

Listening to Learners - Development Ideas

1.0 Introduction and background

1.1 Why this work is important

It is clear that if the government is to achieve the ambitious targets set out in its Skills Strategy¹ there is going to have to be a step change in approaches to taking account of the views of individuals.

Recent policy documents² recognise the importance of taking account of the views of individuals in order to:

- raise aspirations and skills levels of employees;
- provide informed choices through improved access to information, advice and guidance;
- link learning to individual need, employability and progression;
- re-engage individuals not currently involved in learning activities.

The needs of employers are rightly highlighted, as is stimulating a demand for learning at level 2 (or for that provision that leads to it). Recent policy has also led to significant public investment in infrastructure designed to support these processes; e.g. Sector Skills Councils and improved information, advice and guidance services. Alongside this there has been a greater focusing of priorities for funding to nationally identified targets as well as those in regional strategic documents.

Much has been done to address the market failures of the current system in providing the skills to ensure an economically competitive and socially cohesive region, however it is not clear whether this is enough. The government's focus of public investment on level 2 qualifications presents a number of challenges, not least that resources are being targeted at those individuals (or communities) where the view is held that *learning is not for me*.

NIACE, as the leading independent organisation focused on adults wherever they learn, has for many years been carrying out surveys on adult participation in learning. The overall message has been, despite the raft of policies aimed at widening participation: "if at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed."³ But there are other messages too from our national research:

- Workforce participation plays a crucial role in determining engagement. Roughly equal proportions of full time, part time and unemployed workers participate in learning (47%, 45% and 46% respectively), whereas adults outside the workforce are significantly less likely to do so.
- Participation in learning decreases with age. The decline is particularly steep among those aged over 55. Nevertheless, since 1996 participation rates have shown some increase among older adults of working age.
- Prior qualification is an important factor influencing participation in learning. There is also a strong association between the number of years spent in full time education and the propensity to engage in learning as an adult.
- The proportion of women and men currently participating in learning is roughly equal. However, women are significantly more likely than men to say that they have not participated in learning since leaving full time education.⁴

Further qualitative research clearly shows that successful approaches to involving and encouraging the progression of those individuals least attracted to learning: *start from where the learner is*.⁵

¹ DfES (2003) 21st Century Skills: realising our potential Cm5810 (London: HMSO).

² DfES (2005) *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work* (Cm 6483), Part 2, pp. 43-4,

³ Helena Kennedy (1997) *Learning Works: Widening participation in further education* (Coventry: FEFCE).

⁴ Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett (2004), *Business as Usual? The NIACE survey in adult participation in learning 2004* (NIACE: Leicester)

⁵ See Appendix 3: literature review.



In order to do this providers involved in widening participation have to listen to learners at all stages of the curriculum process:

- at the course design stage;
- during planning;
- within delivery;
- in terms of assessment (formative and summative);
- within evaluation processes.

At the same time, providers have to work within a funding and planning structure that is largely top-down, and created without recourse to the processes outlined above. There have been some encouraging developments with the LSCs learner surveys, but these only go as far as measuring existing customer satisfaction. They do not address the fundamental question that concerns us at this stage in the skills strategy implementation: *how do we engage (and progress to level 2) those who are not there?*

To achieve this there will need to be a meaningful interface between what learners and communities want on the ground and the skills needs of employers (addressed by the Regional Skills Alliance/SWESA). It has been a SWFRESA & now SWESA priority that there should be 'no wrong door' for individuals wanting to access learning. Each time someone encounters that 'wrong door' it represents not just a waste of resources, but a sacrifice of human potential.

Ensuring we get this right is therefore a strategic concern and one that needs to sit alongside the other processes and resources allocated to achieve the region's priorities.

1.2 Literature review: why listen to learners?

Since the 1999 Green Paper *The Learning Age*, the government has professed a commitment to making the stress on learner-driven provision a guiding principle in the development of post-compulsory learning. The subsequent white paper, *Learning to Succeed*, assigned to Learning Partnerships the task of ensuring that both learners and potential learners were consulted on the quality, content and accessibility of provision.⁶ Public policy now seeks to connect more with local needs and to enable existing and potential learners to play a leading role in shaping the kind of learning opportunities available to them. Raising demand for and improving access to learning are central aims of the Skills Strategy and *Skills for Life*. Meanwhile, the 2003 Skills Strategy announced the Testbed Learning Communities initiative to trial and evaluate strategies to support communities to raise aspirations and demand for learning and to develop their learning and skills base in line with local employment opportunities.

