National Survey of Post-16 Learning Providers: Gathering and Using Learner Views in LSC-Funded Provision

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1. Introduction and Policy Context

1.1 RCU was commissioned in March 2006 by the LSC to research current practice in the collection and use of learner satisfaction information by providers and to test proposals for a learner satisfaction measure across the learning and skills sector. This supported a commitment in the LSC’s Corporate Plan to 2006 to monitor learner satisfaction as a means of improving the quality of teaching and learning. The scope of the research encompassed the whole of the learning and skills sector, including further education, work-based learning, school sixth form provision and adult and community learning. Throughout the report *blue italics* are used to signify direct quotes from secondary sources, provider comments or survey instruments.

1.2 The aims of the research project were to:

- consult with a wide variety of providers regarding current practice;
- explore the use of learner satisfaction information to improve quality;
- test the relevance of proposed over-arching standards for gathering learner views in different learning and skills contexts;
- test potential measures of learner satisfaction and core questions proposed by the Learner Satisfaction Technical Group; and
- provide examples of practice that could be shared with provider networks.

1.3 The research drew on the evidence base compiled for the *Foster Review*, previous research commissioned by the LSC and on evidence recorded in inspection reports published by Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). However, the report mainly draws on direct consultations with a wide range of providers, conducted through a structured national survey, a series of follow-up interviews and a series of consultation events held across the country. These consultations produced detailed evidence of current practice, including innovative approaches to the gathering of the views of learner groups whose voice might otherwise be hard to obtain through traditional approaches. All sections of the provider base contributed to the consultation and regional events in the summer term of 2006 were particularly well-attended.

1.4 The research process gathered general evidence on the effectiveness of strategies to gather learner views and also provided specific guidance to the LSC on the development of national measures of learner satisfaction and ways to enhance the usefulness of the National Learner Satisfaction Survey.

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2 A wide-ranging advisory group established by the LSC and including representation from the DfES, the Inspectories, providers, NIAEC, ASCL, Sector Skills Councils, data analysis organisations and LSC staff.
1.5 A series of policy documents in recent years have made it clear that responsibility for monitoring and responding to learner views is the responsibility of providers. This was emphasised in the 1999 White Paper *Learning to Succeed* which stated that:

> The principal responsibility for quality improvement remains with providers themselves. The Government looks to all providers to adopt strategies for securing continuous improvement as many already do. These strategies should be based on self-assessment and action planning (including target-setting) and responding and acting upon learner feedback and complaints.

1.6 Providers are expected to develop effective strategies for gathering learner views and to use these to inform the process of self-assessment. *Success for All*, published in November 2002, set out the Government’s agenda for reforming further education and training in England and led to the proposed development of new ways of measuring success in the learning and skills sector.

1.7 A consultation process on measuring success, launched jointly in early 2004 by the LSC, DfES, ALI and Ofsted, indicated a high level of support for the adoption of a consistent approach to the gathering and reporting of learners’ views. The broad principles of the proposed model were that providers should:

- know the levels of satisfaction among their learners and take effective action to improve their learners’ experience;
- have access to a methodology to support effective benchmarking that would be designed by the LSC to be consistent with the national survey; and
- assess their processes against robust national standards, covering areas such as regularity, wording of core questions, survey administration, benchmarking and response.

1.8 These proposals were further developed in *New Measures of Success: Priorities for Development* which proposed revised core questions for gathering learners’ views, enhanced guidance to ensure consistency between local and national surveys and dissemination of examples of effective gathering of learner views in a range of contexts. The importance of learner views was also a strong theme of the *Foster Review*, which stressed the importance of responding effectively to learner views as part of a robust quality improvement process.
1.9 In drawing up a specification for the research, the LSC and its partners identified a wide range of potential users for enhanced learner satisfaction data. These included:

- the DfES (to report on the overall effectiveness of the sector and support policy development and evaluation);
- the LSC (for planning, policy development and performance measurement at a national, regional, local and provider level);
- ALI/Ofsted (as evidence of robust self-assessment and effective quality improvement systems);
- providers (for internal and external benchmarking, self-assessment and the improvement of the quality of provision);
- learners/parents (in choosing between alternative providers and as a vehicle through which to raise concerns about local issues);
- employers (in choosing between alternative providers and as part of the evaluation of the impact of training); and
- private consultants and data analysts (to provide context for their own survey services).
2. Methodology

2.1 LSC and RCU agreed a methodology for the research as summarised below.

- A short desk research phase building on evidence from recent research projects, including examination of published extracts from recent inspection reports and consultations with key stakeholders.

- A structured sample of just over 1,500 providers reflecting different categories of learning and skills providers. This was a mainly quantitative survey but included opportunities for providers to comment on the effectiveness of particular approaches to gathering and responding to learner views. The survey was supplemented by a qualitative survey of special schools with learners over the age of 16.

- Follow-up interviews with more than 50 providers to probe current practice in more detail and identify innovation in the gathering or learner views. These interviews were designed to have a special emphasis on the use of flexible techniques to ensure that vulnerable learners are gathered effectively.

- A series of four regional workshops in July 2006 disseminating the results of the national survey and testing providers’ response to proposed developments for the learner satisfaction measure.7

- Consultation on emerging findings with New Measures partners and the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA).

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7 Events were held in London, Bristol, Leeds and Manchester. Around 150 providers were represented.
3. Executive Summary

RCU was commissioned by LSC in March 2006 to research providers’ current practice in the gathering and use of learners’ views and to test proposals for a learner satisfaction measure across the learning and skills sector. (Section 1.1)

The research built on previous research in the sector and on policy steers within the Foster Review of the Future of FE Colleges and the FE White paper. It was additionally informed by a substantial provider survey covering the whole learning and skills sector and feedback from a series of provider seminars. (Sections 1.3 and Section 2)

There is considerable evidence in previous research on effective practice in gathering the views of particular groups of learners, including non-completers, adult learners, learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, learners with mental health issues, school sixth form pupils and work-based learners. (Section 4)

National surveys of the satisfaction of learners have taken place in the learning and skills sector since 2001/02 and in the higher education sector since 2004/05. The learning and skills sector survey, the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS), now includes all aspects of the sector apart from school sixth forms. (Sections 4.14 – 4.18)

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) examine the effectiveness with which evidence of learner views is used to improve the quality of provision. The inspectorates do not prescribe the methods to be used to gather learner views but the Common Inspection Framework, and extracts from inspection reports, point to the need for approaches that gather views in a comprehensive and inclusive manner and impact directly on the quality of the learning experience. (Section 5)

A total of 545 providers responded to a written questionnaire designed to provide evidence for the report. This represented a response rate of 36% from an initial sample of 1,509 providers. The initial sample had been structured to provide robust data from the further education, work-based learning, adult & community learning and school sixth form sub-sectors. A separate qualitative survey was conducted with a national sample of special schools with post-16 learners. (Sections 6.1 – 6.5)

Formal techniques of monitoring learner views, such as written questionnaires, complaints procedures and staff feedback are used by a majority of providers. Learner representative structures appear to be playing an increasing part in the sector, especially in further education, but are rare in work-based learning and adult & community learning. Qualitative approaches such as learner forums and focus groups are less common, but appear to be playing a growing role in delivering clear explanations of learners’ views and providers would like to increase their use of such techniques. (Sections 6.6 – 6.16 & 6.29)
Less than one in ten providers use telephone interviews as a regular element of their processes. Where these techniques are used they are most likely to relate to interviews with non-completers (in further education) or learners on placements (work-based learning). This raises important issues about the compatibility of providers' internal results with the National Learner Satisfaction Survey. Very few providers have used the research tools website, which includes guidance on making a comparison. *(Sections 6.17 & 6.48)*

Providers consider some of the more formal methods of communicating with learners, such as self-completion questionnaires and one-to-one interviews, to give a high degree of reliability and to be very likely to trigger action. Formal complaints are also felt be providers to link clearly to action, although they are not felt to be particularly reliable as an indication of overall satisfaction. *(Sections 6.21 – 6.24)*

Providers using learner forums and focus group discussions find them to be highly effective and to have a big impact on quality. These approaches (and other direct forms of communication such as individual interviews and representative councils) are perceived by providers as being highly valued by learners. Self-completion questionnaires are felt to be valued less, whether these are completed in paper form or on-line. *(Sections 6.26 – 6.27)*

Providers gave mixed messages to the use of on-line survey software. Some providers are clearly having success in using the technique to gather learners’ views in a quick, flexible and cost-effective manner. However others are concerned at the low response rates they generate and the possible skew of results from different attitudes to ICT among different learner groups. *(Section 6.30)*

Overall, providers are increasingly trying to make the process by which they gather evidence of learner views more sophisticated, balancing qualitative and quantitative evidence and trying to encourage continuous dialogue with learners. They wish to extend their use of qualitative methods and believe that these are valued more highly by learners, but there is concern that the establishment of a national measure may pull the attention back to quantitative approaches. *(Section 6.31)*

Providers have a high degree of confidence in the accuracy and scope of their current approaches, but are less convinced that they are succeeding in engaging the interest of learners. School sixth forms have less confidence in their systems than other parts of the sector. Relatively few providers appear to involve learners directly in evaluating the process of gathering learner views as opposed to commenting on the provision itself. *(Sections 6.32 – 6.38)*
Only around a third of providers currently compare their internal satisfaction indicators to the NLSS and less than a quarter use the recommended core questions. Usage is higher in further education but less well-established in work-based learning and adult & community learning. However, the vast majority of providers would consider benchmarking their results against agreed core questions and would be interested in guidance on processes. The provider seminars indicated that support for this approach would depend on having sufficient flexibility to reflect variations in learner characteristics and learning context. 

(Sections 6.41 – 6.44 & 9.6)

The research tools website has not succeeded in impacting positively on providers. 

(Section 6.50)

There are huge variations currently in the approach providers take to sampling their learners, and the extent to which this extends to dialogue with non-completers and under-16s. There is also considerable variation in the extent to which providers are taking account of groups of learners who might find it difficult to make their voices heard under standard arrangements.

(Sections 6.52 – 6.61)

Qualitative research with special schools that have learners over the age of 16 provided evidence of the complexity and sensitivity involved in gathering the views of learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties and/or behavioural issues. Self-advocacy and the development of independent living skills are central to the special school curriculum and, perversely, a growing willingness to criticise provision and adults in authority can be viewed as a highly positive indicator. (Section 7)

Around 150 providers attended one of four provider seminars, aimed at disseminating the results of the national survey and testing provider reactions to possible ways forward. The seminars received very positive feedback, although providers were reserving judgement at that stage on the implications of the Framework for Excellence. Providers’ key concern was the validity of comparing complex messages that arise from flexible and continuous dialogue with learners to a single biennial national survey. Providers were also concerned that a national model might place undue emphasis on traditional quantitative measures and lack the flexibility to reflect the needs of some learner groups and learning contexts. (Section 8)
4. Evidence from Past Publications

4.1 There is a considerable body of research evidence stretching back over several decades into the factors that impinge on learner satisfaction and models of good practice in obtaining learner views in particular learning contexts. Much of the work in respect of the further education sector was undertaken by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and its predecessor bodies FEDA and the FEU. Since April of 2006 this work will fall into the remit of the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA).

4.2 Some of the research has examined general satisfaction levels, for example FEDA’s 9,000 Voices report in 1998. This examined the causes of student continuation and non-continuation and the role satisfaction played in this. In particular it identified statistically robust links between learner satisfaction levels and the likelihood of non-completion. Around the same time a report by RCU confirmed the link by surveying the initial satisfaction levels of 6,000 learners and tracking their drop-out or continuation over the rest of the academic year. Learners who dropped out of college provision, often months later, had much lower levels of initial satisfaction than those who were destined to complete.

4.3 LSDA was also involved in researching the views of learners in other parts of the post-16 sector, including a series of collaborative projects with NIACE (the National Organisation for Adult Learning). In 2001 the two organisations published Listening to Learners which explored good practice in monitoring the views of adult learners, staff and the wider community. The report identified a framework in which adult providers could gather and respond to learner views and provided guidance on effective use of a wide range of approaches, including complaints monitoring, learner representatives and learner forums.

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8 9,000 voices: student persistence and drop-out in further education, P. Martinez and F. Munday, FEDA, 1998.
10 Listening to Learners, Mark Ravenhall, NIACE & LSDA, 2001.
11 Detailed discussion of effective responses to complaints is contained in Consultancy for free: making the most of complaints, J. Owen, LSDA, 2001.
4.4 More recently, LSDA worked with the National Union of Students (NUS) on a research project on effective strategies to ensure learner representation. This partly built on the NUS’s involvement in the sparqs project in Scotland\textsuperscript{12} which has been viewed as being highly effective in raising the impact of learner consultations. NUS has strongly endorsed the emphasis placed by the Foster Review on learner views and has offered the following analysis:

> Turning ‘Learner focus’ from words into actions will involve:

- strengthening learner advocacy at national and local LSC level and college level;
- offering greater choice, not only between courses but amongst learning mode; and
- in relentlessly streamlining qualifications and learner pathways.\textsuperscript{13}

4.5 Skill: The National Bureau for Students with Disabilities has provided regular guidance for the sector on inclusive approaches to the gathering of learner views. In its response to New Measures of Success: Priorities for Development Skill identified two key issues relating to the effective gathering of evidence of the views of learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. Skill stressed the importance on ensuring that learners in receipt of additional support were given the opportunity to comment on these aspects separately to the assessment of their learning programmes. The second issue involved the importance of providing help for some learners with learning difficulties to ensure that they were able to understand, and respond effectively to, core questions. Skill noted that this support should be given by someone who was not directly involved in teaching the programme.

4.6 Skill also made reference to the 2003 LSDA publication Count me in FE.\textsuperscript{14} This report covered a wide range of learners’ perspectives on inclusive learning. It called on providers to devise strategies to enable all learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to review their academic and social experiences in situations where they can state their views independently of staff who work with them. The report also stressed the particular importance of effective feedback to vulnerable learners raising concerns.

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\textsuperscript{12} NUS Scotland was funded by the Scottish Funding Council for Further & Higher Education to deliver sparqs, which stands for Student Participation in Quality Scotland. The project provided training and support for student representatives to increase the effectiveness with which they could comment on issues affecting learning and learners in their institutions and spanned both FE and HE. The programme included a substantial external training programme, supporting continuing training through peer trainers. For more information see www.sparqs.org.uk.

\textsuperscript{13} Source: www.officeron-line.co.uk/blogs/ellierussell.

4.7 The findings from *Count me in FE* echoed previous RCU research into the gathering of learner feedback from learners with mental health difficulties.\(^{15}\) The report concluded that standard arrangements for gathering learner views within further education produced unreliable evidence of the opinions of adults with mental health issues. The report concluded that many of the weaknesses of standard approaches could be applied to any group of learners but that

Such flaws may simply lead to distorted or unreliable data in mainstream college provision, but in the case of courses for people with mental ill-health the problems are exaggerated and the act of gathering evidence may itself be counter-productive.

4.8 The report recommended the use of flexible and sensitive approaches to the gathering of satisfaction evidence, based on trained staff who were independent from the delivery of the learning programmes. It noted an intense personal loyalty to tutors in some discrete groups and a need to get beyond this to identify opportunities for quality improvement. The report also noted the difficulty of separating course related aspects from the impact of medication, therapy and the naturally cyclical nature of some conditions.

