involvement in accordance with available guidance. Against a high overall level of activity, WBL providers were more likely than FE providers to report this approach. WBL providers were also more likely to include training for new staff on learner involvement as part of their staff induction or when new procedures that affect learner involvement are introduced.

6.13 The longitudinal survey of providers shows that **support and training for staff is increasing**. Over the last six months (Figure 6.5):

- 48% of providers indicated that they had increased the overall amount of support available for staff to promote engagement in learner involvement activities;
- 45% have increased the number of teaching staff engaged in learner involvement; and
- 40% have increased the number of support staff involved.

**Figure 6.5 – Longitudinal cohort: changes in support for staff to promote engagement**
6.14 When the Year 2 cohort of providers were asked to comment on how teachers and tutors are supported in learner involvement activities, 77% of providers reported training in learner involvement processes for tutors/teachers as part of their on-going professional development programme. Most providers (88% of the longitudinal cohort) provide training for teaching and non-teaching staff.

6.15 In summary, providers are becoming more aware of the benefits of learner involvement and are confident that they can provide sufficient time and resources for learners to be involved. Around half are increasing the level of resources they provide to assist learners and adopting new approaches. Support from staff is seen by learners to help them become engaged, and providers are also increasing the levels of dedicated staff to support learner involvement. Most providers report offering staff training, both through informal processes and as part of induction and continuous professional development programmes.
## 7 CONCLUSIONS

“Learner feedback is subtle in the short term and substantial over time”

### Outcomes and Benefits

7.1 **Overall, Learner Involvement results in benefits to both providers and learners.** These benefits are enhanced for those providers that have a formal programme of learner involvement in place. The most frequently reported results arising from having a formal learner involvement strategy relate to improved staff confidence about involving learners, ability to collate and analyse information about learner involvement activity and to demonstrate changes that have come about as a result of learner involvement activity.

7.2 **Learners reported effects from their involvement that related to improved teaching and facilities** as well as recognition that they were taking a more active part in decisions about their learning. Learners appear to find it difficult to articulate how or why their involvement has been beneficial to them; however the majority of learners report that they value and enjoy the opportunities for involvement that they have been given, describing benefits relating to an improved overall learning experience, improved confidence and improved ability to make informed choices.

### Strategy Development

7.3 **There are indications that the encouragement of a strategic approach to learner involvement is having some effect.** All providers taking part in the surveys could demonstrate some level of learner involvement activity and 94% of providers in the longitudinal cohort had maintained their programme between surveys. 56% of those aware of the requirement to have a strategy felt that their approach to learner involvement had changed as a result of this obligation. Over half were also aware of the recent guidance from DIUS on consultation with learners and employers. Both FE and WBL providers engage learners in drafting learner involvement strategies, although FE providers are more likely than WBL providers to involve learners in this activity and to be aware of the recent guidance on consultation.

7.4 **35% of providers in the longitudinal study reported changes in approach between our research surveys, including modifications and improvements to their programmes to make them simpler and more effective; and also to widen representation and increase involvement of learners.** This suggests that many providers are managing and refining their learner involvement programme actively. However, FE providers were more likely than WBL providers to have taken steps to widen representation and also more likely to have reviewed their overall learner involvement process or strategy.

7.5 **Learners appear to value that they are asked their opinions and 95% agreed that they are treated with respect by their provider.** There is a strong association in both FE and WBL between learners who can describe opportunities to be involved in decisions relating to learner support, facilities and courses and their statement that the provider seeks their views. WBL learners are more likely to believe that their learning providers always seek and respond to their views: a higher proportion of WBL learners ‘strongly agreed’ that their provider asks their opinion on how to improve courses, teaching and facilities.

### Participation Mechanisms

7.6 **Although the use of surveys and questionnaires remains the most widely recognised means of learner involvement, almost two thirds of providers reported offering learner parliaments or forums; and involvement of learners as peer support or as mentors was also widely encouraged. In other words, over time a mix of both active and passive measures has been prevalent.** FE providers appear to use a greater range of learner involvement methods than WBL providers. Both FE and WBL providers mostly felt that the use of surveys/questionnaires was effective, with 49% of WBL providers and 34% of FE providers taking this view.
7.7 Compared with FE providers, WBL providers were more likely to consider the engagement of learners as mentors to be important. Representation and other active approaches emerge as the least used approaches among both samples.

7.8 Both main types of providers reported changes and progress with their learner involvement programmes, and although more FE providers reported changes in approaches to increasing the range and depth of involvement opportunities available to learners, more than half of WBL providers indicated that they had made such changes.

