Feedback giving and getting feedback from learners

All inspections will focus primarily on the experiences and expectations of individual learners... providers should have effective systems for gathering feedback, including customer surveys, learner satisfaction surveys and leaver surveys and act upon the feedback to make improvements.


What?
- give learners feedback on their performance
- ... and their learning
- find out what learners think
- questioning and listening skills
- learner satisfaction surveys

Why?
Since the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) started in 2001, learning provision has been assessed in terms of the perspective and experience of the learner. Following the lead given by the common inspection framework, Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) inspectors focus on the impact of providers’ policies and practices on the learner. Phrases such as ‘the learner experience’ or ‘the learner journey’ regularly appear in reports, consultative papers and policy documents.

The LSC carries out a series of national learner satisfaction surveys, providing useful benchmark data for local surveys. Against this background, and with the latest input from government in the form of Success for All, learner satisfaction is core to any judgement about the quality and impact of learning programmes and learning providers.

Giving and getting feedback are essential to the whole process of reviewing learning. It’s a two-way process. Employers and providers give learners feedback on their performance and learning. Learners reflect on their experience of learning and give feedback in their turn.

There are immediate benefits. Learners who are given good feedback on their learning are more likely to:
- make decisions and solve problems for themselves
- learn from their mistakes
- see learning as positive – something they are involved in rather than something that’s done to them
- think about their own needs and development
- consult others or work as part of a team when learning.

Employers and providers that take account of what learners think are more likely to:
- know what’s good about their provision, and what needs improving
- focus on the impact of what they do on learners and learning
- make changes to improve learners’ experience
- head off serious complaints
- improve their reputation in the market.

Key facts
- Giving learners feedback on their learning leads to significant improvements in achievement rates.
- Less than a third of work-based learning providers have good arrangements for collecting learners’ views.
- Many providers failed to act on the information gathered from learners to make improvements.
- Informal channels for gathering learner feedback are better developed than more structured, formal methods.
How?

Give learners feedback on their performance

People on work-based learning programmes are there mostly to learn the skills and knowledge to do a job and give a good start to their careers. They are bound to be interested in how well they are doing at work, and they appreciate feedback on it. The time that trainers, assessors and workplace supervisors take to comment specifically on learners’ performance is time well spent.

Feedback on learners’ performance at work can be given:
- formally, as part of reviews and assessments
- informally, as part of the everyday process of learning at work.

Formal feedback tends to reflect a learner’s performance over a period of time. Learners may have done a range of different tasks during the time, or even worked in different areas of the organisation. The value of this type of feedback is that it gives learners an overall picture of how well they are doing. But there’s a risk that it can be vague and over-general.

Informal feedback, in the best cases, is more or less continuous. Supervisors and other experienced work colleagues can guide and support learners many times a day, perhaps without realising it. Just by giving a word of encouragement here, or a piece of advice there, they help learners gain mastery of their skills. By taking the opportunity to show, correct and congratulate learners on a task or a small part of a task, they provide continuous feedback.

When giving feedback:
- start with the positive – what the learner has done well
- describe areas where improvements could be made
- state clearly what the learner needs to do as a result of the feedback.

. . . and their learning

Good relationships with learners are based on openness, trust and growing confidence in their abilities. Learners are likely to gain this confidence if they get regular feedback on how well they are doing in their learning.

It’s useful to distinguish learning from performance. They influence each other, of course, but someone whose level of performance is poor compared to another person or a set of standards may still be making learning gains. Focusing on these gains, which may be small in themselves, helps to build confidence in learning. Little by little this should feed into improved performance and more efficient learning.

People can improve their learning as well as their performance. Over time, learners should:
- learn more quickly and efficiently
- take more responsibility for their own learning
- make the link for themselves between learning and improved performance.

Employers and providers can recognise this by giving separate feedback on improvements in learning. The key skill, ‘Improving own learning and performance’, provides a framework for:
- setting short-term targets
- taking responsibility for planning learning and getting support
- reviewing progress.
Find out what learners think

It isn’t enough just to give learners feedback on their progress and performance. Encouraging learners to give feedback on their experience of work and learning also needs to be woven into the overall approach. Employers and providers that see their relationship with learners as a partnership are more than half way to putting learners at the centre of their own learning. It’s all part of encouraging learners to make their own, informed decisions with appropriate help and guidance.

A good way of finding out what learners think is by asking them to reflect on what they have been doing. It doesn’t have to be a big deal, just something to think about. Simple questions like these can pave the way:

- What are the main tasks you have been involved with lately, and what have you learned by doing them?
- What were you pleased with?
- Was there anything you found difficult, or would do differently next time?
- How could we help you better?

It can also be productive to ask learners what they think about the feedback they get from managers and staff. Examples are:

- ‘I’d say you need to practise a bit more before we assess your performance. What do you think?’
- ‘You need to key this report in. I can’t read your handwriting. Would you say it’s legible?’

Questioning and listening skills

It’s important to be good at asking questions and listening to the answers, when encouraging learners to give feedback. Some pointers are given in the box below.

**Questioning skills**

- Use open questions (beginning with ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘when’ and ‘where’) to start a dialogue or to find out what the learner has been doing.
- Use follow-up questions to probe deeper: ‘How did you do that?’ or ‘Tell me more about …’.
- Use closed questions (those that require the answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’) to confirm agreement or further action: ‘Would you like me to speak to your supervisor about that? or ‘We’ll include that on the action plan, OK?’.
- Use silences. Learners may be thinking of an answer and it doesn’t always help to have someone else plunge in and say something.

