



# Learning from learners: a key to success

# What can providers learn from learners?

## *Consultation today builds better opportunities for learners tomorrow*

During a consultation event for learners (part of Adult Learners' Week 2008), participants highlighted a wide range of potential benefits for adult learning providers from listening to learners. These include quality improvement; better management and planning; and enhanced reputation, relationships and market share. This leaflet summarises the discussions. It is hoped managers, governors and staff will find it useful in producing strategies and charters on learner involvement.

### **Benefits for providers**

#### **Quality improvement**

Providers can use a good knowledge of learners' needs, hopes, experiences and skills to support individual and group learning, tailor their provision better and address any issues earlier. This means more satisfied learners, better retention, completion and achievement rates, more consistent quality, and positive evidence for self-assessment and inspections.

#### **Better course, programme and organisational management**

Learner feedback helps informed decision-making, staff and organisational self-assessment, better curriculum development, more efficient and sustainable provision, closer match between staff and different groups and courses, and learner involvement in course delivery.

#### **Better planning to meet policy and organisational objectives**

Learners suggest that most consultation activity focuses on trying to find out what learners are getting, or could get, from a programme or service. However, a good understanding of learners' aspirations, needs and interests also helps planning and funding decisions, and addresses equality and diversity and learner involvement requirements. It supports effective use of limited resources and produces important information for policy makers and funders. Learners and providers often have similar messages and can be allies.

#### **Improved reputation, relationships and market share**

Meaningful consultation leads to better relationships with learners. It offers opportunities to explain to learners the possibilities and limits of planning processes, and enhance profile and reputation. It can mean more, and more diverse, learners.

## Benefits for learners

Consultation can benefit learners by encouraging learning and by helping them to get their voice heard.

### Encourages learning

Effective consultation helps learners clarify what they want to learn, feel encouraged to try new things, or risk having another go at something they've tried before. It's an "*opportunity on the side for IAG (information, advice and guidance)*", according to learners.

### Finding a voice

If it's done well, consultation enables people to get their voice heard – to tell it like it is from their perspective, to say what they want, to praise and criticise, and to advise and encourage.

## Make a difference

Involving learners is a democratic and empowering approach. The aim of consultation is for learners to influence what's available, now and in the future, and to shape policy. Some programmes and learners are subsidised by providers but learners also pay for much of their learning through taxes and fees.



# ● Principles for good learner consultation

Learners suggest a number of principles for effective consultation.

## **Prioritise learner consultation**

- *Introduce* a learner involvement and consultation strategy and team.
- *Involve* learners from the start as partners and co-designers.
- *Plan* consultation carefully. Use a range of approaches to suit different people, and be flexible about timing and location.
- *Ensure* the consultation findings reach the whole organisation.

## **Get the preliminaries right**

- *Be clear* about the reason for consulting and how/whether you can provide what might be asked for.
- *Make sure* learners get accurate and timely information, including details of financial and other support. Get it translated, where necessary, and distribute it to places where learners and potential learners go.
- *Arrange* any necessary training and support for involving learners, for example action research.
- *Remember* good consultation is a two-way process.
- *Inspire* a passion for learning. Show it's not all about targets.

## **Treat learners with respect**

- *Use* staff who are good at working with adults. Ensure **all** staff treat everyone well. Don't patronise people or assume you know their needs.
- *Recognise* and use learners' expertise and skills.
- *Use* inclusive approaches and take account of disabilities, different cultures and faiths.
- *Think about* dress. Some people find informal clothes discourteous; others may dislike formality.
- *Recognise* it may be very hard for some learners to become involved.
- *Don't push* learners to give views or information they are reluctant to. Encourage them to do so.
- *Be open* about what is **not** possible, and explain why: *“Things to avoid – too high an expectation and that goes both ways. If we think the provider has got a bottomless pit and can do everything for us that is not going to help us. Or if they think they can just take a lecturer out of anywhere, that isn't possible.”*



### **Welcome positive challenges**

- *Encourage* responses. Some learners and potential learners are likely to be sceptical about the value of consultation. “When it comes to questionnaires, people ask ‘does anyone ever read them?’” “One person I know is so fed up with surveys because they don’t ask questions that are relevant to the situation they are in.”
- *Consult* on big issues as well as course details – for example, on future provision and use of resources. Ask difficult questions (for instance, “Why are we losing our learners?”) and be prepared for learners to tell you what they think and to ask questions in response.