4.9 In 2005 the DfES published a major review of the issues relating to effective use of learner feedback in apprenticeship programmes.\(^{16}\) The report contained a detailed summary of the policy context in which apprenticeship programmes operate and reported the needs and priorities of a number of stakeholder groups, including national funding bodies, the inspectorates and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA).

4.10 The report did not set out to advocate any particular methodology for gathering, analysing and using learner feedback, but it did explore a number of important issues for the application of any system to work-based learning. These included the wide range of expectations and prior experiences among work-based learners and the importance of gathering effective evidence on the cohesion of workplace and off-the-job elements.

\(^{15}\) *Gathering Effective Client Satisfaction Data from Students with Mental Health Difficulties*, G. Aitken, RCU & Lancashire County Council, 1999.

\(^{16}\) *Listening to the work-based learner: unlocking the potential of apprenticeship feedback*, J. Berkeley, DfES, 2005.
4.11 The report presents learner feedback as a powerful channel for two-way communication that can form part of the learning process by raising learners’ understanding of the contribution their input can make to improving their workplaces. The report identified three main ways in which providers could gather learner views:

- adapting, and benchmarking against, core questions from the National Learner Satisfaction Survey;
- collaborating with other providers in the same geographical or occupational areas to develop a common approach and procedures and thus facilitate benchmarking; and
- using commercial survey software and/or data analysis companies and benchmark against their other clients’ responses.

4.12 The issue of learner views in schools is covered by section 2 of the Secondary Schools Self-evaluation Form (SEF). The SEF is designed to be completed annually, or more frequently if the school wishes, in order to record the outcomes of self-evaluation. The document forms a key part of the preparation arrangements for Ofsted inspection, although this section is not graded in either the self-evaluation process or during school inspection. Schools are asked to comment under four headings:

- a description of how the views of learners, parents/carers and other stakeholders are gathered, how frequently this takes place, and how impartiality is assured;
- an assessment of what the views tell the school about learners’ standards, personal development and well-being and about the quality of provision;
- a description of how findings are fed back to learners, parents/carers and other stakeholders; and
- examples of actions taken or not taken, with explanations and an evaluation of effectiveness, with special reference to improvement plan priorities.

4.13 The SEF does not distinguish between sixth form and Key Stage 3/Key Stage 4 provision. Details of some of the judgements made by Ofsted during school inspections are contained in the next section of the report. Neither Ofsted nor ALI prescribe the methodologies that should be used to gather learner (or stakeholder) views, focusing instead on the effectiveness with which views are gathered and the use made of this evidence.

4.14 Providers in the further education, work-based learning and adult and community learning sectors have the opportunity to benchmark their learner satisfaction data against the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS), which took place annually from 2001/02 to 2004/05 and will next be undertaken in the early months of 2007. The NLSS is a telephone-based survey carried out with a national sample of learners selected to be representative in terms of the national learner profile and the geographical distribution of learners.

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17 Learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties can request a face-to-face interview.
4.15 The NLSS sample is not designed to generate provider level data or results that are valid at a local level. Instead its principal aim is to track learners’ overall satisfaction with LSC-funded provision. School sixth form provision is not included in the sample, partly due to the absence of a contact telephone number in national pupil records. However the LSC has been exploring ways of expanding the NLSS to incorporate LSC-funded school provision.

4.16 The results of the 2004/05 survey were published in June 2006 and were based on the views of 43,000 respondents. The sample is selected from the initial statistical return of the academic year and therefore includes a proportion of non-completers, provided they were on course at the time of the first census point. The survey found overall satisfaction levels of around 90% in further education and work-based learning and slightly higher satisfaction ratings in adult and community learning. Ratings for the main indicators of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and the overall learning experience have been rising during the period monitored by the NLSS. Providers are encouraged, but not required, to align elements of their own satisfaction monitoring to the themes covered by the NLSS and the LSC has identified core questions within the survey to facilitate this. The LSC website also contains guidance on administrative arrangements and a research tools section in which providers can drill down into the national survey findings.

4.17 A similar national survey is carried out in the higher education sector, funded by HEFCE. The fieldwork for the first National Student Survey (NSS) was carried out in March 2005 and results were published six months later. Around 170,000 final year undergraduates across 141 institutions took part in the survey, representing around 60% of potential respondents. The coverage includes England, Northern Ireland and Wales but not Scotland, where arrangements are separate. Student Unions in some institutions organised boycotts of the process, concerned that the survey was a distraction and was too generalised to impact positively on quality. Around 80% of students expressed satisfaction with their higher education experience and results were broadly consistent across different institutions. The response rate and overall satisfaction level were broadly similar in the second survey, carried out in the spring of 2006.

4.18 The survey is carried out by self-completion on-line, based on contact information provided by higher education institutions (HEIs) to an independent research organisation. Initial assessment of on-line responses leads to a process of reminders and direct contacts to ensure the response pattern is balanced and this includes some telephone and postal follow-up. Anonymised results are fed back to HEIs to inform their quality improvement strategies.

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18 For details see the Higher Education Funding Council for England website at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss.
5. Evidence from the Inspectorates

The Common Inspection Framework

5.1 The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) consistently stress that they do not prescribe the methodology in which learner views should be gathered. They stress that the key indicator is the impact processes have on the quality of learners’ experiences rather than the existence of any particular process. The Common Inspection Framework points to a number of factors that would indicate effectiveness and these are listed below.

- Are providers gaining an accurate picture of learners’ views and experiences?
- Is the process comprehensive and inclusive?
- Is the evidence shared effectively and reacted to in a positive and self-critical manner?
- Is the evidence used effectively used to support self-assessment?
- Is it clear how quality improves as a result?

The Adult Learning Inspectorate

5.2 ALI provides examples of effective practice on its website, accessible via the Excalibur search tool. The extracts confirm the importance of learner views in informing self-assessment. For example the July 2005 report on Walsall Housing Group (which gained a Grade 1 for Overall Effectiveness) stated:

The inspection team had a high degree of confidence in the reliability of the self-assessment process. The self-assessment report is inclusive and detailed. It involves all staff and relies heavily on learners’ feedback.

5.3 Similar comments were made for Focus Training Limited (April 2005), which was described as making good use of feedback from learners and a wide range of other stakeholders to improve the service offered to learners. RUSH Education (which gained Grade 2s for Overall Effectiveness and Leadership & Management in August 2005) was described as consulting learners and employers at each stage of the self-assessment process, leading to a report that was rich in judgements and honest and self-critical.

5.4 ALI’s report on Graham Webb International (April 2006) described a self-assessment report that was appropriately critical and quite detailed and based on the Common Inspection Framework. The process of compiling the self-assessment was said to involve managers and trainers and to take into account learners’ and stakeholders’ views, but there was no clear linkage back to a development plan and this contributed to a Grade 3 for Overall Effectiveness.

19 Similar guidance is provided within the ALI Inspection Handbook.
5.5 JAC Training and Development Consultancy Ltd. (April 2006) was described as having a carefully structured self-assessment process facilitated by an external consultant and involving staff, but a lack of involvement of learners, employers or other stakeholders contributed to a Grade 3 for Leadership & Management. Inspectors noted that the self-assessment report identified few of the same strengths and weaknesses identified by inspectors.

5.6 A similar instance, this time from the adult and community learning sector, confirms the importance of ensuring that learner feedback has a clear impact on the quality of provision. The report on Learning Plus (March 2006) recorded a Grade 3 for Overall Effectiveness and noted:

Although feedback is gathered from learners, this information is not used sufficiently in the report. Learning Plus has only recently put arrangements in place to collect data on learners’ opinions directly.

5.7 A work-based learning provider, the Reynolds Group (April 2006), was found to involve staff and learners in its self-assessment process but the responses were judged to be:

… not sufficiently focused on the quality and curriculum design of learners’ programme fully to support quality improvement.

Interestingly the company was still judged at Grade 1 for Leadership & Management as the issue had been identified in the self-assessment process and addressed in the company development plan.

5.8 The most common references in the examples cited by Excalibur relate to the use of questionnaires, but other information sources are also identified. Dudley MBC Future Skills is described as having:

...extended the complaints process, which is now a useful process for suggestions, preventative action and complaints, that provides valuable feedback.

5.9 A report on adult and community learning provided by Croydon LEA CETS (March 2006) contained a Grade 2 for Leadership & Management and noted the effective use of learners’ feedback from a variety of sources to improve the learners’ experiences. Inspectors noted that:

As well as conducting broad satisfaction surveys, CETS obtains learners’ feedback from targeted groups such as ESOL learners, learners with disabilities and family learning learners.
5.10 There is an interesting contrast to some of the ALI advisory reports on managing training risks in the British Armed Services. One provider is described as having a level of complaints that is too low to be credible and which contrasted with confidential interviews with families. ALI noted that the armed forces prefer complaints to be resolved at the lowest level.

The ALI reports on armed forces training provide a useful, if at times extreme, illustration of the consequences where a provider has systems to monitor learners’ views in place but has not ensured that these views will be treated confidentially and with respect. The report on HMS Sultan in Gosport, Hampshire described monthly surveys covering a range of subjects, including harassment and bullying, and a post-course discussion group that fed directly back to senior management. However most complaints were not passed up the chain of command and many recruits were found to be reluctant to complain for fear of reprisal.

**Ofsted**

5.11 Recent inspection reports published by Ofsted contain far fewer references to the monitoring of learners’ views than those published by ALI and the Ofsted website has no equivalent of the Excalibur tool. The report on City of Sunderland College (March 2006) contained Grade 2 judgements for Effectiveness of Provision and Quality of Provision, but the only reference to learner feedback related to the monitoring of initial advice and guidance. A report on Keighley College (February 2006), judged Grade 4 for Effectiveness of Provision and Leadership & Management, but there was no reference to the monitoring of learner views.

5.12 A report on Salisbury College (March 2006) noted that students’ views are listened to and acted upon to improve the quality of courses as part of the overall judgement of the Quality of Provision (Grade 3). The report on Leicester College (March 2006) contained more detailed discussion of the impact of learners’ views within a Grade 1 judgement on Capacity to Improve. Quality improvement strategies at the College were described as being very effective in raising the quality of provision, with full involvement of the executive team. Inspectors described a high level of accountability supported by a strong focus on the use of learner feedback to ensure the college is meeting learners’ needs. The accuracy and use of data were both described as good.

5.13 A report on Cadbury Sixth Form College (October 2005) noted that good use is made of feedback from students in self-assessment. The College was described as using college improvement groups as a catalyst for cross-college quality improvement and the sharing of good practice. Another sixth form college, Loreto College, was judged at Grade 1 for Quality of Provision (March 2006) and was described as using its student council to present learners’ views to the Principal regularly. The use of representative processes was also described in a report on the Liverpool Theatre School and College (November 2005). Feedback to senior management had previously relied on a head boy and head girl but this had been expanded to female and male representatives from each year group whose submissions are considered at course meetings. Ofsted judged Leadership & Management at the school to be Grade 2.
5.14 The report on Guildford School of Acting (November 2005) contained a judgement of Grade 2 for Leadership & Management and included a detailed description of what was judged to be a well developed and effective system for using student feedback to improve provision.

All students are invited to complete well-prepared questionnaires to help them evaluate the effectiveness of their training. An external facilitator then analyses the feedback and meets with each year group of students to discuss the strengths and areas for improvement for each course. The facilitator then writes a series of informative reports for each course, and for the school as a whole, pulling together common themes for discussion and action by the senior management team.

Learners at the school were also involved in discussing the quality of their learning experience through a student council attended by senior staff and there was learner representation on a number of meetings and committees.

5.15 Reports on some 11-18 schools identify effective involvement of learners in discussing issues relating to the school’s physical and pastoral environment, but imply that some schools find it difficult to involve learners in the discussion of teaching and learning. Manor High School (February 2006) was judged at Grade 2 for Leadership & Management and inspectors noted the impact learners’ views had had on the school environment in particular in achieving the ‘Bog Standard’ for the toilets, but the report noted:

Whilst the student council contributed appropriately to issues relating to welfare and guidance, pupils do not have a sufficiently strong voice regarding provision for teaching and learning.

5.16 Student councils are also found in general further education and sixth form colleges, but are less common in work-based learning and adult & community learning. A key recommendation arising from the Foster Review was that the right of learners to be consulted on major issues impacting on their learning should form part of a learner entitlement. In January 2004, Ofsted drew attention to the effective role played by the student council at Chichester College. Every tutor group in the College elects a representative to sit on the student council, which meets twice in the Autumn Term and once in the other two terms. The council elects an executive, appointments of which are staggered to ensure continuity between terms and between academic years. The executive has a core of 20 to 25 learners who meet regularly and which has direct access to the college management and the governing body. The work of the student council at the College is guided by an over-arching Student Voice Policy which is reproduced in Appendix 1.
6. Evidence from the National Survey of Providers

Introduction

6.1 To provide a strong evidence base for the report RCU carried out a structured survey of over 1,500 providers across the learning and skills sector in May and June 2006. The sample for the survey was designed to produce robust sub-samples for further education, work-based learning, adult & community learning and school sixth form provision. The charts in this section generally report separately on the four sub-sections of the learning and skills sector. Different sampling frames were used in each sub-sector, with an aim of generating 100 or more responses in each sub-sector22 based on anticipated response rates.

6.2 Providers were sent a double-sided A3 questionnaire, incorporating an initial explanatory letter, three pages of closed and open questions and a freepost reply envelope. A copy of the questionnaire appears as Appendix 2 at the end of the report. The survey instrument reflected a range of key issues agreed by the LSC’s Learner Satisfaction Technical Group and the questions were pre-tested by some of the providers represented on the group. The sampling frame and response rates are summarised in the table below.

**Provider survey sampling frame and response rates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sampling Frame</th>
<th>Initial sample</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General FE/tertiary colleges</td>
<td>133</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth form college</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist college/other FE provider</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All further education</strong></td>
<td><strong>527</strong></td>
<td><strong>451</strong></td>
<td><strong>221</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group training association</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer work-based learning provider</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other work-based learning provider</td>
<td>118</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All work-based learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>794</strong></td>
<td><strong>529</strong></td>
<td><strong>155</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authority adult community learning</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other adult community learning</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All adult community learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>229</strong></td>
<td><strong>229</strong></td>
<td><strong>64</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School with sixth form</td>
<td>1,782</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RCU Market Research Service records.

6.3 Questionnaires were despatched to all general FE/tertiary, specialist23 and sixth form colleges and a sample of other further education providers24 selected at random within LSC regions. Questionnaires were also sent to all local authority and voluntary sector adult & community learning providers (excluding FE colleges providing adult & community learning).

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22 With the exception of adult & community learning, where there were only 229 providers in the initial sampling frame, all of which were sent a questionnaire.

23 For example land-based colleges and colleges of art & design.

24 For example specialist colleges for learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties.
6.4 Work-based learning providers and school sixth forms were selected at random within LSC regional groupings to generate agreed sample sizes. In addition a random selection of nationally-contracted work-based learning providers was included with the sample proportion boosted to reflect their contribution to overall work-based learning volumes. College providers of work-based learning were excluded if they had already been included in the further education survey. Following guidance from the Schools Sub-Committee of the LSC Learner Satisfaction sub-group, special schools were excluded from the general survey. Instead they were sent a customised survey form based around more open questions.25

6.5 The overall response rate of 36% (545 responses out of 1,509) is relatively high for a postal survey of this kind. Almost half the further education providers responded, compared with over a third of schools and slightly lower response rates in work-based learning and adult & community learning. The database sub-sections available to compile the survey contained only limited information on the precise characteristics of providers and as a result the questionnaire established more detail about respondents’ provider type. The results are summarised in the chart below. Due to the relatively small number of respondents in some of these sub-categories, subsequent charts are grouped according to the larger aggregations.