There is now a considerable body of research to suggest that engaging adults in learning, and especially those who had negative formative learning experiences, means developing learning that is relevant and integral to their lives. Work carried out by NIACE for the Department for Education and Skills, for example, confirms that unless learning provision is relevant to people, unless it responds to their interests and needs and takes account of their life situation and circumstances, then it will be neither sought nor valued by them. People who have poor school experiences and who see education institutions as remote and intimidating will only take advantage of learning opportunities which are both locally-based and connected to their lives and concerns. Achieving wider participation means allowing communities to set their own agenda. Similarly, people are far more likely to engage and continue in learning when programmes are designed in direct response to their interests and priorities than when they are offered conventional pre-determined and pre-packaged provision.⁷ The evidence

⁶ DfEE (2000) *consultative Fora: Good practice for Learning Partnerships* (London: DfEE)

⁷ Sue Duffen and Jane Thompson (2003) *Talking it Through: a practitioners' guide to consulting learners in adult and community learning* (Leicester: NIACE).



not only of national but also of international research confirms that finding out what people want is critical to developing a strategy to stimulate demand. Unless the interests and wishes of adults are genuinely taken into account in the planning, content and delivery of learning provision, there will be no real change in adult participation patterns. Consequently, successfully attracting new learners into learning often means developing creative and innovative approaches which take learning into the community, into settings which are familiar, reassuring and inspiring. It means being prepared to engage learners on their own territory and on their own terms.⁸

Listening to learners is also high on the post-16 raising standards agenda. Learner feedback is recognised as occupying a central place in the quality improvement process and the pursuit of best practice. A key element of the quality improvement strategies of LSCs and LEA adult and community learning (ACL) providers, and indeed of other providers, is the need to engage with learners in the evaluation of provision and to demonstrate that they have done so effectively.⁹

It has been stressed, however, that when gathering learners' views as part of the quality improvement process, it must be recognised that the learning achievements and outcomes most valued by learners (such as growth in self-confidence and self-esteem, or the ability to do things they could not do before) often differ from those most valued by policy makers (qualifications and 'employability'). To function effectively, this approach also needs to include a mechanism for reporting back to learners the results of their feedback.¹⁰ And of course, it is not sufficient to canvass the views of current learners: those of potential learners too must be surveyed. As recent work has argued, pursuit of the quality agenda does not necessarily mean engaging with learners in ways which are likely to widen participation. If collecting learner feedback is undertaken primarily as a managerial exercise, it may not be able to take advantage of the ways in which the experience and insights of learners and those not yet engaged in formal programmes of learning can help planners and providers widen participation and achieve a range of policy objectives.

Genuine consultation implies discussion, negotiation, capacity building, and partner-like arrangements between professionals and ordinary people in the interests of sustainable, bottom-up approaches to social change at the local level. It relates to social inclusion, community cohesion, active citizenship and participatory democracy. There needs to be a serious commitment to work alongside, rather than at arms length from, local people. Engagement of this kind is likely to be empowering rather than manipulative, and is much more likely to raise demand for learning.¹¹ Research carried out by NIACE for both the present and other projects indicates that a considerable lack of genuine understanding remains among planners and practitioners about the purpose, meaning and great potential of engaging in serious consultation with learners.¹²

As regional overviews above makes clear, there are many adults in the region who, for social, financial and economic reasons, have not benefited from their past involvement with education. This is one of the principal challenges which the SWESA has identified if it is to succeed in its aims to raise skills levels within the region, increase economic productivity and promote social inclusion.

Increasing skills levels among adults in the region means encouraging more people into learning, including those from disadvantaged communities and others who are not attracted to the idea of learning. The SWESA has the potential to provide a nexus which can ensure that there is a 'fit'

⁸ Verionica McGivney (2002) *Spreading the Word: reaching out to new learners* (Leicester: NIACE); Jan Eldred with Kay Snowden (2005) *A-Z of Widening Participation: ideas and inspirations from the Adult and Community Learning Fund* (Leicester: NIACE).

⁹ Mark Ravenhall (2001) *Listening to Learners* (London: LSDA).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Jane Thompson (2004) 'Lost in Translation?' in *Adults Learning*; Chris Jude (2003) *Consulting Adults* (Leicester: NIACE).

