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The Status and Reputation of the Further Education System

Research study
conducted for the
Learning and Skills
Council

July 2007

Of interest to everyone involved with
the further education system

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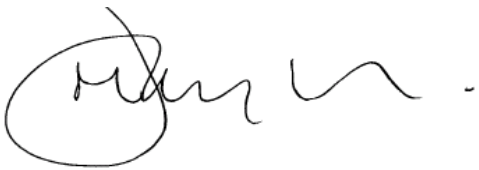
Foreword

I have always maintained that building the reputation of the further education system is pivotal to delivering the education and training needs of this country. If FE has a good reputation, then everyone benefits.

I am therefore pleased to introduce this important research which, for the first time, looks at the current reputation of FE. We commissioned Ipsos MORI to talk to hundreds of people who work in and with the system, and who benefit from it. We asked them what their views are of FE, what drives their perceptions and what the key priorities are for FE, given that there has never been a better time to influence its direction. The findings are enlightening: 57 per cent of those polled think that FE is well respected, with many recognising the contribution that FE makes to the national economy and productivity. Much of this satisfaction is experienced locally, with 67 per cent of respondents recognising that FE has a major impact on improving local communities. Overall, those we questioned tended to be more positive about FE provision locally than nationally, and while those who use the FE system are generally satisfied, FE remains largely invisible nationally.

The findings of this research will influence the work of the FE Reputation Steering Group, which was set up as a result of the White Paper *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (published by the then DfES in March 2006), and our *agenda for change*. The group comprises over 20 colleges and learning providers. I am delighted that these individuals and organisations have stepped forward and that FE will begin to benefit nationally from its well deserved and highly regarded local reputation.

Our commitment has always been to give young people, adults and employers access to high-quality training to enable them to prosper in work and in life. We are also dedicated to helping the FE system to operate in a way that allows it to be recognised for its unique contribution to the economic success of this country. This research helps us to identify areas of concern, allows us to agree (with our partners) the direction of travel, and gives us the evidence we need to establish plans for the future.



Mark Haysom
LSC Chief Executive

Introduction

- 1 This report presents the findings of a research study conducted by the Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute for the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).
- 2 The overall aim of this research is to assess how key stakeholders – both within the further education (FE) system and externally – perceive the status and reputation of that system.

Research background

- 3 The LSC and what was previously the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) have been working with the FE system (and particularly with FE colleges) to implement the reforms set out in *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*, and to respond to the challenges set out by Lord Leitch in his recent report *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: World Class Skills* (published by HM Treasury in December 2006).
- 4 One of the key issues is the need to improve awareness and understanding of the role of the FE system among stakeholders. To achieve this, the LSC commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct research among key stakeholders on their understanding and perceptions of the role of the FE system.
- 5 This research provides a baseline measure of perceptions and attitudes against which future progress can be measured.

Methodology

- 6 The research was conducted in two phases.
 - The first phase involved 30 in-depth interviews with senior stakeholders, including MPs, journalists, student representatives, LSC national and regional members, and individuals from think tanks, local authorities, regional development agencies, Government Offices, sector skills councils, business representative organisations, trade unions, training providers, FE colleges, sixth-form colleges and universities). The purpose of these interviews was to identify key issues for inclusion in the survey. The interviews took place in January and February 2007.
 - The second phase of the research consisted of structured telephone interviews with 874 stakeholders. Fieldwork took place during March and April 2007.

Multivariate analysis

- 7 In addition to standard analysis of the data, other techniques were also used.
 - **Multiple regression** (also known as Key Driver Analysis) was used to examine the relative importance of a range of factors in explaining overall satisfaction with – and advocacy towards – the FE system.

- Chi-squared Automatic Interaction Detector (CHAID) analysis was conducted to segment stakeholders according to their propensity to express satisfaction with – and advocacy towards – the FE system.

8 CHAID uses statistical techniques to select:

- the key determinants or drivers (such as stakeholder type, relationship with the LSC or other attitudes) of the characteristic
- which groups are most and least likely to exhibit these characteristics.

9 The benefit that this technique has over the standard analysis is that it identifies the relative strength of variables. Those identified nearer to the top of the CHAID tree have a greater association with the dependant than other variables included in the model (whether they are identified or not).

Interpretation of the data

10 It should be emphasised that it is just a sample of stakeholders who have been interviewed – not all of them. This means that all results are subject to sampling tolerances, and that not all differences are statistically significant. This report only comments on findings that are statistically significant.

11 Where percentages do not add up to 100, this is due either to computer rounding, the exclusion of ‘don’t know’ categories, or multiple answers.