*Best description of respondent organisations*

![Pie chart showing the distribution of respondent organisations.](chart.png)

**Base = 545**

Source: Q1 survey questionnaire.

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25 See Section 7 and Appendix 3.
Methods Used to Gather Learner Views

6.6 Respondents were asked to consider a range of possible approaches that could be used to gather evidence of learner views. The range of options combined largely quantitative techniques (such as self-completion questionnaires) with more qualitative approaches (such as focus groups and individual interviews). Respondents were asked to indicate, for each possible approach, whether they used the method consistently or regularly, occasionally or not at all. These responses are represented by the red, fawn and grey portions of the bars in the chart below.

Most common approaches used to gather learners’ views

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Used consistently or regularly</th>
<th>Used occasionally</th>
<th>Not used/no reply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written questionnaires completed at a set time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal monitoring of complaints</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff feedback on learner views</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner representatives (e.g. student councils)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner suggestion boxes or ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written questionnaires completed in learners’ own time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups or discussions on specific issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner forums or consultation sessions open to all learners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual face-to-face interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-line self-completion questionnaires</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet forums or on-line discussion groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base = 545

Source: Q2 survey questionnaire.

6.7 **Written questionnaires completed at a set time** (for example in tutorials or teaching sessions) were used by almost all providers. Usage in schools was much lower (see next page), while the few college exceptions tended to rely on on-line questionnaires. 9 out of 10 respondents carried out **formal monitoring of complaints** although later analysis reveals this to be inconsistent across the different sub-sectors. **Staff feedback on learner views** was the third most frequently used method, but follow-up interviews indicated that this was rarely a formal or co-ordinated method and was more likely to be based on staff interpretations of views expressed by learners in progress interviews or tutorial discussions.

6.8 Less than 1 in 10 of the providers used **telephone interviews**, despite the fact that this is the core method within the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS). Usage was more frequent in work-based learning, especially to monitor the satisfaction of learners in the workplace, while in FE the technique was mainly used to contact non-completers.
6.9 The LSC’s Research Tools website provides guidance and conversion figures, derived from the NLSS, to compare results derived from written and telephone survey methods but none of the providers interviewed in the survey follow-up had used this technique.

6.10 The combination of techniques used by providers to gather evidence of learner views differed in different parts of the learning and skills sector. The chart below shows the variation in responses relating to the use of written questionnaires at a set time. This practice is most common in FE colleges and sixth form colleges, but less than half of the schools responding to the survey used written questionnaires regularly or consistently.

**Proportion of different provider types using written questionnaires at a set time**

![Proportion of different provider types using written questionnaires at a set time](chart)

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms.
Source: Q2 survey questionnaire.

6.11 Although the schools with a sixth form that were included in the sampling frame for the research were selected at random within broad geographical areas it is reasonable to assume that schools with more advanced systems for monitoring learner views would have been more likely to reply. The use of questionnaires may, therefore, be even less embedded in school sixth forms than the chart suggests. If the LSC maintains its commitment to extend the NLSS to include sixth forms, and to encourage them to benchmark against the survey findings, schools are likely to need substantial guidance and support.
6.12 Section 5 of this report included extracts from Ofsted reports relating to the use of learner representatives (for example student councils) in schools and other providers. The chart below confirms that this is a more common practice in schools than the use of written questionnaires, although FE colleges and sixth form colleges are again more likely to use this approach. The Ofsted extracts indicated that student councils and representative structures in some schools do not address issues of teaching and learning, concentrating instead on environmental and pastoral issues. While undoubtedly important, learner views on these issues will not guarantee improvement in the overall quality of learners’ experiences. It is interesting to note how rare formal learner representative structures are in work-based learning or in adult & community learning. In the latter case this is likely to reflect more physically dispersed learner bodies and the largely part-time nature of provision.

Proportion of different provider types using learner representative structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner Representatives</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>90%</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE Colleges (Including specialist providers)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sixth Form Colleges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WBL Providers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACL Providers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School with a Sixth Form</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms.
Source: Q2 survey questionnaire.
6.13 The chart below shows the proportion of each type of provider using learner forums or consultative events open to all learners. This practice is less common than the use of learner representatives but forums are used at least occasionally by more than two-thirds of FE colleges and more than half the sixth form colleges, work-based learning providers and adult & community learning providers. School sixth forms are again less likely to use this approach.

Proportion of different provider types using learner forums

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms.
Source: Q2 survey questionnaire.

6.14 Some of the school sixth forms attending the provider seminars that followed the survey expressed concern at the impact that representative structures and learner forums for sixth form pupils might set a precedent that would be difficult to apply lower down the school. However, others had successfully used learner forums and class representatives with younger pupils or had used sixth form pupils in advocacy roles to express the views of younger learners.
6.15 The next chart examines the use of *focus groups or discussions on specific issues* to gather learner views. More than 90% of FE colleges and sixth form colleges and just under three-quarters of adult & community learning providers and school sixth forms use this approach at least *occasionally*. Work-based learning providers are less likely to use this approach. The main use of focus groups is on an ad hoc basis, to gain quick information on a topical issue. The provider seminars and follow-up interviews also produced examples of providers making effective use of *focus groups* both before and after written surveys.

6.16 *Focus groups* can be very effective before written surveys to ensure that the survey is covering the right issues and using terminology that will make sense to learners. One of the major concerns providers expressed in the seminars with the NLSS core questions and off-the-peg surveys offered by commercial data analysis companies is that local learning contexts are not taken into account. *Focus groups* can also be very effective after written surveys to probe why learners had responded in particular ways or to test the depth of feeling on issues raised by a few learners in response to open questions. Some providers have had success using independent third parties to conduct focus groups, while others used internal staff with roles perceived as neutral (for example marketing or quality managers or learner counsellors). Others had trained learner representatives to carry out the role or had a policy of using senior staff to ensure they understood learner perspectives.

### Proportion of different provider types using focus groups or themed discussions

![Bar chart showing the proportion of different provider types using focus groups or themed discussions](chart.png)

*Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms.*

*Source: Q2 survey questionnaire.*
6.17 Direct interviews with learners, either face-to-face or by telephone were relatively rare as the two charts below indicate. Both were more commonly used in work-based learning than in other parts of the sector, as part of required routine monitoring procedures. Face-to-face interviews were also slightly more common in school sixth forms, although this appeared mainly to relate to the by-product of individual tutorials where the main focus of discussions was individual progress.

Proportion of different provider types using face-to-face or telephone interviews

Face to Face Interviews

Telephone Interviews

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms.
Source: Q2 survey questionnaire.
6.18 Providers were invited to identify on the questionnaire any other approaches they had used that had proved particularly effective. Many were minor variations or explanations of the options already included in the question but others appear to be useful examples of innovation:

- Mobile phone text messaging.
- Candidate interviews at assessor review visits.
- On-line suggestions, compliments and complaints forum.
- E-feedback through the use of voting pads.
- Regular meetings with students and governors.
- Feedback from external teaching and learning observations.
- We have used whole college consultation days for staff and students together.
- Feedback from parents and other key stakeholders.
- Learner group feedback forums externally facilitated.
- Individual learner mentors.
- Open door policy to training manager and CEO.
- Learner shadowing and learner representation.
- Student opinion polls, using touch-screen technology.
- Snapshot questionnaires.
- Feedback via employers.
- Diaries, tutorials and minuted weekly meetings.
- Informal feedback.
- Annual student conference.
- Learner newsletters.
- Tear out reply slips in learner hand books.
- Learner ‘flight deck’ that learners control.
- We use specialist communication aids.
- Lesson observers ask learners directly during lessons.
- Annual learner conference and student union magazine.
- Mystery shopping.
- Specialist cross-college forums.
Provider Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Current Approaches

6.19 Question 3 of the survey asked providers to comment on the effectiveness of the methods they had used to gather learner views. As a result, the chart below excludes providers that had not used a particular method with the exception of the last question, which related to approaches they would like to use more often. This means that the base varies from bar to bar and this is shown by the figure in brackets in the key after each method.

6.20 Providers were able to cite more than one method in response to any particular prompt but were not required to comment on each method they used under each heading. For example, 54% of the providers that use learner forums chose to include this method as an example of an approach that produces reliable evidence. This does not imply that the remaining 46% consider the approach to be unreliable, but merely that it may not strike them as being especially reliable compared to other methods they use. The key value in the chart lies in the relative ratings for each method rather than their absolute score in response to a particular prompt.

Perceived effectiveness of current methods

![Chart showing provider perceptions of the effectiveness of current methods.]

Base figures as shown in the key.
Source: Q3 survey questionnaire.
6.21 Providers’ perceptions of approaches that gave the most reliable evidence of learners’ views included three relatively formal methods of communication, namely written questionnaires at a set time, face to face interviews (principally used in work-based learning) and on-line self-completion questionnaires. However, providers who used learner forums also considered these to produce relatively reliable indications of learner views.

6.22 The high reliability rating given to on-line self-completion questionnaires is particularly interesting as they are currently used by less than a quarter of providers. Some providers contributing to the provider seminars and follow-up interviews described initial concerns over on-line questionnaires due to the anonymous nature of responses and lack of control over response rates. These continue to worry some providers using the approach, but others described an improvement in the quality of responses to open comments and less clustering around neutral response options.

6.23 Few of the providers using formal monitoring of complaints, intranet/on-line forums and suggestion boxes considered them to have relatively high reliability. However it was interesting to note in follow-up discussions that imaginative alternatives to suggestion boxes such as graffiti walls and post-it posters were providing valuable and immediate feedback for some providers.
6.24 Despite generating a relatively low response for reliability, formal monitoring of complaints was one of five approaches seen by providers to have a big impact on quality. This is not contradictory as the degree of formality with which providers treat complaints mean learners often use them only for major (and sometimes highly personalised) issues. When a complaints process is triggered it does tend to have a significant impact.

6.25 Providers’ assessment of methods that were most likely to trigger action closely matched those felt to have a big impact on quality. Formal monitoring of complaints and written questionnaires at a set time had the highest ratings.

Provider Example 2

In addition to using written questionnaires, Manchester Adult Education Service adopted a new approach to gathering learner feedback prior to inspection. Three posters were put up in a main thoroughfare at each of their fourteen centres. The posters asked:

1. What do we do well?
2. Where do we need to improve?
3. What would you be interested in doing in future?

Post-it notes and pens were left out so that passers-by could jot down their ideas and stick them to the poster. The approach worked well. It acted as a sort of brainstorming board. Comments posted by one person served to trigger a response in another. Tutors and Centre staff were also able to see the feedback, making the approach very direct and transparent. This enabled staff to quickly pick up and sort anything in their area, so the posters generated some quick fixes and early wins as well as other points needing more detailed consideration.

Administrative staff subsequently typed up the comments and stuck them to the boards. The snap-shot survey is followed up by posting ‘you said / we did’ feedback in the Centres.

Contact: Helen Bacon, Manchester AES h.bacon@manchester.gov.uk

Provider Example 3

Park Lane College collects complaints centrally. These are logged and investigated by the Quality Manager as an independent person. Reports on complaints received, their outcomes and performance in resolving complaints go to the Senior Management Team monthly and to governors termly. Complaints are analysed in a number of ways, for example by course, course type and learner characteristics and links can be made to the outcomes of other surveys.

Contact: Carolyn McDermott, Park Lane College c.mcdermott@parklanecoll.ac.uk
6.26 Written questionnaires and staff feedback on learners’ views were also viewed by providers as having a big impact on quality. Follow-up discussions with providers indicated that staff feedback and the outcomes of individual face-to-face interviews often came from formal progress reviews and individual tutorials, where learner views emerge but are not necessarily the primary focus of discussions. In both cases the channel of communication back to the provider involves a degree of interpretation by a member of staff. Very few providers appear to use independent third parties to interview learners, although general feedback does come from confidential discussions with counselling and learner support staff. Interestingly a relatively high proportion of providers using focus groups view them as having a big impact on quality. In contrast, telephone interviews had a lower response from providers, possibly because these often have to be brief and learners may be less relaxed and forthcoming than in a well-run discussion group.

Provider Example 4

Work-based learning provider The Joint Learning Partnership (JLP) sees each learner every fortnight in a face-to-face interview. At one stage JLP considered reducing the frequency of visits to learners but feedback showed people liked the regular contact so this has been retained. The fortnightly visits are thought to contribute to the company’s good Success Rates and increases in whole Framework achievement. JLP also has a ‘Cause for Concern’ form which is used after a fortnightly review if any issue has emerged which needs to be flagged. The issue, whether course-related or personal, is referred to the WBL Manager. Additionally there are 6-monthly surveys of the 350 candidates and their employers, usually carried out by phone. Satisfaction levels recorded via simple questionnaires were said to be high. The individual reviews and telephone interviews were said to be invaluable in order to obtain pointers about the scope for improvement.

Contact: Bryan Marshall, Joint Learning Partnership Ltd. bryan.marshall@jointlearning.co.uk
6.27 Intranet/on-line forums are not viewed by providers as having a big impact on quality and a relatively high proportion of the providers that have tried this approach found it proved not to be very effective. This was also true for suggestion boxes, on-line self completion questionnaires and questionnaires completed in learners’ own time. The last two of these had resulted in low response rates for some providers and concerns about imbalance in the pattern of responses. Follow-up interviews produced mixed messages concerning on-line self completion questionnaires. Some providers spoke favourably about the immediacy of replies (and potentially feedback to learners) and the ability to test topical issues at short notice, but others felt that response rates had dropped greatly among adult learners and learners with certain learning difficulties. Where providers were willing to comment on on-line response rates the figures were much lower than for written questionnaires completed in controlled situations.

6.28 Providers’ perceptions of learners’ attitudes to the various methods are potentially significant. They identified individual face-to-face interviews, learner forums, focus groups and learner representative structures/student councils as the approaches most valued by learners. All of these involve direct and, for the most part, loosely structured dialogue between providers and learners in a way that allows learners to raise the issues that matter most to them in their own words. In contrast providers believe learners place less value on structured questionnaires, irrespective of how they are administered. Discussions at the provider seminars described fears that learners were growing less tolerant of the constraints placed on their responses by standard questionnaires. For many providers there were significant delays between the completion of questionnaires and feedback to learners and this could also add to a lack of motivation for future questionnaires.

Provider Example 5

Every year for the past four years, the College of North East London has held a Learner Conference, attended by about 60 learners, who are course representatives. The session lasts a morning and is facilitated by an external ‘motivator’ skilled at getting the delegates relaxed and focussed quickly. The conference is video taped and the outcomes of the discussions passed to SMT and acted upon during the following year. One issue raised and acted on was the need for medical advice which led to the appointment of a Health Adviser to run campaigns on health and healthy living. Another example was a suggestion from the Conference to involve Security Staff in learners’ induction. There had been some misunderstandings about the role of the Security Staff and this had led to pockets of antagonism at the start of term. Delegates had suggested introducing Security Staff at induction would help explain the issues and help with perceptions of Security Staff if they needed to intervene. The suggestion was taken up.

