From Plastic Forks to Policy Change: Involving Disabled Learners in the Work of the National Learner Panel

The main points of the final report to the Learning and Skills Council

February 2010

Easy Read Version
Most of these pictures were taken and adapted from CHANGE picturebank and photosymbols.
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Introduction

The National Learner Panel was set up by the Government.

It is a group of learners who tell the Government what they think about college and adult education courses and training in England.

We use the word “college” for all these things in this report, to keep it shorter.

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is the organisation that pays for all these courses and training.

The LSC asked NIACE, the national adult learning organisation to find out...

- how learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have a say about their courses and training
- how to make sure that the National Learner Panel hears the views of disabled learners.
NIACE wrote a report about what they found out called

‘From Plastic Forks to Policy Change: Involving Disabled Learners in the Work of the National Learner Panel’.

The report was called ‘Plastic Forks’ because sometimes learners start by talking about useful things that are important to them at college, like wanting to use metal knives and forks, rather than plastic ones.

As people become more confident at speaking up, they will often want to talk about other things as well like, what courses they want to do and how good they think the teaching is.
What did NIACE do?

NIACE sent out a list of questions to colleges and other organisations that run courses.

They asked

- “How do learners have a say about their courses and about how the college is run?”
- “How do you make sure that disabled learners are included in having their views heard?”

There were 128 replies to the questions. They were from colleges, adult education centres and other places that run training and education.

24 of the replies had interesting information about ways disabled learners are included and have their say.

NIACE got in touch with these 24 places to find out more about what they were doing.
What NIACE found out

Most of the places who replied really wanted to involve all learners, including learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and hear what they have to say.

They had thought about different ways of doing this.

Some important things which help disabled learners to be involved

- Providing training and support for learners to speak up.
- Making sure disabled learners know how they can become more involved in college life if they want to.
- Producing information that is clear and easy to understand.
Colleges must believe that it is important to listen to what all learners have to say.

Colleges have to take what learners say seriously and do something about the things that learners say need to change or get better.

‘Speaking up’ and saying what you think should be part of all courses. Learners should have the chance to choose the things they want to talk about.
What stops disabled learners being involved?

Some colleges said that there were some problems in making sure everyone could be involved in having a say...

- It can be hard to find a time when everyone can meet and to sort out the transport.

- Worries about how to pay for the work involved in making sure that learners have their say.

- Some learners might not want to go to a group which was just for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

- Some learners were not interested or did not want to be part of speaking up groups.
How can disabled learners be involved in having a say?

NIACE thought of a way to involve learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in having a say.

They called this idea a model.

The model is to have learner activities or groups from one college, meeting with groups from other colleges in the same area or town.

Then these groups might want to get in touch with groups further away, but in the same region.

A region is a large area that includes lots of cities, towns and villages, like for example, the Yorkshire and the Humber Region. (There are 9 English regions.)
If people met in regional groups, they could then link with the National Learner Panel.

Disabled learners could let the National Learner Panel know what they think about things to do with where they learn and what they are learning.

NIACE felt that this was already happening in some places like with the Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Learners' Panel.

NIACE also thought that people might like to talk to each other at meetings and also to use the Internet to make contact with learners in other colleges and other part of their region.
What can the LSC do so learners with learning disabilities have their say?

1. LSCs in different parts of England, could use the networks they already have in their area to support learners to come together to discuss local issues.

2. Organisations in the voluntary and community sector that provide education, like the Workers Education Association and Mencap and also NATSPEC, which supports learners in specialist residential colleges, should be involved in these meetings.

3. The LSC should develop more resources that help learners to speak up.

4. Colleges should be asked to show how they have involved learners in designing and running their courses.
How could the National Learner Panel make contact with learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities?

5. Members of the National Learner Panel should be asked if they can make contact with the regional groups of learners.

6. The National Learner Panel could develop its website into a social networking site a bit like Facebook, to encourage people who want to talk about their courses and college to get in touch.

7. The National Learner Panel website could also be made more accessible to learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities with information that is clear and easy to read.
8. The National Union of Students website could also be made into a space where disabled learners can get in touch with each other.

9. The National Learner Panel could meet with the Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Learners’ Panel to talk about how they could support disabled learners better.

They could also make a DVD about the work that the National Learner Panel does.

NIACE also said that the LSC might want to...

10. Do some more work with learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to find out what they think about how they are involved in speaking up about learning and training.

This idea has been taken up in two conferences for learners called ‘Have Your Say’.