### **Always follow through**

- *Follow up* all queries, and make sure consultation findings are made available, at least to those involved.
- *Respond* to as much as you can, as quickly as you can. Create action plans with time limits.

## ● Ways of consulting learners

Learners' experiences suggest that providers tend to rely on a few commonly used methods, not all of which are well-regarded by learners:

- **course or event evaluation forms:** mainly completed by individuals but occasionally by a group – some learners are not keen on forms, regarding them as potentially threatening, difficult to complete, or lacking in clarity about their purposes or how the information will be used;
- **discussion** in initial assessments, skills assessments, about individual learning plans, or in individual tutorials;
- **surveys** of various kinds, such as satisfaction or intention surveys;
- **suggestion boxes and 'tasters';** and
- **face-to-face contact** with people such as union representatives, IAG workers, learning managers, job centre staff, tutors, mentors and link workers – this approach is favoured by learners.

More innovative approaches include:

- participative 'open' events;
- focus groups, forums, social networks or social events;
- 'Big Brother Diary' room; and
- learner representatives or peers – learning champions (or 'ambassadors', 'mentors' or 'learning reps'), members of inspection teams, course reps, in students' unions, or on Student Liaison Committees, Boards of Studies or Academic Boards.

## ● Listening to more and different learners

Learners feel that some learners, particularly those studying full-time or on programmes leading to a qualification, are more likely to be consulted, and that providers should make particular efforts to listen to other, less visible groups, such as young adults who have dropped out of education; learners with a range of disabilities and learning difficulties; part-time and/or online or distance learners; retired people; women with young children, and carers; learners on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses; prisoners and ex-offenders; long-term unemployed or homeless people; hostel or refuge residents; rural residents and people learning for 'leisure'.

Providers will recognise these groups. It is significant that learners also see them as lacking proper chances to have their say.

## ● Tips for more inclusive consultation

To involve these groups, learners recommend (in addition to general good practice) providers should:

- *avoid* approaches that remind people of school – aim for a relaxed setting that sounds fun (but useful), interesting and (if need be) confidential;
- *take account* of dyslexia, and literacy or language issues in any written materials, and make appropriate support available for events;
- *permit* anonymous responses to address any feelings of intimidation;
- *include* potential learners (as far as possible);
- *build in* practical arrangements such as childcare and ensure timings are right (e.g., they don't clash with religious festivals, and suit older people using bus passes, and parents collecting from school);
- *work with* trade unions and Union Learning Reps to get employer 'buy-in', and consider setting up learner forums;
- *remember*, people with health issues may need more time and different approaches;
- *provide* clear information – people on low incomes will worry about hidden costs – and use plain English: *"Whatever you do, you have to have it in a language that everyone can understand. Simple and direct as possible"*;
- *support* learning mentors, champions or advocates, e.g., providing training, recognition and access to decision-makers – *"We as learners can encourage other people through our enthusiasm... Sometimes it is the person you least expect to do it!"*;
- *invite* at least two learners together to attend meetings; and
- *locate* events where people live or work, and let people know about physical access.

## ● Learners say...

“If we’re heard properly, it’s great. If you’re not listened to, it can have the opposite effect. Also if asked for ideas but nothing happens, it’s ‘empty promises’. If it can’t be done, say why or say when it can.”

“Changes happen but no-one informed the people... so I don’t feel we get consulted.”

“No-one sits down and asks the users. They work on the assumption that one course sold out the previous year so they will do it again.”

“We have responsibilities as learners. If we’re not happy with stuff we have to change it and not just criticise it.”

“Success builds success. If they are providing the right requirement, they will be successful and the students will increase.”



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