Contact: Mary Massingham, College of North East London mmassingham@staff.conel.ac.uk

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26 The research brief did not include the gathering of views from learners directly, although providers’ views mirror recent NUS statements on the importance of qualitative measures and direct dialogue between providers and learners.
6.29 *Individual face-to-face interviews, learner forums* and *focus groups* all featured relatively strongly among approaches which providers would like to use more. The barriers to doing so, revealed by the provider seminars and follow-up interviews, related to a combination of time factors, lack of the skills necessary to run qualitative sessions effectively and concern that open discussions could lead to more *messy* and *contradictory* messages than those emerging from quantitative approaches.

6.30 Interestingly, a relatively high proportion of providers expressed interest in increasing their use of *on-line self completion questionnaires*. The responses of providers currently using these approaches indicate that there are potential advantages to be gained from such an approach, but that it will need to be balanced by other channels for learner views, particular from groups of learners who lack confidence with computer-based communication.

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**Provider Example 6**

**North Devon College** uses on-screen questionnaires as one of its main sources of learner feedback, supported by qualitative approaches such as learner forums and focus groups. The questionnaires are supported by freely-downloaded software as part of the College’s virtual learning environment (VLE) although the College did incur development costs in adapting this.

Questionnaires are themed for different stages of the year, for example post-induction and on-course elements. When the approach was first introduced there were some problems with flippant responses, but this has been tackled by supporting the questionnaires with statements confirming their importance and influence. Some of the questions can be mapped against those used in the National Learner Satisfaction Survey, but the College felt a need to adapt the wording in some cases. The College hopes to involve learners in the question design in future. Learners are free to complete the questionnaires as they use the VLE, but to encourage response some tutors schedule groups into the learning resource centre and discuss satisfaction issues within tutorial time.

The College monitors responses by different learner groups against known learner volumes and gives direct encouragement to boost response rates where required. Results are monitored at a College-wide level and are also supplied separately to the 18 College Sections to support course review. Where there are identified issues Section Leaders arrange learner focus groups to probe the causes. The College uses plasma screens to feed results and actions back to learners. The evidence also helps inform learner forums, which have representatives from each full-time tutor group.

**Contact:** John Laramy, North Devon College jlaramy@ndevon.ac.uk
6.31 The responses to Question 3 on the questionnaire are potentially very significant for the LSC and its New Measures partners. Providers are increasingly trying to make the process by which they gather evidence of learner views more sophisticated, balancing qualitative and quantitative evidence and trying to encourage continuous dialogue with learners. The responses indicate that providers wish to extend their use of qualitative methods and feel that these approaches are valued highly by learners. Providers attending the seminars expressed concern that a requirement to benchmark against the NLSS would lead to undue concentration on quantitative methods and written questionnaires.

6.32 Appendix 1 contains an example, from Chichester College, of a formal policy on learner views that stresses the variety of channels through which learner views can be communicated. Overall, around three-quarters of providers said, in response to Question 4, that they had a formal strategy or policy for gathering/using views. Follow-up interviews indicate that this forms part of student charters or learner entitlements for many providers but that specific policies like the Chichester College approach are relatively rare.

6.33 Question 5 asked providers to comment on a range of prompts relating to the effectiveness with which learner views are gathered and used to raise quality. The results are set out in the chart below. Not surprisingly, very few providers expressed disagreement with the prompts and the most interesting feature is the variation in the degrees of confidence providers had in their agreement with the different prompts.

Responses to a series of prompts regarding the effectiveness of provider processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral/No reply</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner views are a major influence on our provision for post-16s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A very high proportion of learners contribute their views in some way</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We get accurate information on the issues that matter to learners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident that learners are able to give their views openly and honestly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff respond positively to issues raised by learners even if the issues are difficult</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We tell learners directly what issues they have raised and how we will respond to them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our approaches to gathering learner views are successful in engaging learner interest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base = 545
Source: Q5 survey questionnaire.
6.34 Providers had most confidence in the ability of learners to give their views openly and honestly and in the impact such views have on provision for post-16 learners. Around 30% of providers agreed strongly that a very high proportion of learners contribute their views in some way while another 50% agreed. However, 1 provider in 10 disagreed with the statement and a similar proportion were unsure. For some providers this was a product of size, which required the use of sampling techniques if written questionnaires were used and there was also disagreement among some providers using on-line techniques.

6.35 Although overall responses are broadly positive, the three prompts relating to learner engagement in the process generated more hesitancy among the providers. A quarter of providers felt unable to agree that they gained accurate information on the issues that matter most to learners and more than 40% failed to agree with the prompt that their approaches were successful in engaging learners’ interest. Around 30% of respondents did not agree that they fed the results of consultations back to learners effectively. These responses indicate an important need to share effective practice.

6.36 School sixth forms and Adult & Community Learning providers were slightly less convinced than other providers that learner views were a major influence on provision for post-16s. Only 22% were fully convinced of this compared to 52% of sixth form colleges, but 80% of school sixth forms expressed at least some level of agreement with the statement.

6.37 Sixth form colleges were also most likely to be convinced that a very high proportion of learners contribute their views in some way and that they got accurate information on the issues that matter to learners. This is likely to reflect a combination of institution size, the relatively high proportion of full-time learners in sixth form colleges and the relative homogeneity of learning programmes compared, for example, to general FE colleges.

6.38 There was no statistically significant pattern to responses regarding confidence that learners could give their views openly and honestly. However the rating for staff responsiveness to learner views produced clear distinctions and these are shown in the chart on the following page. Almost a third of work-based learning providers agreed strongly with the statement that staff respond positively to issues raised by learners even if the issues are difficult and a further 60% agreed. Adult & Community learning providers also had a relatively high level of confidence in this aspect and follow-up interviews indicate that this is felt by ACL providers to reflect a particularly strong staff commitment to learners. School sixth forms again have the lowest level of confidence that staff respond positively to issues raised by learners even if the issues are difficult and this suggests that the culture of responding to learner views is less embedded in the schools sector.
6.39 There was no strong statistical pattern to responses regarding feedback to learners, with disagreement levels running at 6%-10% in the different sub-sectors. Interestingly, responses of neutral/unsure were quite high. The proportion of respondents unable to say whether their organisation would normally tell learners directly what issues they have raised and how the institution will respond was almost 30% in adult & community learning provision and more than a quarter in sixth form colleges.

6.40 Work-based learning providers had the highest levels of agreement with the statement our approaches to gathering learner views are successful in engaging learner interest. Almost 80% responded positively to the prompt and follow-up discussions indicated that the key was often seen as the inclusion of both off-the-job and workplace experiences in the process. Responses of neutral/unsure were higher for this question than any of the others. More than half the sixth form colleges and 42% of general FE colleges and school sixth forms do not know whether or not the approaches they are taking engage learner interest. An effective system for gathering and using learner views will include learners in evaluating current processes as well as identifying their views on provision.
Potential Support from the LSC

6.41 Questions 6 – 9 of the questionnaire asked providers about their current and potential use of the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS) and the LSC’s research tools website. The chart below shows the responses to Question 6, which asked if providers compare their internal results to the NLSS. School sixth form learners do not at present form part of the NLSS cohort but adult & community learners have been added in recent years.

How organisations compare the results of learner surveys to the NLSS

[Diagram showing the comparison of results across different types of providers]

6.42 Around 1 in 5 work-based learning providers and a quarter of adult & community learning providers are unaware of the NLSS and a small additional group believe that it is not relevant to their learners. Awareness and usage levels are highest in FE colleges, but even among colleges only half currently make any form of comparison between their own surveys and the NLSS. These results show that any future requirement on providers to use core questions and benchmark against them will take most providers into new territory. Clear communication of the reason why change is needed and a high level of support are likely to be required.

6.43 Questions 7 and 8 asked providers to comment on possible developments the LSC might introduce and the results were overwhelmingly positive. Overall more than 86% of providers would definitely or probably consider using NLSS core questions to benchmark
against their own results.\(^{27}\) The chart below shows how this broke down by sub-sector. In all parts of the sector a clear majority of providers are willing to at least consider this approach. Follow-up discussions with providers indicated that the concerns of sixth form colleges and schools with sixth forms derived from unfamiliarity with the NLSS and concerns that benchmarks might lump them in with different types of provider.

**Whether providers would benchmark internal results against NLSS core questions**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of providers willing to benchmark internal results against NLSS core questions across different sub-sectors.](chart.png)

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms. 
Source: Q7 survey questionnaire.

6.44 The results suggest that the LSC will encounter a positive response to the proposals, if the changes are seen to be driven by a wish to provide better evidence to feed into providers’ quality assurance systems. Discussions with providers at the regional seminars indicated that this support will be more fragile if the emphasis is on publishing results externally and making external judgements of providers’ relative merits.

\(^{27}\) Strictly the LSC will be feeding back averages than benchmarks, since the NLSS does not produce institution-level data. These averages are likely to relate to sub-sectors of the provider base.
6.45 The responses to a later question in the questionnaire, Question 15, indicate that there is likely to be general agreement on the sort of issues that should be covered by core questions. The table below shows the extent to which six key themes are already covered in providers’ arrangements for monitoring learners’ views.

**Coverage of different core aspects in providers’ monitoring arrangements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coverage of Various Aspects of Learners’ Views</th>
<th>FE Colleges (including specialist providers)</th>
<th>Sixth Form Colleges</th>
<th>WBL Providers</th>
<th>ACL Providers</th>
<th>Schools with a Sixth Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction with the learning experience</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>98.1%</td>
<td>98.4%</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner satisfaction with their progress</td>
<td>90.4%</td>
<td>84.1%</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
<td>89.1%</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with equipment and resources</td>
<td>97.2%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td>87.7%</td>
<td>97.3%</td>
<td>63.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with the quality of teaching/learning</td>
<td>98.3%</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>96.8%</td>
<td>96.9%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction that learners’ needs have been met</td>
<td>91.5%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td>93.8%</td>
<td>69.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrangements to ensure equality and diversity</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
<td>87.7%</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms. Source Q15 survey questionnaire.

6.46 Almost all providers monitor *overall satisfaction with the learning experience* and a very high proportion monitor satisfaction with *the quality of teaching and learning*. However, around 1 in 8 school sixth forms exclude *teaching and learning* from their monitoring arrangements. School sixth forms appear generally to have more limited coverage in their arrangements to gather and use learner views. Less than a third monitor learner’s satisfaction with *equipment and resources* and around a quarter do not obtain evidence on *learners’ satisfaction with their progress*.

6.47 There is lower coverage, across all parts of the sector, for *arrangements to ensure equality and diversity*. It can be difficult to phrase direct questions on these issues that appear relevant to individual respondents and many providers use disaggregation of survey responses rather than specific questions to gather evidence on equality and diversity.
6.48 The chart below shows the response to Question 8, which asked providers how useful they would find the development of standards on how learner views are gathered and how they might be used to feed back into quality. Providers attending the regional seminars tended to take the view that they would suspend judgement until they saw the details of the proposed standards. Those from work-based learning and school sixth forms were particularly keen to know whether the proposed standards would be flexible enough to reflect their circumstances.

Potential usefulness of standards that could be used by providers to benchmark their processes

![Bar chart showing the response to Question 8, comparing FE Colleges (Including specialist providers), Sixth Form Colleges, WBL Providers, ACL Providers, and School with a Sixth Form.]

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms.
Source: Q8 survey questionnaire.

6.49 There appears to be a correlation between confidence with current methods and likely response to national standards. Sixth form colleges, in particular, tended to be more satisfied with their current approaches and appear more lukewarm to the offer of guidance from outside.
6.50 The support providers will require in order to adjust to core questions and national standards will have to be direct and accessible. The responses to Question 9 indicate that the research tools website has not succeeded in impacting positively on providers.

Use of the research tools website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>90%</th>
<th>100%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
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<tr>
<td>FE Colleges (Including specialist providers)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sixth Form Colleges</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>WBL Providers</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ACL Providers</td>
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<tr>
<td>School with a Sixth Form</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Yes, we use this and it is useful
- We use this but it is not very useful
- We've looked at this but don't think it is relevant
- We're aware of this but haven't looked at it
- No reply
- We are not aware of this facility

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms.
Source: Q9 survey questionnaire.
Use of Outside Agencies

6.51 Some providers use outside agencies, although the survey results indicate that such usage is less than had been previously thought by the LSC. Overall just under two thirds of FE colleges use an external agency for at least part of the process of gathering learner views, but the figure is much lower in other parts of the sector. The second chart shows the number of providers, as a proportion of all respondents, using external agencies for particular types of support. Providers could tick more than one box and as a result the bars add up to more than the 48% that use external agencies. Where agencies are used this is mainly for questionnaire design, benchmarking and administration/confidentiality support. For the most part agencies are not involved with the translation of survey results into action. Different external agencies appeared to dominate the market in each sub-sector.

Proportion of providers using an external agency and uses made

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms.
Source: Q10 survey questionnaire.
Approaches with Particular Groups of Learners

6.52 The standards being developed by the LSC and its partners will need to ensure consistency in the planned coverage of formal surveys of learners’ views. For example, the NLSS sample is drawn from all learners enrolled at the initial census point of its constituent datasets and, as a result, includes learners who have left the provider by the time the survey takes place. Furthermore, the main contact is by telephone and several attempts are made to contact each learner, including calls at different times of the day. The charts below show huge variations between different sub-sectors (and similar providers) in the scope of surveys.

6.53 The earlier analysis of responses to Question 2 indicated that some providers are using methods that involve a considerable degree of self-selection, for example on-line self-completion questionnaires and written questionnaires completed in learners’ own time. Both of these methods are likely to produce lower response rates from some groups of learners. There is also inconsistency in the extent to which providers make arrangements to gather the views of absent learners and non-completers. Where approaches vary, or conflict with the approach taken in the NLSS, this could undermine the validity of benchmarking.

Proportion of providers including the views of absent learners and non-completers

![Chart showing the proportion of providers including the views of absent learners and non-completers.](chart.png)
6.54 Question 14 explored the monitoring of the views of learners aged 14-16 in institutions that mainly cater for learners over the age of 16. There are two main reasons for giving these learners separate consideration. The first relates to the ethics of questioning young people on issues that could be sensitive or might expose them to risk of retribution. The Market Research Society Code of Conduct defines children as young people under the age of 16, although some of the conditions of the code (and of child protection legislation) also apply to vulnerable adults such as learners with learning difficulties. The MRS Code also provides guidelines for research with young people aged 16 and 17. The main limitations are the requirement to obtain permission from a parent or authority in loco parentis, the right of young people to refuse to take part and an obligation not to gather any personal information other than for the purposes of informing a parent or responsible adult.

6.55 The second consideration when researching the views of under-16s relates to the collaborative nature of such provision. Local partnerships are currently developing the arrangements that will allow the Government’s 14-19 Learner Entitlement to be delivered in local areas and this will increasingly mean young people will learn in more than one institution from Key Stage 4 onwards. It will be important for consistency and inter-provider communication to ensure that learners are able to give their views on their overall learning programme. The chart below indicates that only 1 in 5 providers with learners under the age of 16 currently make special arrangements to gather their views.

**Inclusion of 14-16 year-olds (not applicable filtered out)**

- 53% We include these learners in our normal arrangements
- 16% Don’t monitor their views formally
- 10% We make special arrangements
- 21% Gathered by a partner institution
- 10% Don’t monitor their views formally
- 53% We include these learners in our normal arrangements
- 21% Gathered by a partner institution

Base = 152.
Source: Q14 survey questionnaire.