**Listening skills**

- Concentrate wholly on what the learner is saying – not on framing a reply.
- Listen until they have finished. Make encouraging noises if necessary, but don’t interrupt.
- Make sure your body language says you are listening (don’t go overboard though!).
- Repeat things back to learners if you aren’t quite clear, like this: ‘So, what you’re saying is you aren’t happy working on reception, am I right?’

**Learner satisfaction surveys**

*Any good business will tell you it is vital to listen to the views of customers in order to improve. In the case of . . . the post-16 education and training sector, this means the learners who are at the heart of everything we do.*

Bryan Sanderson, Chairman, The Learning and Skills Council
Learner satisfaction surveys are a systematic way of understanding learners’ experiences. The results should enable employers and providers to respond better to learners’ needs.

There is considerable variation in the extent and type of information obtained from learner surveys. Most have some way of measuring:

- general satisfaction with the quality of teaching/training
- overall satisfaction with the learning experience
- how well the programme matches expectations
- positive and negative aspects of the programme.

These are important. But it’s just as important to investigate other issues such as:

- the possible effects of the programme on learners
- learners’ attitudes to learning
- complaints that learners may have about aspects of the learning programme
- reasons that learners have for choosing a particular course or programme.

The most common method for finding out about learners’ views is to use a written questionnaire. A few commercial products are available, but many employers and providers devise and administer their own questionnaires. The information obtained from questionnaires is largely quantitative, as there is generally little space for the respondent to offer qualitative feedback. Focus groups, learner forums and face-to-face interviews can be used to provide more detailed, qualitative information.

Results from learner surveys can be used to:

- provide information for discussions inside the organisation
- contribute to the annual self-assessment report and development plan
- specify what improvements are needed
- make changes, e.g. to the structure and delivery of programmes
- provide material for marketing and/or publicity.

**When and where?**

Giving feedback to learners is a continuous process. Informal feedback on work performance can be given daily, several times a day. The same applies to informal feedback on learning in a group or one-to-one session. Formal feedback should be given less frequently, through it should be done regularly, e.g. as part of reviews and assessments.

Getting feedback from learners is similarly continuous. Informal feedback can be obtained from learners on:

- how well they think they are doing in both their work and learning
- the feedback given to them – do they think it’s fair and accurate? Would they want to add to it in any way?
- all aspects of their training programmes generally – are they learning and progressing? Do they enjoy it? Could they suggest improvements?

Formal feedback should be obtained through learner satisfaction surveys. Learners should have the opportunity to respond at least once a year. It’s good practice to give learners the chance to complete one survey soon after they start, another in the middle of their programme and a final one near the end of their programme.
Case studies and examples

Giving feedback on performance

An engineering employer that recruits between fifteen and twenty apprentices a year provides constant feedback to apprentices on how well they are progressing. The training manager explains:

“We start on day one by going through the results of their selection test. We tell them how they did on the aptitude test and manual handling exercises, and in their interviews. Then they do an initial assessment test to identify key skills needs. We go through the results of that with them as well, and get them to agree what goes in the learning plan.

Once they’re on the shop floor, it’s the supervisor’s job to look after them and make sure they’re picking things up the right way. Every apprentice is with a designated MA supervisor. They get an extra amount in their pay packets for supervising apprentices, and some of them have been through the same process themselves.

When I’m going round the workshops I can generally hear the supervisors telling apprentices how to do something that bit quicker or better. It keeps them on their toes alright.”

Getting feedback on the learning process

One provider that supports national companies has developed a systematic approach to obtaining feedback from learners at all stages of the learning process.

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<tr>
<th>Learning process</th>
<th>Feedback obtained on:</th>
<th>Methods used</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Recruitment and selection</td>
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<td>• accuracy of individual learning plan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• support from supervisor/mentor</td>
<td>• questionnaire and focus group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Off-the-job learning</td>
<td>• relevance to work and training</td>
<td>• review</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• quality of teaching and support</td>
<td>• questionnaire and focus group</td>
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<td>• quality of facilities and resources</td>
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<td>Assessment, monitoring and review</td>
<td>• rate of progress made</td>
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<td>• quality of guidance received</td>
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<td>• access to support</td>
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The information obtained is summarised and discussed at team meetings. Changes are regularly made to various aspects of the programme, to fine tune them so that they meet learners’ needs.
Learner feedback

Ideas for other ways of getting learner feedback are given below.

- Open communication channels, e.g. suggestion boxes – to facilitate and invite gathering of information.
- Consultations on specific topics – to develop new ideas and gauge opinions on possible changes.
- Getting learners directly involved in specific tasks, e.g. market research, preparing publicity materials – to build in learners’ views first hand.
- Forming learner groups to ‘shadow’ decision-making bodies – to give learners real input into the main decision-making groups in the organisation.

Resources

- Learning and Skills Council (2002) Seeking the Views of Learners: Findings from the LSC’s first national learner satisfaction survey 2001/02.
- NIACE/LSDA (2002) Listening to Learners

Stay in touch

- www.lsc.gov.uk
- www.ldsa.gov.uk
- www.qca.org.uk

Checklist

- What formal systems does your organisation use to give feedback to learners?
- How much feedback is given to learners informally?
- How could the way in which learners are given feedback on their performance at work be improved?
- What about the way in which they are given feedback on the progress they are making in their learning?
- How do you encourage learners to reflect on their performance and their learning?
- How good is your organisation at listening to what learners say?
- How could you improve the way in which you ask questions and listen to the answers?
- What methods does your organisation use to survey learner satisfaction?
- How often are surveys undertaken?
- What general aspects of learners’ experiences do the surveys measure?
- What specific aspects are investigated in more depth?
- How are the findings from learner surveys used?
- What recent changes have been made to programmes as a result?