12 An asterisk (*) denotes values above zero but less than half a per cent.

13 ‘Net’ figures represent the balance of opinion on attitudinal questions. In the case of a ‘net satisfaction’ figure, this represents the percentage satisfied on a particular issue or service, less the percentage dissatisfied. For example, if an aspect of service records 40 per cent satisfaction and 25 per cent dissatisfaction, the ‘net satisfaction’ figure is +15 points.

Structure of the report

14 This report is organised into two main sections.

- ‘Summary and Implications’, which summarises the key findings and implications of the research.
- ‘The FE System’, which discusses in detail stakeholders’ perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the FE system.

Publication of the data

15 To protect the LSC’s interest in ensuring that the findings of this research are accurately reported, the publication of the research data is subject to the advance approval of Ipsos MORI. Such approval will only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misrepresentation.

Acknowledgements

- 16 Ipsos MORI would like to thank Rob Cirin, Sue Ashe and Julie Nugent from the LSC for their help and guidance throughout this study. We would also like to thank the stakeholders who took part.

Summary and Implications

The FE system

- 17 The term ‘further education system’ was introduced by Sir Andrew Foster’s report, *Realising the Potential: A review of the future role of further education colleges*, published by the then DfES in November 2005.
- 18 For the purpose of this research, ‘the FE system’ includes FE colleges; work based learning providers, other providers and also includes school sixth forms.
- 19 Stakeholders are generally positive about the FE system, and recognise that it is a key factor in meeting the Government’s wider goals on economic competitiveness, social inclusion and community cohesion.
- 20 However, the qualitative findings show that when stakeholders talk about the FE system, they are essentially thinking about FE and sixth-form colleges.
- 21 Two-thirds (64 per cent) of respondents believe that the activities of the FE system have a major impact on the national economy and productivity. A similar proportion – 67 per cent – believe that the FE system has a major impact on improving local communities. Three in five (57 per cent) regard the FE system as well respected.
- 22 The majority of stakeholders also feel that the system has made good progress in recent years: over three in five believe that the quality of provision and the general estate and buildings have improved (63 per cent and 61 per cent respectively).
- 23 Half of stakeholders (50 per cent) believe that choice of provision has improved – more than twice as many as say that it has got worse (18 per cent). An identical proportion – 50 per cent – believe that the quality of leadership within the FE system has improved. Again, this compares favourably against 6 per cent of respondents saying that it has got worse.
- 24 Overall, stakeholders tend to be more positive about FE provision locally than nationally – 69 per cent are satisfied with local provision compared with 54 per cent for national. (Research on public services conducted by Ipsos MORI has demonstrated a similar pattern.)
- 25 There is a general consensus that while users of the system are generally satisfied, on a national scale the system is invisible to the general population. Stakeholders attribute this low national profile to the absence of a sector champion; the complexity of the system and the lack of clear pathways for learners; and a general perception that the system is non-aspirational and ‘second class’ to higher education (HE).
- 26 Key Driver Analysis (see paragraph 7 for more details) shows that, in order to raise stakeholders’ satisfaction with FE provision nationally, the system needs to ensure that (in order of significance):
 - stakeholders are satisfied with their local FE provision
 - the FE system is achieving employer engagement

- the FE system is perceived to be well respected
- choice of provision is perceived to be good.

27 Furthermore, CHAID analysis (see paragraphs 80 to 88) highlights the important role that is played by local LSCs in promoting the FE system to external stakeholders: where stakeholders have a relationship with the local LSC, they are more likely to be positive about the FE system generally. The LSC plays a crucial role in acting as a champion for the FE system.

28 In focusing on these drivers, the system needs to pay attention to all stakeholder groups. Currently, there is a 'perception gap' between FE and sixth-form colleges (which are significantly more positive about the system's performance) and the rest of the stakeholder population.

29 This gap clearly needs to be brought to the attention of FE and sixth-form colleges, so that they can address it.

30 However, it is advocacy rather than satisfaction that is the key measure – the extent to which stakeholders will speak up for the system, without being asked.

31 Overall, more stakeholders are advocates than critics: 28 per cent are spontaneous advocates and 19 per cent would speak highly about the system if asked. By contrast, 18 per cent would be critical (13 per cent would be critical if asked and 5 per cent would be critical without being asked).

32 FE and sixth-form colleges are key advocates of the system, while training providers and employers who have not used the FE system are its fiercest critics.

33 The remaining stakeholder groups – schools, local authorities, other stakeholders and employers who have used FE – lie between these extremes.

34 Training providers are generally critical about the FE system and do not perceive themselves as part of it. However, these providers work extensively with employers and learners, and it is crucial that the system is perceived to be cohesive by those that it comprises as well as by those whom it seeks to engage.