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28 The responses of schools with sixth forms were not included in the analysis and most sixth form colleges and adult & community learning providers had no relevant learners.
29 Conducting research with children and young people, MRS, March 2006 (www.mrs.org.uk/standards/children.htm)
6.56 Question 13 in the questionnaire asked providers about any special arrangements they made to ensure that certain groups of learners who might find it difficult to contribute their views could do so. It is likely that the LSC’s proposed standards for gathering and using learner views will need to pay special attention to groups of learners who might find it difficult to make their voice heard in standard approaches.

6.57 The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 200130 place a requirement on institutions to make reasonable arrangements to meet the needs of learners, including anticipating the needs of future learners where these vary from the needs of the current body of learners. There is a requirement for institutions to make key documents and materials accessible to all learners and this could be interpreted to include materials designed to gather learner views. A number of organisations have produced specific guidance to providers on the implications of the legislation, including Skill: the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities.31

6.58 In the light of the requirement to anticipate learners’ needs, where this is reasonable and practical, many providers will need clear guidance on effective ways to ensure that the views of potentially vulnerable learners can be taken into account. Section 4 of the report noted, these arrangements will need to ensure that learners’ views are being gathered independently from the staff responsible for delivering or supporting their learning. The responses to Question 13 indicated that a large number of providers, especially in school sixth forms, believe that they do not currently have experience of some potentially vulnerable groups. The proportions in each sub-sector stating that they had no learners in the groups covered by Question 13 are set out below. Some of the figures give cause for concern, for example it is difficult to understand why ten times as many school sixth forms as sixth form colleges should have no dyslexic learners or why so few work-based learning providers or school sixth forms should have no experience of learners with mental ill-health.

### Proportion of providers stating that they had no learners in particular categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>FE Colleges (incl. specialist providers)</th>
<th>Sixth Form Colleges</th>
<th>WBL Providers</th>
<th>ACL Providers</th>
<th>School with a Sixth Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learners with visual impairment</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with hearing impairment</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with other restrictive disabilities</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>67.1%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>75.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with dyslexia</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with low level literacy skills</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with learning difficulties</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with learning disabilities</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>70.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with mental health issues</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners whose first language is not English</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>65.1%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 221 FE, 155 WBL, 64 ACL & 105 school sixth forms.
Source: Q13 survey questionnaire.

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30 Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 Chapter 10/2 Further and Higher Education.
6.59 If providers felt their current learner body did include learners with the characteristics listed in Question 13 they were asked to identify whether or not they made any special arrangements to ensure that they could contribute their views. The results are set out in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners with learning disabilities (348)</th>
<th>Learners with learning difficulties (380)</th>
<th>Learners with low level literacy skills (402)</th>
<th>Learners with visual impairment (304)</th>
<th>Learners with other restrictive disabilities (316)</th>
<th>Learners with hearing impairment (329)</th>
<th>Learners whose first language is not English (340)</th>
<th>Learners with dyslexia (464)</th>
<th>Learners with mental health issues (277)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We make special arrangements for these learners</td>
<td>We have learners in this category but make no special arrangements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base varies with each group of learners as shown by the figure in brackets. Source: Q13 survey questionnaire.

6.60 Providers are most likely to make special arrangements for learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. Many providers also make arrangements for learners with low literacy skills (for example testing the reading age of written prompts and adapting them accordingly) although 1 in 5 providers with such learners make no special arrangements for them. Some providers may need guidance on the use of adaptive technology to ensure that approaches taken to gathering learner views are accessible for visually impaired learners or learners with restrictive disabilities. This will be particularly important to ensure that the staff who work closely with these learners are not placed in the difficult position of having to interpret questions or responses that relate to their own performance. This will also apply to learners who would find it easiest to communicate in a language other than English, for example users of British Sign Language or speakers of languages other than English (ESOL).
6.61 More than a third of providers with learners who have mental health issues make no special arrangements for them. Circumstances vary enormously for such learners but providers may need to give careful consideration to the possible effects of medication and the cyclical nature of some mental illnesses on responses and on the possible need for special arrangements to convince learners that their responses will be treated confidentially.
National Survey of Post-16 Learning Providers: Gathering and Using Learner Views in LSC-Funded Provision
RCU ref. 06.044
September 2006
7. Evidence from a National Consultation with Special Schools

Introduction

7.1 The Schools Sub-Committee of the Technical Group advising the LSC on Learner Satisfaction issues recommended a direct consultation with special schools. The committee concluded that special schools would be less likely to reply to a general questionnaire aimed at the whole post-16 sector than a tailored consultation on one or two key issues. The committee also stressed the very limited management capacity in many special schools and the low level of engagement with the LSC.

7.2 This advice led to the design of a short consultation document allowing special school heads to respond to four broad and open questions regarding the main methods they used to gather the views of learners aged over 16. The sample for the consultation was drawn from a list of special schools supplied by the DfES. The spread of ages in special schools can alter from year to year according to the progression needs of particular young people and the DfES identified the oldest learners at the start of academic year 2005/06. 430 special schools had an upper age limit of 18 or 19 and a sample of 371 to receive a brief covering letter and four open questions was selected by omitting schools with very low pupil numbers.

7.3 The response rate to the consultation is likely to have been reduced by the timing, since a detailed list of relevant special schools was only obtained towards the end of the summer term of 2006, and there was no expectation that the survey would produce quantitative indicators. In the event, 36 responses were received, giving a flavour of the approaches taken in the special school sector.

Main Methods Used to Gather the Views of Learners Aged 16 and Over

7.4 The schools described a combination of approaches that broadly matched those taken elsewhere in the post-16 sector, but with a strong emphasis on personalisation and adaptation to meet individual learner needs. Some special schools are using written questionnaires (for pupils, parents and staff in some cases) but these are made relevant to particular groups or individuals, through the use of appropriate language and/or symbols. One school commented that the use of a formal questionnaire with symbols was not very satisfactory but we’ve made a start. One school referred to a written questionnaire that was completed at home as a joint input from learners and parents/carers. Another school took a similar approach but was concerned that the responses mainly reflected parental views.
7.5 Staff/learner relationships in special schools are extremely close due to the small size of most schools, the relatively high staff to learner ratios and the nature of learners’ support needs. As a result, information on learner views is picked up on a daily basis and responses can be equally rapid. Feedback can be direct but observation and interpretation of learner reactions is also seen as important. One school referred to the close knowledge of both learners and their families, resulting in continuous dialogue. Another referred to daily discussions in an informal dining area where staff and learners mixed.

7.6 Special schools typically review the progress of individual learners on a regular and case-by-case basis and these discussions can involve learners, parents/carers, staff from other support agencies and specialist Connexions advisers. In most schools learners are working to individual learning plans, negotiated and reviewed at a personal level. These regular reviews are typically backed up by termly or annual reviews involving parents/carers and other stakeholders.

7.7 Most of the schools that responded to the consultation had developed school councils (covering all age groups, in some cases from 2 to 19) and representative structures. Schools referred to representative structures on issues such as healthy eating, health & safety and school improvement. One school described a school council that met half-termly to discuss school improvement issues informed by a head boy and head girl (both over 16) who were supported in gathering the views of younger pupils. Other schools were using formal advocacy programmes (including independent advocates/mentors in some cases) and youth parliament structures to encourage learner feedback.

7.8 The special schools responding to the survey were keen to stress that the gathering of learner views was not a one-off exercise, but resulted from a culture of continuous dialogue that was tightly linked to the curriculum. The primary goal of many individual learning programmes is to develop independent living skills and self-advocacy skills. One school explained:

> These issues are discussed on a daily basis in circle time and students are involved in setting their own objectives and evaluating these. We use the ASDAN towards independence syllabus, related to self-advocacy and citizenship. These issues are also covered in sex education and relationship education.

A key aim of independent living skills and self-advocacy provision is to encourage young people not to accept adult authority and levels of service unquestioningly and to develop techniques for ensuring that their views are made clear. One school described the need to probe personal views among learners, since questionnaires completed at home appeared to include a high parental input.
7.9 Perversely, falling levels of headline satisfaction can be an indication of growing self-confidence and willingness to express views. This factor also applies to learners with low initial self-confidence in other parts of the post-16 sector, for example Entry to Employment work-based learners, adults on Skills for Life provision, learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties and learners on ESOL provision.

Particular Issues or Considerations in Special Schools

7.10 The key issue for most respondents was communication. Some special school pupils have physical barriers to communication but are fully able to understand and respond to requests for feedback. Others have profound and multiple learning difficulties that form a barrier to abstract thought. Schools had to use a combination of technical support and skilled learner support staff to ensure that concepts were clearly communicated to learners and that they could provide meaningful responses. Where there were significant barriers to communication (some of our learners neither speak nor sign), or where learners had specific complex needs, such as severe autism, this process was time-consuming and involved an inevitable element of interpretation. Schools were acutely aware of a narrow dividing line between helping learners to articulate their views and shaping their responses.

7.11 Symbolic communication, for example the use of Widgit software/Picture Exchange Communications Systems (PECS) to represent information as pictures, was used where verbal communication was not possible, but some schools stressed a need to be realistic about the degree of understanding some learners could develop regarding satisfaction issues. One school explained:

> You must present simple choices that the students have experience of using; symbols, signing, photos and videos. These visual clues enable students to understand and express their views.

Schools also commented that some learners gave volatile or self-contradictory feedback, not necessarily recalling previous statements. One described this as a need to respect idiosyncratic communication strategies. This issue echoed some of the issues in further education regarding vulnerable or fragile learners, for example learners with mental health issues.

7.12 Respondents again made reference to the crucial issue of the development of self-advocacy skills. One noted that learners tend to be keen to please adults, so it is important to make sure that their views are genuine. The schools placed a lot of importance on self-esteem and self-advocacy, especially with quieter or more vulnerable learners. At times this meant helping young people to express themselves independently of the views of their parents.
Particular Arrangements for Vulnerable Learners

7.13 The responses to this section of the consultation generally repeated earlier statements regarding the need for simple, tailored communication and individual technical/personal support. Several of the schools had had success with the use of independent advocates, including learner peer support, buddy relationships with pupils from a local mainstream school and use of advocates from other agencies (including charities and Specialist Connexions Personal Advisers). Issues again arose from the fact that the most vulnerable learners were most likely to respond to the adults that knew them best and this always led to a risk of, however unintentional, interpretation.

Innovative or Especially Effective Approaches

7.14 Some schools were reluctant to offer their approaches as innovative or particularly effective, partly as a result of uncertainty on the practices used in other schools. One noted that they would love to hear about good practice and innovative approaches. Other schools commented that it was hard to separate out particular approaches since the emphasis was on an entire culture of empowerment through the curriculum.

7.15 Approaches that were mentioned included:

- video and webcam personal statements;
- "Have a Say Day" event;
- advocacy and buddying/peer mentors;
- photos or videos of learners involved in activities;
- programme called “making choices” developed with speech therapists;
- using communication passports for the most vulnerable learners (so their chosen means of communication is known);
- observations for those who cannot communicate directly (covering involvement, response, interaction and behaviour); and
- learner analysis and commentary on questionnaires.

32 For example PECS/MAKATON.
8. Feedback from Provider Seminars

Introduction to the Seminars and Delegate Views

8.1 The final section of the general questionnaire invited providers to indicate if they were willing to share any of their current practice with other providers and also asked them to indicate if they would like to attend one of four regional seminars being convened to discuss the outcomes of the survey. Other providers were invited to attend the seminars directly, based on their involvement in relevant regional or national projects. Around 150 delegates attended one of the four events.

8.2 Evaluation sheets were completed by 87 of the delegates. The evaluation sheets sought to confirm whether or not the seminars had raised delegates' understanding of issues relating to the monitoring and usage of learner views and the link between this and the development of the LSC’s Framework for Excellence. Only 15% of the delegates had viewed their understanding of the issues as very clear prior to the events, but this had risen to around two-thirds by the end. Almost 70% of delegates had registered a clear increase in their understanding as a result of the seminars.

Rating of level of understanding of issues covered by the seminar.

![Chart showing understanding levels](chart)

Source: Delegate evaluation questionnaire.
8.3 Delegates were also asked to comment on the effectiveness of the seminars and to give their reaction to the general approach being adopted by the LSC. The results of this are summarised below.

**Agreement with statements regarding the seminars and the direction of LSC policy**

![Survey Results Graph]

Source: Delegate evaluation questionnaire.

8.4 More than 80% felt the events had helped to clarify the LSC’s policy and around 90% felt the presentations had been clear and comprehensive. However, there was some concern that the LSC was not yet in a position to explain how the Framework for Excellence would work in practice.

8.5 Only just over half felt the LSC’s emerging proposals would be helpful to the sector. Comments confirmed that many delegates approved the idea of encouraging providers to gather and respond to learner views and most supported the idea of guidance on effective ways of doing this. However there was considerable doubt about the validity of comparing the complex messages that arise from effective provider dialogue with learners to a snapshot biennial telephone sample.
8.6 Some quality managers felt that the use of learner satisfaction data by the LSC/DfES to form external judgments of provider quality, and possibly to influence funding allocations, would distort the process and make learner satisfaction evidence less reliable as a means of improving quality internally.

Issues Raised Duration Workshop Discussion Relating to Specific Parts of the Sector

8.7 At each of the events the delegates spent time discussing issues and concerns in small groups, based on provider type. Some of the issues relating to specific parts of the sector are recorded below.

- In some parts of the sector, especially FE and WBL, the broad approach being developed by the LSC reflected current coverage of satisfaction monitoring, although the enforcement of benchmarking was new.

- Process standards and core questions would be useful but they would have to allow flexibility for variations in context (e.g. learners with low communication skills).

- There was an issue of sample size for large colleges and ACL providers – providers were concerned that the LSC would stipulate this or expect providers to survey all learners even if this were not current practice.

- Providers stressed that the language had to be accessible in terms of learner reading age/comprehension and the circumstances of the learning.

- Exit interviews (used especially in FE and WBL) are closest to the LSC’s core questions (but happen much later), but monthly reviews/tutorial discussions were seen as more likely to simulate rapid quality improvement.

- There was an issue of flexibility about timing where procedures were well-established in the self-assessment timetable (e.g. sixth form colleges and short duration work-based learning like E2E). In ACL for example the full evaluation structure was already in place for 2006/07.

- The processes for gathering learner satisfaction appeared to be better established in FE and therefore harder to adapt to LSC requirements. Many schools have less established systems and would find external guidance more valuable.
• Many work-based learning providers survey learners each quarter (alongside other tools) but this was only one feedback tool and was often quite limited (many trainees prefer oral expression).

• In some national WBL providers (e.g. National Construction College) the longest continual spell they had with learners was 6 weeks.

• Many WBL providers gathered feedback that distinguished on-the-job and off-the-job elements and the issue of employer involvement needs to be addressed. For example, pay is the biggest issue for many of the trainees but is outside the control of the provider (the apprenticeship age limit was a topical issue).

• In some parts of the sector (e.g. ACL) provider staff were still seen as the only practical means of administering surveys and any standards needed to be clear on the arrangements required to encourage learner trust in the process.

• The absence of national benchmarks for school sixth forms and specialist providers for learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties would make it hard for these institutions to prepare for the proposed changes.

• There was concern that a two-yearly NLSS would give dated feedback. Providers argued that this would be unreliable where major new issues had emerged (for example the re-focusing of ACL, rising fees in FE or the introduction of EMAs to replace training allowances on E2E programmes).

• There was strong concern, especially among FE groups, that in an attempt to avoid being prescriptive the LSC would permit inconsistency in methodology and that this would not be taken into account when headline outcomes of learner satisfaction monitoring were being judged.