7.9 Over 70% of learners in the Year 2 cohort were able to comment on some specific involvement mechanisms employed by their provider, and 37% of the longitudinal cohort indicated that they had been personally involved in discussion about how the provider could improve the learning experience. It is worth noting that for a significant number of respondents these mechanisms included active approaches such as discussions with staff as well as completion of surveys.

7.10 In terms of formal arrangements for evaluation of learner involvement, formal processes are common among FE providers (68%) and WBL (51%). While over 70% of providers reported that they had evaluation methods in place, almost 20% had put these arrangements in place since April 2008 – this could be a further indication that the requirement for a more strategic approach is having effect on the approach of providers.

7.11 Positive outcomes were reported where evaluation structures are in place. FE and WBL providers both reported that collection of evidence had led to changes to improve accessibility of involvement methods; ensure that support is provided for learners to be effective; and improve individual aspects of their learner involvement programme.

7.12 Overall, across the provider network there is a mix of active and passive approaches, the use of collective and individual involvement mechanisms and varying degrees to which informal and formal structures are in place. Providers that had more formal structures have been seen to be better able to observe benefits from their learner involvement programmes.

Influencing Teaching and Learning

7.13 Over half of providers report that they involve learners in development of course content and influencing the strategy/direction of the organisation. Most providers reported disseminating the results of surveys and informing learners about the actions they are taking (although FE providers are more likely to do this). While over half of providers feel that no groups are under-represented in learner involvement activity, a considerable proportion (7-9%) reported that ethnic minority groups or those with a disability are under-represented.

7.14 Most providers reported that they consider it to be valuable to tell learners about actions taken. In addition to the importance of letting learners know that their views have been taken seriously, providers felt that this communication was likely to encourage further participation and involvement by learners and to allow students to take ownership of their learning plans.

7.15 However, less than half of providers reported that they have provided training for learners to be able to evaluate their courses; and fewer allow learners to observe learning/training sessions as part of an evaluation process.

7.16 Over 80% of providers report that learner involvement activity is closely integrated with wider management processes. The longitudinal survey found that half of WBL providers and 40% of FE providers integrate learner involvement activity with their Equality and Diversity policy, although FE providers were more likely than WBL providers to involve learners in the development of their E&D policy.

Supporting Learners and Staff

7.17 The majority of providers are confident that they help learners with difficulties to participate and that they provide sufficient time and resources for learners to be involved.
7.18 Less than one third of providers in the Year 2 cohort provide training for learners for them to be actively involved, for example as a learner representative. Possibly associated with the extent to which this mechanism is used, fewer WBL providers reported that they actively work to raise awareness of the role of learner representatives or provide training for learners to take on this role (59% of FE providers and 21% of WBL).

7.19 Many providers feel that they have increased the amount of support available to learners to assist them in feeding back on their experiences since April 2008 (50% of FE, 40% of WBL providers). This may be a further indication that the development of more formal learner involvement strategies is increasing focus on this area and increasing the resources committed to learner involvement. The longitudinal survey also found that FE providers are currently more likely to have dedicated staff in place to support and promote learner involvement.

7.20 A large percentage of learners indicated that support from staff and peers had helped them become involved. Interestingly, WBL learners reported significantly higher levels of support through training to help them become involved, which contrasts with the providers’ reported offer of training. This may reflect the nature of engagement between WBL learners and their tutors/assessors or the nature of learner forums or other mechanisms used by WBL providers.

7.21 Most training for staff on learner involvement appears to be informal, including that staff are made aware of an expectation on them to promote learner involvement in accordance with available guidance. Against a high overall level of activity, WBL providers were more likely than FE providers to report this approach. WBL providers were also more likely to include training for new staff on learner involvement as part of their staff induction or when new procedures that affect learner involvement are introduced.

Concluding observation

7.22 The longitudinal cohort in particular illustrates that there are clear benefits from learner involvement that improve the learners’ experience, build staff confidence about involving learners and enable the organisation to gather evidence and demonstrate the changes that have been made more effectively. Providers have noted benefits for their learners, for staff and for the organisation as a whole. A formal strategy provides a more coherent framework on which to build activity and a mechanism to embed and manage learner involvement objectives. This is not to say that an informal programme does not have benefits, but it providers with a clear structure were able to articulate their activities and benefits more clearly.

7.23 The research uncovered a rich mix of learner activity including both active and passive measures. Collective and individual approaches and both formal and more informal structures were observed to be in place across the provider network. A combination of these measures appears to provide a comprehensive set of results, particularly where staff are encouraged and trained to be more confident in how they can support learners.

7.24 The providers that have seen impact from their learner involvement programmes have shown that embedding learner involvement activities in a strategic manner requires a range of carefully tailored mechanisms to meet the needs of the individual learner, the teaching and support staff working in providers and the organisation as a whole, and that the investment.

“Learner feedback invariably leads to an improved learner journey and learning environment.”