¹² Sue Duffen and Bryan Merton (2001) *Listening to Learners: How Learning Partnerships are seeking to hear the voice of the adult learner* (Leicester: NIACE).



between the needs of employers, individuals and local communities in the shaping of a sustainable learning strategy for the region. There are a number of initiatives with employers, businesses & providers so that the region's skills policies and investments can be aligned to its current and future demands for skills. It is also clear, though, that without effective strategies for listening to learners, the SWESA will be substantially hampered in any attempt either to respond to the requirements of government and the pleas of employers that it increases demand for learning, or to achieve its professed aim of fostering social inclusion through the expansion of a skilled citizenry.

1.3 Suggested approaches from the research

The following approaches are those generated by the 'Better Deal for Individuals' Project in the Humberside & North Yorkshire Region:

1. Creating a listening culture.

The RSP should take the lead in influencing a culture of listening to learners and potential learners as a body and through its partners. For example, local LSCs may have the potential to place a premium on approaches that exhibit real attentiveness to learners, potential learners and communities. The LSC regionally, or the RSP itself, might wish to develop a scheme where organisations work towards a 'kitemark' that will demonstrate their responsiveness to the views of learners.

2. Providing a mechanism for voices to be heard at a regional level.

'Funnels' or similar frameworks should be developed to capture and bring together feedback from a number of sources, including:

- Existing consultation exercises. RSP strategic partners should be encouraged to make use of the opportunities offered by their providers' and partners' consultation mechanisms to ask specific questions, with responses being fed back through.
- Those working closely with learners and potential learners, particularly learner champions, learner representatives, learning ambassadors, Trades Union representatives, and Information, Advice and Guidance. Focus groups would be an appropriate way of capturing and transmitting views.
- Dialogue with existing learner forums.

3. Sponsoring specific consultations.

In addition to capturing feedback from existing sources, the RSP could sponsor specific policy-focused opportunities to enable the influence of learners and potential learners. For example:

- Bespoke consultation exercises that would not just involve learners. These would be an appropriate way for the RSP to engage with groups or communities where it has prioritised widening participation in learning.
- Approach Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum to explore the potential for working with the voluntary and community sector as a way of engaging with learners and potential learners. Such cooperation could build on the important role of the VCS as a source of expertise and conduit for information identified in the LSC's *Working Together* strategy. (In an exemplary development in the South East, the VCS infrastructure body is co-ordinating the Regional Assembly's Partners' Support Unit to enable greater involvement in and influence of the Assembly by VCOs.)
- Commission an independent organisation to convene a regional group of learners and potential learners, working with, for example, Adult Learners' Week and other Award winners, nominees identified by voluntary and community organisations (through Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Forum) and local providers and existing local learners' forums. This could have the potential to move from a one-off event providing feedback to the RSP (which might include how best to obtain feedback from learners and potential learners) to an ongoing regional forum.



4. Establishing a Learners' Advisory Group

In order to create and monitor the workings of 'funnels', and additional actions of the type suggested in the above recommendation, the RSP should consider establishing a regional Learners' Advisory Group, acting as a sub-group reporting to the RSP Board (who could also use it as a mechanism to keep people informed). The role of such a group would be to:

- Set a framework of expectations not just of how much consultation but of who is consulted, how, about what, where their voices go and how they are responded to.
- Consider the implication of feedback from work with learners and potential learners from around the region, provided that this could be gathered together and analysed.
- Secure consultation on important specific questions where there is little or contradictory evidence from previous consultation or where the views of particular groups have not been adequately sought.
- Commission additional mechanisms for feedback or ongoing dialogue.
- Explore the idea of a 'kitemark' that providers and other bodies can work towards to demonstrate their responsiveness to the views of learners and potential learners.
- Disseminate promising practice and celebrate it.
- Be a place for people to report into - what is going on, how it is working.
- Explore what has not worked and why.
- Provide a sounding board for professionals to test out their ideas; activity will give rise to more and different learners depending on the quality of ideas.
- Provide supported space and information for practitioners/providers to make considered decisions, and act as a critical friend.

To function in this way, it would be important to ensure that membership was not subject to 'provider capture'. It would need to include a strong proportion of learners that went beyond token membership. Ideally, there would be links with a regional forum or local learners' forums that could field members to such an advisory group and provide a space for dialogue with other learners. An advisory group could, also ideally, include representation from bodies such as the voluntary and community sector, trades unions, local authorities (because they function across the region and have 'well-being' powers), health and regeneration partnerships. It is likely that much could be learned from Connexions, Early Years Development Partnerships or Sure Start about how to successfully constitute such a group.