• The key message was that process benchmarking and standard-setting had to be relevant to the learning context. It also had to be relevant to the learners, some of whom lacked confidence and communication skills or had come from a highly disengaged background.
Perceived Benefits and Added Value from the Process

8.8 Delegates offered the following observations on potential benefits from the proposed provision of core questions and standards:

- The core questions would be relatively easy to incorporate and most providers already asked something like them.
- The standards could prompt better approaches to the inclusion of minority groups.
- The standards would be very useful to providers that were relatively new to this (for example schools).
- Benchmarking was currently limited in WBL and standardisation would be helpful.
- The link from the core questions to the Common Inspection Framework and the Every Child Matters33 agenda would be essential.
- If the questions could give sufficient flexibility to be adaptable to specific learner groups (language level, degree of engagement etc.) they would be more helpful to providers but there was a risk that qualitative evidence of learner views would gain less attention. Providers felt this was often the most useful evidence for quality assurance purposes.
- Some providers asked whether a shorter and more focused national survey could support a larger sample size and a provider level measure. Few were aware of the objections of provider representative bodies to provider level analysis within the NLSS.
- There was considerable support for the view that the extent to which learners felt consulted with, and listened to, was a key performance indicator and possibly said more than satisfaction levels.

33 For more information see http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk.
Factors Providers Want the LSC to Take into Account

Delegates offered the following observations on factors they wished the LSC to take into account in developing core questions and standards:

- The college groups were concerned that the link between the New Measure/Framework for Excellence and funding might make learner satisfaction evidence less reliable because it would introduce an incentive to influence outcomes.

- Providers felt the LSC/DFES needed to make a clear case on why learner satisfaction was needed as a measure on top of Ofsted and performance measures (including capacity to improve). Some providers seriously doubted the value or robustness of a benchmark and it was also felt that the NLSS would in any case produce an average, not a provider level benchmark.

- The timescale for introduction needed to be realistic (for both the questions and the methodology) as did the balance between statistical requirements and provider resources.

- There needed to be clarity on the expected sample size. Some groups also asked if the LSC would be introducing an analysis tool/kitemarking or whether providers would be expected to develop the analysis themselves.

- Compliance would have resource implications (time, software, materials etc.).

- The process needed to be reliable and give robust data. In particular the issue of varying scales had to be addressed and the NLSS aligned to current practice in the sector (although delegates variously used four, five and two point scales).

- The process standards had to give flexibility where systems already work well. Prescriptive methods would not work for all parts of the sector.

- The standards needed to include administration arrangements.

- There was concern that core questions might be over-emphasised in internal processes rather than the more complex causal factors that are felt to be the best spur to quality improvement.

- Causal factors were only felt to make sense in context, but providers queried whether this would be considered when external judgments were made.
• There was a need to clarify whether the guidance to be issued with the measure would include the frequency of contact. Some providers monitored learner views on a monthly basis and it was not clear how frequent indicators like this would fit with a requirement for a once a year reference to a biennial national sample.

• Providers felt the link between outcomes and future funding had to be made clear.

• There were issues of consistency versus flexibility in self-assessment. Ofsted appeared to providers to be more concerned with improvement over time than external benchmarking. One provider asked:

  … if 90% of our learners are satisfied will this be viewed as good or taken as a sign that we’ve got the questions wrong?

• Many of the providers considered that trend data within a single institution were much less susceptible to distortion than external benchmarks in a subjective measure like satisfaction.

• The key focus of self-assessment was viewed by providers as the effectiveness with which they gathered and acted on learner views. This did not seem, for some, to be enhanced by reference to external measures of the level of satisfaction.
9. Conclusions

9.1 Providers across the sector are committed to gathering and using learner views as a core element of their quality assurance processes, but the effectiveness with which this is currently done varies between providers and provider types.

9.2 There is a considerable body of past research into the gathering of learner views that points to a need for flexibility and appropriateness in information gathering techniques, especially for groups of learners whose voice might not be heard using traditional techniques.

9.3 The messages given out by Ofsted and ALI will be crucial in determining providers’ reactions to core questions and standards developed by the LSC. These will need to be mapped clearly against the Common Inspection Framework and the Every Child Matters agenda. Current inspection reports focus heavily on the impact of learner views on quality improvement but give less coverage to the extent to which the methods of gathering learner views are inclusive.

9.4 If the LSC’s preferred measure of learner satisfaction is to depend on a comparison between providers’ internal evidence base and the National Learner Satisfaction Survey the LSC will need to convince providers of the robustness of such comparisons. Provider concerns derive from the telephone methodology used for the national survey, the biennial nature of the survey, the significant delay before results are published and the limited opportunities for disaggregation to ensure published averages are relevant to a providers’ context.

9.5 Most providers do not have procedures to include absent learners or early leavers in their main satisfaction surveys. This issue will have to be addressed in the development of standards and in the presentation of the NLSS results.

9.6 The survey indicated that providers across the sector would react positively to a set of core questions and standards, providing these have sufficient flexibility to allow them to be adapted to the wide range of learners and learning contexts covered by the sector. However, the current research tools website has not had a significant impact on providers and much more direct methods of communication will be required to embed any new approach.
9.7 The confidence of further education, work-based learning and adult & community learning providers in the proposed model will be undermined unless there is a clear commitment to the inclusion of school sixth forms in the model. Individual school sixth forms attending the provider seminars were keen to enhance their procedures for gathering learner views, but the provider survey confirmed that processes are under-developed in sixth forms compared to the rest of the sector.

9.8 There is a need of clarity on whether the proposed learner satisfaction measure might eventually be extended to incorporate post-16 learners in special schools.

9.9 Providers view the inclusion of qualitative techniques and effective representative structures as a sign of maturity in their processes. Many fear that a national model of gathering consistent learner satisfaction data could only be based on quantitative approaches and that these would gain undue attention as a result.

9.10 There is broad consensus on the key issues that a system for gathering learner views would need to address, although the scope of such processes is again more limited in school sixth forms. Providers have concerns about the extent to which questionnaire-based methods engage the interest of learners and many are aiming to provide opportunities for more flexible and continuous dialogue with learners.

9.11 There is considerable expertise in parts of the sector on the effective gathering of the views of vulnerable learners and learners who require flexible communication channels. However, these practices will not be easy to reconcile with the standardised measures implied by an institutional measure of satisfaction based on quantitative elements.
Appendix 1: Example of a College Policy on Learner Views from Chichester College

Source: http://www.chichester.ac.uk/support/union.htm

Chichester College
Student Voice Policy

Policy Statement

Chichester College is committed to involving the learner in its strategic decision-making and operational management processes.

Aims & Objectives

The college firmly believes that embracing learner views and offering an opportunity for learners to have direct involvement in assessing and shaping their own learning experience will have a significant and effective impact on developing the college’s quality improvement processes and improving student success. The college also believes that learners have key roles to play in self-assessment and policy-making procedures.

All learners, individually and collectively, have an entitlement to participate in the “co-production” of their college experience and in the evaluation of their teaching and learning through the following mechanisms of engagement:

1. **Chichester College Student Union / Student Voice.** All students automatically become members on enrolment unless they wish to opt out.

2. **Student Representatives.** Each tutor group from every curriculum area of the college nominates one or two representatives who are commissioned to voice the views of the group at meetings of the Student Councils established at the two main campuses.

3. **Student Council.** Tutor group representatives comprise the membership of the council, which meets four times each year, twice in the first term and once in each subsequent term on both campuses.

4. **Student Executive.** Elected by the Student Council, the Executive are the senior partners of the student body, responsible for embracing the views of the learners as voiced at the Student Council or other formal or informal channels and taking them forward to the appropriate college management forums. The Student Executive meets on a weekly basis with the Student Liaison Officer and the Student Activities Co-ordinator. Both roles are key to facilitating Student Voice activities.

5. **Student Governor.** One student is elected as Student Governor on an annual basis. Two additional student observers are nominated to attend meetings of the Governing Body and a number of its committees.

Continues
6. **Student Committee.** This is a formal committee of the Governing Body which meets termly. It comprises the Student Executive, Governors, the Senior Management Team and other appropriate managers including the Quality Assurance and Human Resources Managers. The Chairman of the Student Committee is a college governor. The Vice-Chairman is the Student Governor.

7. **College Management Forums.** At least two student representatives primarily, but not necessarily, from the Executive attend and contribute at a range of management committees. For example, Equality and Diversity Committee, Health and Safety Committee, Quality Forum and Academic Board. These forums provide learners with an opportunity to make a positive contribution to the college's management processes.

8. **Student Executive/Senior Management Team liaison.** The SMT are formally invited to the Student Union Executive meetings each month. There is a 2-way “open door” policy in existence to allow free liaison between SMT and executive members or other learners at any other time.

9. **Sub Committees/Focus Groups:** Student representatives make up at least 50% of the membership of the Facilities, Learning Resources and Catering Focus Groups. Outcomes are reported at Student Council, Student Committee and at management committees/forums as appropriate.

10. **Student Union/Student Voice Self-Assessment processes.** The Student Executive uses the same quality assurance processes as college management to assess its effectiveness. The document includes a forward-thinking action plan with targets, performance indicators and a monitoring procedure. It is derived jointly from Student Council feedback and from the Executive planning process. Its intention is to provide a focus for improvement and advancement of a staff/student co-production culture. It is included in the College's annual Self-Assessment report.

11. **Course Review and Evaluation.** Learners are involved in the evaluation of their course with the Curriculum Team Managers, Course Leaders and teaching staff. This process feeds into the college's annual course review and evaluation process.

12. **Evaluation of Teaching and Learning – Student-centred input.** The college intends to involve appropriately-trained learners in the evaluation of teaching and learning through structured “learning walks” and paired observations with experienced observers.

13. **Student Survey.** The college-wide Student Survey is distributed to all students twice yearly and the results disseminated to all students. Action plans are devised and monitored through quality processes, which involve student representation.

14. **Learner Advocacy at National and Local Level.** The Student Voice at Chichester College has an ambassadorial role to play at national and local level. Learners make a positive contribution to supporting community events and activities and work collaboratively with NUS and Government agencies to promote the Student Voice in FE.

DS/AN/ChiColl/06
Appendix 2: Provider Survey Questionnaire

National Survey of Post-16 Learning Providers: Gathering and Using Learner Views in LSC-Funded Provision

Please help us with this important national survey of education and training providers. More than 1,500 colleges, work-based learning providers, adult & community learning providers, UfL providers and schools are being surveyed to identify current practice in the gathering and using of learner views.

The results will provide the first national picture of how providers get feedback from learners and how this evidence is used to improve the quality of learners’ experiences. Please answer the questions in an open and objective way. Your organisation will not be identified in the analysis of the survey’s results, unless you offer your current approach as a potential case study of good practice. Your responses will not be used for any purpose other than the analysis of this survey.

We will be sharing the overall results with the sector and providing examples of approaches that appear to work well. We will also be using the survey as an important part of our evidence base in the development of a new measure of success for learner satisfaction in the sector. The Government is committed to encouraging effective involvement of learners in the improvement of provision. We want to support this and your views on what approaches work best, and on how the LSC can help support these, will be vital.

Can I thank you for finding the time at this busy stage of the year to complete and return the survey? You can participate by returning a written response using the attached freepost envelope or, if you prefer to submit your views on-line, you can complete an e-version at: www.rcu.co.uk/survey/learnersatisfaction.jsp.

Berni Henson
Group Manager, Accelerating Quality Improvement
Learning and Skills Council

Thank you very much for helping us.

Please return this form, by Friday 9 June 2006, in the envelope provided. If the envelope has become detached please send the questionnaire (no stamp needed) to:
Responsive College Unit Ltd, Freepost Licence No. PR1 5171, Preston, PR1 3YX.
### About your organisation

1. Which one of these best describes your organisation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General FE/ tertiary college</th>
<th>Sixth form college</th>
<th>Specialist college/ other FE provider</th>
<th>Group Training Association</th>
<th>Employer with work-based learners</th>
<th>Other WBL provider</th>
<th>Local authority adult learning provider</th>
<th>Other adult learning provider</th>
<th>UK network or provider</th>
<th>School with a sixth form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### How you gather the views of post-16 learners on LSC-funded provision

2. We are interested in understanding the ways in which learner views are gathered on LSC-funded provision. Are these approaches used in your organisation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not used</th>
<th>Used occasionally</th>
<th>Used consistently or regularly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner forums or consultation sessions open to all learners</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner representatives (e.g. student/trainee councils or governors)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups or discussions on specific issues</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff feedback on learner views (e.g. from tutorial or group discussions)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written questionnaires completed at a set time (tutorial, group session)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written questionnaires completed in learners’ own time</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual face-to-face interviews (e.g. opinion polling)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-line self-completion questionnaires</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet forums or on-line discussion groups</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone interviews</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal monitoring of complaints</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner suggestion boxes or ideas</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you use any approaches not mentioned above that you’d recommend to others?

3. We need feedback from the sector on what works and what doesn’t. Please think objectively about the approaches you ticked in Question 2 (ignore any that don’t apply).

**Which ...**

(tick more than one if you wish)

- ... give reliable evidence?
- ... have a big impact on quality?
- ... have not proved very effective?
- ... do learners value most?
- ... are most likely to trigger action?
- ... would you like to do more of?

4. Does the organisation have a formal strategy or policy for gathering/using learner views?

**Yes** ☐ **No** ☐
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness with which learner views are gathered and used to raise quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Do you agree or disagree with these statements?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner views are a major influence on our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provision for post-16s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A very high proportion of learners contribute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their views in some way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We get accurate information on the issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that matter to learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident that learners are able to give</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their views openly and honestly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff respond positively to issues raised by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learners even if the issues are difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We tell learners directly what issues they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have raised and how we will respond to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our approaches to gathering learner views are successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in engaging learner interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Does your organisation compare the results of your learner surveys to the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, we use some NLSS questions and benchmark against them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don’t use NLSS questions but do compare our results to the NLSS figures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are aware of the NLSS but don’t use it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The NLSS results are not relevant for our learners or our type of provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not aware of the NLSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The LSC is considering identifying core questions in the NLSS that providers could use in their own surveys and then compare to relevant benchmarks. Would you consider using these?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. We are also considering the development of standards on how learner views are gathered and how they are used to feed back into improved quality. This might include feedback to learners on actions, whether changes are monitored over time and feedback to governors. This would allow providers to benchmark their processes. How useful would this be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Does your organisation use the LSC’s learner satisfaction research tools website?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, we use it and it is useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We use it but it is not very useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We’ve looked at this but don’t think it is relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We’re aware of this but haven’t looked at it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are not aware of this facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you use outside agencies in any of the following roles? (Tick any that apply)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing expertise in the design of questionnaires/issue lists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administering surveys/interviewing learners to ensure confidentiality for learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing research skills that you do not have in house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing comparisons to relevant benchmarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing advice and guidance on responding to learner feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training your staff to raise their skills in obtaining learner feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something else (please explain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. If you answered yes to Question 10, which agencies do you use?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

63
## Practical arrangements to monitor learner views

**12.** Do you have arrangements in place to ensure that the views of the following are gathered?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners who are absent when surveys etc. happen</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learners who leave courses before surveys happen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**13.** Some learners may find it difficult to contribute their views. If you provide learning for any of the following learners, have you made any special arrangements to ensure that they can contribute their views?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners with visual impairment</th>
<th>We don't have learners in this category</th>
<th>We have learners in this category but make no special arrangements</th>
<th>We make special arrangements for these learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learners with hearing impairment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with other restrictive disabilities</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learners with dyslexia</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learners with low level literacy skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with learning difficulties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with learning disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners with mental health issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learners whose first language is not English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Special arrangements for other vulnerable learners:</td>
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</table>

**14.** If your organisation provides learning for young people aged 14-16, please say if they are included in your arrangements to monitor learner views.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We don't have learners in this age range</th>
<th>The views of these learners are gathered by a partner institution</th>
<th>We have learners aged 14-16 but don't monitor their views formally</th>
<th>We include these learners in our normal arrangements</th>
<th>We make special arrangements for these learners</th>
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**15.** Do your arrangements to gather and use learner views currently cover the following:

- Overall satisfaction with the learning experience
- Learner satisfaction with their progress
- Satisfaction with equipment and resources
- Satisfaction with the quality of teaching/learning
- Satisfaction that learners' needs have been met
- Arrangements to ensure equality & diversity

## How you can get involved in the follow-up to this survey

**A.** We are very interested in talking to providers that have developed innovative and/or particularly effective approaches to gathering and using learner views. Are you willing to share your current practice and can we contact you if we want to discuss this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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**B.** We will be consulting further with the sector at four regional seminars in July. The most likely dates and timings (subject to confirmation) are London 4 July; Bristol 11 July; Leeds 13 July and Manchester, 14 July, all from 12pm until 4:00 pm.

Would you like to be invited to one of these?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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If yes, which would you be most likely to attend?

- London
- Bristol
- Leeds
- Manchester

## Contact details for A or B

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Position:</th>
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Appendix 3: 16+ Special Schools Survey Questionnaire

July 2006

Headteacher
XXX School

Dear XXX

RCU is currently working with the DfES and the Learning and Skills Council to gather best practice in identifying and responding to the views of learners.

We are particularly keen to include examples from Special Schools and are therefore contacting a number of schools over the summer. I would be very grateful if you could take a few minutes to answer the questions on the back of this sheet and return it to me in the freepost envelope provided.

Please note that the main focus is on learners aged over 16 (because of the LSC’s funding remit) and we are keen to hear from as many schools as possible irrespective of whether you consider yourself to be an example of “good practice” or not.

There is no set deadline for a response (given summer holidays) but we need to complete our project report by the end of September.

Yours sincerely

Gordon Aitken
Director

Enc

Our Ref: 06.044let.special.doc/ac
What are the main methods you use to gather learner views (aged 16 and over)?

Are there any particular issues or considerations when gathering and responding to learner views in Special Schools?

Do you make any particular arrangements to make sure that vulnerable learners are willing/able to give their views?

Are there any innovative or especially effective approaches you have used to gather learner views that you would recommend to others?

Name: _______________________________________________

School:  ______________________________________________

Best contact method and contact details if we have any queries of follow-up questions:

___________________________________________________________________
Appendix 4: Additional Examples of Provider Processes

This appendix presents further examples of approaches taken by providers. These were not offered by the providers as examples of good practice necessarily, but did represent approaches they had felt had worked well in their institutions and which they would recommend to others.

**Written Questionnaires**

The Quality Unit at **West Cheshire College** issues a ‘central’ questionnaire to 1000 learners per annum. A sample of learners is generated and the results are processed by an external contractor, providing information which can be benchmarked. This is carried out in the middle of the course rather than at the end in order to allow the College to take action whilst the courses still have time to run.

Additionally if any concerns come to light about a particular course, for example concerns raised by learners or by parents or as a result of monitoring success rates or as a result of teaching observation, the course or course group completes the central questionnaire. This helps in the identification of underlying issues and contributory factors. This is done as soon as an issue or concern arises. The findings are fed to the Quality Improvement Group – this is led by the Principal and includes the Assistant Principal in charge of Quality, the Quality Leader – Teaching and Learning, the manager of the respective area and the course leader.

**Contact:** Ian Rimmington, West Cheshire College i.rimmington@west-cheshire.ac.uk

**Park Lane College** has now switched to use of optical character read forms, with software to analyse the results and capability to analyse the outcomes in depth – down to the level of individual teachers. Findings are categorised according to the Common Inspection Framework and fed back to tutors. This can also be easily incorporated into self-assessment process. Each section/course team receives its own report which is put onto the intranet. National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS) questions were adopted extensively but adapted in that the College’s survey is paper-based and uses a different rating scale. Due to learners being ‘surveyed to death’ the College has imposed a moratorium on surveys bar the 3 corporate ones – post induction, on programme and end-of-course.

**Contact:** Carolyn McDermott, Park Lane College c.mcdermott@parklanecoll.ac.uk
Manchester Adult Education Service (AES) does a postal survey of 10% of their learners every year. The sample reflects the geographical, age, gender and ethnicity profile of AES learners. The response rate overall has been 30%. However, the response rate has been falling and responses are disproportionately coming from 60+ learners in white affluent areas. This audience is predominantly on leisure courses which are under threat – hence may be more interested in vocalising their feelings, or may feel more comfortable filling in a questionnaire, it is felt.

Postcode analysis, introduced a few years ago has shown interesting issues – feedback from the more affluent areas tends to focus on the car-parking and canteen facilities, availability of certain course, whilst from less affluent areas, feedback focuses more on the courses and learning.

Currently, Manchester AES is planning to move to e-surveys. This was made possible by a decision to start collecting e-mails addresses of learners. In future this will allow the AES to mail out a link to the web-based survey. They anticipate dropping the 10% postal survey over time and will trial the e-version with IT learners before rolling it out more widely.

Contact: Helen Bacon, Manchester AES h.bacon@manchester.gov.uk

Plymouth Adult & Community Education Service contracts with a variety of providers. Three years ago, a common questionnaire for gathering learner satisfaction information was introduced. The questionnaire was cross-referenced to the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) so it could be used directly for self-assessment (SAR) purposes and development planning. In the first year, learners’ responses were extremely positive. Using the analysis was difficult because everything was rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’.

Questionnaires had been sent to the providers for them to distribute. There were some concerns about the spread and return rates across the provider base so in the second year distribution was centralised and the responses offered more differentiation. In the 3rd year, plain brown envelopes were provided in which respondents could pass back the surveys. The survey was sent out centrally and respondents placed their questionnaire in a brown envelope and returned them within their Centre which was then responsible for passing them back to central administration. Once again, there was more differentiation than previously.

Since the questionnaire is mapped to CIF it was easy to identify the areas to which the strengths and weaknesses related.

Concerns were raised about the suitability of questionnaires in the Skills for Life area. Following a mini-pilot, the Service is going to use voting technology so that in future someone can read out the questions and the learners can vote electronically. A further issue for this audience was the need to make the English in the questionnaire more accessible. This particular change will be rolled out across all areas i.e. it is a change that will improve the survey for all clients and is not to be ‘ghettoised’ in Skills for Life only. ESOL is another area which benefits from this approach.

The outcomes feed directly into Self Assessment Days – the Service has one for each curriculum area and the results are brought to these days for tutors to use and include in their self-assessment. As a result, tutors see the relevance and direct impact of the surveys and this supports a culture change towards quality improvement.

Contact: Marie Dooley, Plymouth ACL marie.dooley@plymouth.gov.uk
East Norfolk Sixth Form College has been surveying parents for about 5 years. This is carried out twice a year, at Parents Evenings in December and in April. There are 11 statements, with which parents agree/disagree on a four point scale:

1. My son/daughter is enjoying College
2. The College has kept me informed of my son/daughter's progress
3. The organisation of the College is good
4. Parents'/Guardians' Evenings are informative
5. Staff at the College are approachable to students
6. The College sets high standards in the work it expects
7. The College expects high standards of student behaviour
8. The advice from College on careers/higher education is good
9. The College provides opportunities for students to become involved in extra-curricular activities
10. I have found it easy to approach the College with questions or problems
11. Telephone calls to the College are answered promptly and courteously

Additionally, parents are asked to identify:
- the main strengths of East Norfolk SFC; and
- any areas to improve.

It is acknowledged that the parents attending the Open Evenings and filling in the questionnaires are self-selecting and represent only a small sample of parents. The last event elicited 80 responses, whilst they have around 1,000 learners. The College has tried sending the questionnaires by post but received fewer back than via the Parents Evening route. The surveys are nonetheless valuable. The College has established that what parents have said has been very close to what the College had been thinking of including in its self-assessment report.

Contact: Anita Gentry, East Norfolk Sixth Form College agentry@enof.ac.uk
Focus Groups

During the past four years at City of Bristol College a series of focus groups has been carried out by staff in the Quality Improvement Unit and Learner Services and a plan exists for future years, ensuring that groups are conducted in all faculties. The research has been targeted to reach specific groups of learners e.g. those at Level 1, Access learners, work-based learners or learners on a new programme. Each year 150 - 200 learners are consulted through the focus groups.

The groups are facilitated by staff from the Quality Improvement Unit i.e. by staff who have no involvement in the delivery of the courses and tutors are not present. Tutors are briefed on the process before groups take place and are said to be positive about the use of focus groups. Sometimes tutors are the source of the invitation to facilitate a group, as they want a particular issue explored with their learners.

The focus groups are structured loosely around the Common Inspection Framework key questions, thereby providing information that is directly relevant to the faculties and college self-assessment report. The use of introductory icebreakers, the provision of refreshments and a non-judgemental approach by the facilitators, provide an atmosphere in which learners feel able to speak freely and in detail about their experiences at the college. In some instances, issues raised in questionnaire surveys are followed up in the groups, such as the use of the College handbook, or travel arrangements to a particular centre.

Introductory remarks by the facilitators explain that learners’ views will be treated in confidence and comments will not be traceable. The introduction also states the purpose of the session is to seek positives as well as any areas for improvement. Personal references to individual tutors occur, naturally, but are handled discretely by the facilitators. If anything which requires immediate attention is raised, the tutor would be informed directly, though this generally is not the case.

Faculty staff receive written bullet point reports from the focus groups, together with face to face discussion with the facilitators.

Contact: Philip Barker, City of Bristol College pbarker@cityofbristol.ac.uk

Last year West Kent College introduced focus groups and used these to look at a broad range of issues. This year, they have geared the focus groups around the same questions as those covered in the self-completion survey of learner views and satisfaction. The College used a curriculum manager and the Quality Manager to facilitate the groups, making sure that the curriculum manager was not from the same area as the learners.

In addition to eliciting qualitative information to set against the quantitative information derived from questionnaires, this approach has had a significant impact in rapidly sharing practice across curriculum areas, since managers immediately and directly hear about what is happening in another curriculum area and see and hear the reaction of learners ‘on the receiving end’. In 2006/07, Support Staff Managers will be included in the process, since a number of comments made by learners relate to Support Operations and these staff equally should have the opportunity to get direct feedback, the College believes.

Contact: Joy Mercer, West Kent College joymercer@wkc.ac.uk
**Loughborough College** does a whole-college survey once a year, with items correlating with the national survey. If particular issues emerge, these are then investigated further via focus groups. The discussion groups are facilitated by staff and some include the use of e-voting pads. This gives a semi-quantitative response to issues and enables discussion to focus on these, rather than on whatever the more vocal and influential members of the group want to cover. Action points are subsequently set out on posters which go up around College and are also placed on the learners’ intranet.

Contact: Jan Leivers, Loughborough College jan.leivers@loucoll.ac.uk

At the end of the autumn term at **Peter Symonds College**, each class is asked what they think about the course in a focus group discussion. Initially, each learner was prompted to find 3 good things and 3 not-so-good things, now they’re asked for 6 things (whether good or bad) individually at the start of the session. Then the learners work in pairs and have to agree the items to take forward. Then the learners work in fours (2 groups of 2 are put together) and again only commonly agreed items can be taken into the next round. The items which emerge from this process form the agenda for a course meeting attended by subject staff and a student representative from each class. Importantly the representatives also have to feedback to their peers the outcomes of the meeting. Each department also generates a response which is posted on classroom walls.

Contact: Nick Allen, Peter Symonds College nallen@psc.ac.uk
Telephone Interviews

About two years ago Paragon Training carried out a telephone survey of all learners and employers, asking them 10 quite specific questions, which required simple yes/no answers and thus could be kept to an indicated time of about two minutes.

The initiative was prompted by an inspection in March 2003. They had been using ‘Quality Monitor’, and now have its electronic equivalent, but had found it wasn’t specific enough. The questions included in the telephone survey resulted from the self-assessment process – many items related to communications. Questions included:

- Do you know the name of your internal verifier?
- What’s the name of your training advisor (in some cases, changes of advisor hadn’t been communicated well in the past)
- Do you feel you get enough support from Paragon? From your employer?
- Do you want us to involve/update your parent/guardian about your progress? (this elicited a resounding ‘no’)
- Could you highlight something good and something which needs improving?

Similar questions were addressed to both learners and employers.

Paragon had around 800 learners and almost as many employers and achieved a contact rate of approximately 50% using this approach. Not only have the answers to the yes/no questions been useful, additional comments were made, offering significant quality of information. A further benefit has been that the survey generated extra leads and ‘starts’ which they might have missed otherwise. The exercise had had good PR value in addition to its contribution to quality assurance process.

The process took around 8 months to complete with a member of staff setting aside 4-5pm each day to make the calls. In some cases, the hour resulted in 5 completed calls. In other cases it was more, depending on how much the interviewees wished to volunteer. The key measure is the quality of information emerging, however. It is recognised that the member of staff doing this has to have the right skills and telephone manner and must not be involved in delivery or other liaison with the clients. They must be strictly neutral in the process.

Any immediate causes for concern were actioned but otherwise the information was collated and analysed and passed back to the Programme Manager for individual responses.

Other approaches used are Quality Monitor and ‘Comments’ leaflets which can be posted in a box. The telephone approach has proved the most valuable of all and they are currently hoping to repeat the exercise.

Contact: Jo White, Paragon Training (Dorset) Ltd. jo.white@pgon.co.uk
**St. Helens Chamber** uses telephone interviews as a survey method, having changed to this approach in 2006. They used to use questionnaires at the start, middle and end of programmes but the return rate was low. They had previously used telephone interviews to investigate the reasons why early leavers had departed and it was decided to apply this to the other surveys, too. The calls are carried out by a member of staff who has no involvement in course delivery. It is a structured interview but allows for more probing of respondents and, importantly, picks up the ‘tone’ of the response, which questionnaires do not. The survey uses standardised questions, with ratings running from satisfactory to unsatisfactory. If a complaint is raised during a call, this is reported immediately and action undertaken. Otherwise, reports are submitted to management three times per year.

The Chamber has approximately 200 learners, surveyed three times during the length of their programme. It is important to note, of course, that this is staggered, since trainees are constantly joining or leaving.

Any changes made as a result of feedback are highlighted in a quarterly Newsletter, sent to the learners who are dispersed across a number of employers, in a 'what you said/what we did' format.

**Contact:** Irene Kearney, St Helens Chamber Ltd.  irene.kearney@sthelenschamber.com
Face-to-Face Interviews

Work-based Learning Provider ProCo NW Ltd. has a total of 638 learners across a wide range of occupational areas. ProCo takes a sample of learners from each department using the MI system. The Quality Manager then sits down with the learners and goes through a structured interview. ProCo previously used a written questionnaire but found learners were just ‘ticking boxes’. The issues explored in the interviews include recruitment and initial assessment, induction, Individual Learning Plans and reviews, off the job training, support and on the job training. The aim is to have all key processes are examined.

The Quality Manager collects learner files from the various departments to establish some background information on each learner prior to the interview. This helps to point to areas and processes the learner has been through on their programme. It highlights the areas to ask about and can be used to provide examples to illustrate the feedback. The interviews provide an open opportunity to discuss any issues the learner wants to raise and are not limited to the prompts used by the Quality Manager. A summary of the questions and answers goes to the Management Team.

Contact: Sheila Gerrard, ProCo NW Ltd.  s.gerrard@proconw.co.uk
### Learner Forums, Consultation Events and Learner Governors

The **College of North East London** has for a number of years now arranged meetings between Student Union representatives and governors twice a year. Whilst the Student Union gives ‘hard’ messages, the College is pleased they have the confidence and trust to speak out. For example, a concern was raised that although very few learners had been excluded, Black learners were represented in greater proportions than other ethnic groups. The College investigated and found this looked to be true. Further investigation is under way, however, to look at the proportions of each ethnic group that are represented at each level of the three-stage Disciplinary Process, since ethnicity has previously only been recorded for those dealt with at the third / final stage.

To better accommodate part-time adult learners, the College is going to run local learner forums. An Access to Learning Forum made up of a group of learners with disabilities has recently been set up so that learners can air their views on accessibility and the quality of support to inform future planning and action.

**Contact:** Mary Massingham, College of North East London  
mmassingham@staff.conel.ac.uk

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**City of Bristol College** Student Council is made up of representatives from each programme. The Council meets once a term in five centres (15 meetings a year). Learners are sent questions in advance of the meetings to think about e.g. *what sort of sports and activities would you like the College to offer? what was the highlight of your tutor group?* and are encouraged to discuss with their group any issues or concerns that they would like raised at the meeting.

The issues that arise from these centre meetings are then taken to The Learner-Manager Forum, which meets three times a year (once a term). Student Council representatives attend the Forum, which follows Student Council meetings. The Learner-Manager Forum is attended by members of the Senior Management Team and meetings usually include at least three members of the Principalship.

The Learner-Manager Forum provides opportunities for senior managers to identify actions to address learner concerns. Examples have included the need for access to sports facilities, the need for water fountains. The Forum also provides senior managers with a means to inform and discuss with learners the issues that they are addressing, such as the introduction of a disability equality scheme, the development of a healthy living strategy, as well as news about the College from around the different Centres, such as an update on progress with new buildings and renovations.

Student Liaison Officers who work within Learner Services manage this process. Minutes of both meetings go out by email to tutors and are put on the college intranet, which has a staff and learner area, so both groups can access the information.

**Contact:** Philip Barker, City of Bristol College  
pbarker@cityofbristol.ac.uk
West Cheshire College has a network of learner representatives drawn from every full-time and substantial part-time programmes. Following discussion with the Student Union, it was agreed that the Learner Representative and Union Representative roles should be combined. The representative attends course team meetings to ensure their input can be given directly. Representatives are also invited to focus group discussions which are convened to explore particular issues, for example induction.

The Students Union and the College jointly train the Union Representative/Learner Representative in various aspects of the role, for example how to give feedback, participate in meetings etc.

Contact: Ian Rimmington, West Cheshire College i.rimmington@west-cheshire.ac.uk

In addition to using questionnaires and face-to-face reviews and focus groups, Herefordshire Group Training Association Ltd. holds three meetings per year attended by elected learner representatives, staff, the LSC Contract Manager, Connexions and ‘as many employers as can be persuaded to attend’. Part of the meeting is to feed back what has emerged from learner surveys and consultations and what has been done to address this. The process has now reached the stage that few comments are received about problems, since these matters have already been dealt with. The balance has tilted towards positive comments and how things can be maintained or further improved.

Another approach used by Herefordshire Group Training Association is linked to a 5-day residential event for trainees. An integral part of this event is the requirement for trainees to keep a diary which includes reflecting on their experiences and the process of the residential programme. At the end of the event, the trainees do formal presentations to senior staff of HGTA and their own employers. Whether the residential should be retained is always asked and the answer is always ‘yes’.

Contact: Jackie Wilmshurst, Herefordshire Group Training Association Ltd jackie@hgta.org

Worcester College of Technology has set up a Quality Improvement Strategic Team (QUIST) for academic staff and one for business support staff. Student Services suggested there should be a Student QUIST, too. The advantage of this arrangement is that learners can scrutinise any proposed changes e.g. a reduction in guided learning hours. They can also raise issues of concern whether concerning ‘basic things’ like menu layout or how the College deals with learners, described as “slackers” by other learners. It was reported to have been useful for the academic QUIST to receive the message from the student QUIST that learners want something done about “slackers” and that this is not just an issue for staff.

Contact: Peter Robinson, Worcester College of Technology probinson@staff.wortech.ac.uk
At Churchill Community College, one of the most significant developments has been the inclusion of four learners on the governing body – ranging from a Year 7 to Year 10, Year 11 and post-16 representatives. The learner governors create a link between the Student Council and the governing body. A member of teaching staff is regularly invited to address governors as an update on their particular subject area and on one notable occasion a Subject Head outlined a development and stated ‘all learners are using this’. This picked up by a learner who was able to challenge whether this was uniformly applied. The governors were then able to follow up this issue.

The move has brought more genuine learner focus than previously. There has been a tendency to ‘consult extensively’ but then not actually take action accordingly. With learner governors in place, the school has started to ask itself ‘what can we do to most impact on learners’ experience?’ Student Governors have then focused on the issue of positive rewards around learning, as a major area for them to research and lead on.

A further benefit is that learners see the bigger picture. They recognise that not all parents support their children as fully as they should, that not all learners are as motivated as they might be and begin to appreciate the complexities involved in education.

Contact: David Baldwin, Churchill Community College  david.baldwin@northtyneside.gov.uk
Course Reviews & Mock Inspection

Every year in June, Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College carries out Division Reviews. For example a curriculum area is reviewed by senior managers (the Director of that area, the Principal or Deputy Principal and the Director of Quality). The group reviews the first draft of the self-assessment report (SAR). A group of approximately 10 learners is then invited to meet the Review Team and is asked about experiences on the basis of the SAR submitted. Initially the format examined what had worked and what hadn’t, but now it has been refined so that issues presented in the SAR as strengths or weaknesses can be tested. As an example, the tutorial system may be cited as a strength in the SAR. The learners can then put their views on tutorials and either corroborate or challenge the SAR view. Following this, any actions required are minuted and fed back to the respective curriculum manager and when the SAR is presented in its finalised form in November, it is expected that these minuted actions will have been addressed.

All in all, the approach is said to be a very powerful means of gathering and using learner feedback which questionnaires do not always provide. It also gives learners access to senior managers (and vice versa). The format is usually 30 minutes of learners’ views, then 30 minutes of staff’s views. Feedback to the respective manager covers what is good as well as what needs to be done. The process is said to be much appreciated by all parties. Inspectors were also said to have been impressed with the mechanism – in line with their concern that the focus should be on what is happening as a result of gathering views, rather than simply the act or fact of gathering them.

Contact: Alison Muggridge,
Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College alison.muggridge@wlc.ac.uk
Entry Level Learners and Learners with Disabilities and/or Learning Difficulties

For surveying the majority of learners, Runshaw College takes a representative sample of 1,000 learners across the College. With Entry Level learners, the College has felt these learners may be disadvantaged by the standard survey, because of some of the terminology used. This year, the College decided to use an on-line survey with these learners.

Each learner was given a facilitator used to working with this type of learners but not directly connected with the individual learner. The facilitator was then able to assist the learner to fill in the questionnaire, discussing any questions about the survey items and enabling the learner to respond.

The response rate was high. Additionally, the College received some comments back from these learners, saying ‘thanks for the opportunity to give feedback’ and ‘thanks for the experience’.

The quality of feedback was said to be good and there are no concerns that the facilitator may have influenced the choice of response. The e-version makes a saving in terms of data processing and shifts resource into use of a facilitator and an experience for the learner. Whilst one-to-one support is resource intensive, it is thought to be a better use of resource than someone simply doing data-entry.

The College uses SNAP software for analysis purposes and uses the NLSS core questions. The College has considered symbolic approaches for gathering feedback from some learners but the cost of the software is felt to be prohibitive.

Contact: Jack Todd, Runshaw College todd.j@runshaw.ac.uk

Open Doors groups were introduced at Worcester College of Technology a couple of years ago for learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, for whom the written questionnaires were inappropriate. The College set up a forum which meets about once a month. This provides a social gathering for all ages of learner as well as being an opportunity for issues, praise, suggestions etc to be raised regarding the course. Critical to the process was agreeing with SMT that whatever was raised by the group would be taken seriously and acted on. The assurance was given and results have followed.

The forum is set up at the start of each year. The College writes to all learners who have a disability and/or learning difficulty or have additional support needs and invites them along.

Since the group has started meeting there have been huge strides taken in adapting to the needs of these learners. Their input has been valuable in many ways, some of them minor but significant for the learners. For example, when the design of the foyer was being considered, the College asked learners for their reactions, how they would use the space and were able to bear in mind their feedback. Another example was a response to an idea that the front of the prospectus should have a Braille inscription. Learners with visual impairment reported that this was not necessary since they would never go through the document alone and would always do it with someone else so they could talk it through.

Contact: Peter Robinson, Worcester College of Technology probinson@staff.wortech.ac.uk
Staff from the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities and Quality Teams at Sheffield College undertook a project with Widgit Software to design a symbol-based software application to enable learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties to take part in the survey. It has contributed some additional data to the survey and provided an excellent classroom resource for use with LDD learners.

For Foundation and Entry Level learners, the College developed a simplified version of their standard questionnaire about 3 years ago. They consulted with staff to identify the items which staff felt could be left out. The resulting questionnaire reduced the number of questions by around 50% and used simpler, more appropriate language.

Contact: Trevor Louth, Sheffield College trevor.louth@sheffcol.ac.uk

At Dewsbury College, staff from areas such as English for Speakers of Other Languages, Learners with Disabilities and/or Learning Difficulties, Entry Level and Franchised provision have been involved to ensure the wording of the questionnaires reflected their client groups as far as possible. A ‘standard’ questionnaire has emerged, usable with the majority, but this will be re-visited and further adapted to specific target groups where necessary. The questions are reviewed annually to ensure they remain relevant.

Contact: Gail Norris, Dewsbury College gnorris@dewsbury.ac.uk

Orchard Hall College uses different methods for gathering learner feedback, depending on the suitability of the method for their learners. One tutor who works with adults with profound and multiple difficulties compiles a ‘Scrapbook Challenge’ each week. Essentially, this is a collection of photos and video/DVD footage of activities undertaken by the learners over a week. On Friday, the tutor and learner(s) look at the material together. The tutor looks for the students’ reactions to see whether they indicate they enjoyed the activity or not. In fact the approach represents a celebration of the activities undertaken as well as a means of checking reaction to the activity. At the end of the year, the weekly Scrapbooks can be assembled into a year’s memories/review.

Another approach taken is the practice of tutors and colleagues sitting down after each activity to briefly assess whether clients had participated and how resistant, passive, responsive and engaged they were. The quick review enables them to assess whether the activity has met the client’s needs and to bear this in mind for future planning.

Contact: Peter Sage, Orchard Hall College psage@suttonlea.org
Arden College currently has 49 residential and 26 day learners, aged 16-25 with level of need ranging from those who are autistic and may only be able to communicate via pictorial representations to those with Williams syndrome and may also have emotional and behavioural problems.

The College has a Student Council which meets every month and has been in place for a year. Learners help to set the agenda and can raise any issues via this forum. Nominations were invited and members chosen. The issue for the College proved to be limiting the number of learners participating. The members represent both day and residential learners. The number of representatives is roughly proportionate to the number of day learners and numbers of learners residing in the House.

Issues considered range from personal relationships to bullying, the facilities and the programmes the learners would like to pursue. The aim is to cover all aspects of Every Child Matters. The way it works depends on the cohort of learners in any year.

Members of the Student Council were also involved in the Awards Ceremony. They had been working on an "A-Factor", the Arden version of the X-Factor, and presented what they had rehearsed during the Ceremony.

Feedback is also gathered via weekly tutorials. These are used on the one hand for reviewing progress against targets and determining new ones but also acting as an opportunity for learners to raise concerns. Each learner has a Key Worker, who also functions as an intermediary and advocate, identifying wants and needs and relaying these on.

The gathering of feedback is carried out at individual level but is difficult to aggregate into college-level information due to the wide range of learners they accommodate.

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In May/June, Coventry AES runs a consultation event for adults with learning difficulties, a practice which has been in place for 3 years now. The AES hires an attractive venue and organises a full-day programme which covers:

- strengths and weaknesses of the past year’s programme (which feeds into the SAR);
- presentations by learners of what they’ve done i.e. celebration of achievements; and
- identification of what learners would like to do the following year (informed by consideration of what AES can provide).

The event is available to learners and any non-learners who may be interested.

In one day the event provides feedback on the quality of programmes, identifies possible demand for future courses, celebrates achievement and helps to promote the service to current clients and others.

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Learners Evaluating Teaching

At Pendleton College, learners views are sought during the interviewing of new teaching staff. Learners review ‘micro lessons’ taught by applicants. This has been found to be useful for short listing, and learners appreciate the opportunity, even if they are coming towards the end of their time at the College and may never be taught by the applicant.

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The Piggott School routinely undertakes reviews of each subject area for each Key Stage. As part of the review, the school carries out group discussions with learners in order to incorporate their views and identify possible improvements. The learners are drawn from across the ability ranges and discussion is ‘full and frank’. This practice has been in place for two years now and has been supplemented this year by the appointment of two learner governors to the board. Furthermore, the school is now starting to ask learners for feedback on lessons. Lesson observation also forms part of the review process. Learners are briefed about what the school would deem to be a good lesson so that they are aware of what the school and its staff are working towards, what to look for and how to give feedback. Staff are said to be comfortable with the arrangement, but it is critical that the right ethos is created in which this type of activity can take place.

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During 2005/06 Chichester College agreed procedures for the inclusion of learners within the teaching and learning observation process. The basic principle is that members of the Student Executive should be involved in direct observation of teaching and learning in the college, as part of the wider “Student Voice” programme.

How will it work in practice?
- For an agreed number of lessons in each curriculum area members of the Student Executive would participate in observations of teaching and learning alongside college observers (line managers, Advanced Practitioners)
- After the observation the two observers would discuss the lesson and agree on the key strengths and areas for development, and a grade for the lesson
- The feedback would be delivered to the teacher by the college observer without the participation of the student observer. However, the teacher would be asked whether they would like any feedback directly from the student observer, and if so requested, would be provided at the same time, and in the company of, the staff observer
- No student observer would observe lessons in the curriculum area in which they are studying
- Student observers would be required to exhibit exemplary behaviour, attitude and approach to their own studies, in order not to undermine the credibility and value of the initiative
- Student observers would make a commitment to confidentiality
- Training will be given to the student observers in the Autumn Term – this will include practice observation, with college observers, of teachers who have volunteered to help
- The process would be monitored and evaluated at regular intervals, with reports to the Quality Forum and the Staff Council

Benefits of the approach
- An important student perspective is brought formally into the observation process
- Fresh insights by students could be provided for the benefit of both the observer and teacher observed – impact on quality of judgement, and on the observer’s and observee’s own learning
- A visible and high profile afforded to the “Student Voice”
- Could provide high visibility to members of the Student Executive as role models / exemplars of student approach and practice

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