35 Key Driver Analysis shows that increasing stakeholder advocacy towards the system requires more than simply raising satisfaction levels. The top three priority areas are: ensuring that stakeholders have a detailed understanding of the FE system; ensuring that stakeholders are satisfied with their local FE provision; and ensuring that the system is perceived to be effective in identifying and responding to local needs.

36 Overall, the most commonly cited key priority for the FE system over the next two to three years is employer engagement and ensuring that the system is demand-led. The system currently attracts a mean score of just 5.6 out of 10 from stakeholders for its performance in this area. This is consistent with findings that 36 per cent of employers – both users and non-users of FE – say that they have little or no understanding of the FE system.

- 37 Other key priorities identified by stakeholders include improving the range of provision on offer; reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET); and meeting local and national skill needs.

Implications

- 38 The system is making good progress, but more needs to be done to raise its national profile. The system needs to be clear and consistent about its role, and it needs to present a united front. This means ensuring that training providers are 'on message' and that there is greater collaboration between key players such as the LSC, Association of Colleges (AoC), Association of Learning Providers (ALP) and others.
- 39 The system should also seek the involvement of senior stakeholders to act as ambassadors. Forty-seven per cent of stakeholders are advocates of the FE system, and research conducted by Ipsos MORI has consistently found viral advocacy to be the most potent form of communication.
- 40 There is a need to simplify the system so that it is more easily understood by the target groups – young people, adult learners, parents and employers – as well as by those in positions of influence. Linked to this, work needs to be done on developing a clearer pathway for learners.

The FE System

Overall perceptions of the FE system

The system has a key role to play

- 41 Stakeholders are generally positive about the FE system, and recognise that it is a key factor in meeting the Government’s wider goals on economic competitiveness, social inclusion and community cohesion.
- 42 Two-thirds (64 per cent) of respondents believe that the activities of the FE system have a major impact on the national economy and productivity. A similar proportion – 67 per cent – believe that the FE system has a major impact on improving local communities. Three in ten (for each) say that it has a minor impact, and a very small minority – 2 per cent or less – say that the FE system has no impact at all on improving local communities.

Table 1: Perceptions of the impact of the FE system

Q: What kind of impact would you say the activities of the FE system have on the national economy and productivity, and on improving local communities (for example by giving people the skills they need to get work)?

Base: 874 stakeholders	National economy and productivity			Local communities		
	Major impact %	Minor impact %	No impact %	Major impact %	Minor impact %	No impact %
All stakeholders	64	31	1	67	30	2
FE colleges and sixth forms	91	9	–	95	5	1
Schools	59	34	1	55	42	2
Training providers	52	46	2	52	43	3
Local authorities	67	31	1	60	38	1
Employers – users of FE	59	34	2	66	29	3
Employers – non-users of FE	50	43	4	58	35	4
Other stakeholders	68	29	–	72	24	–

Source: Ipsos MORI

- 43 As can be seen in Table 1, FE and sixth-form colleges, local authorities and ‘other’ stakeholders (which include sector skills councils, regional development agencies, Government Offices, trade unions, LSC non-executives and business representative organisations) are most inclined to believe that the system has a major impact on the national economy.
- 44 By contrast, training providers and employers who are non-users of FE are more likely than average to say that the impact is minor. As we will go on to discuss, training providers are generally critical about the FE system, and clearly do not perceive themselves as part of it.

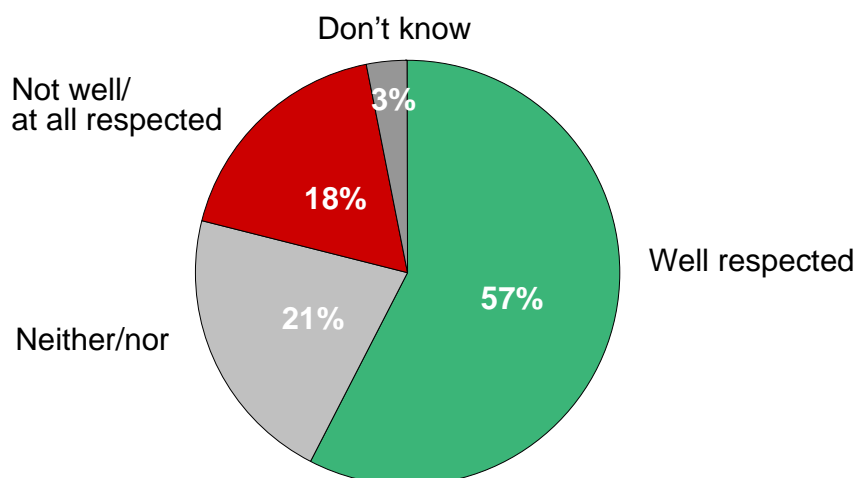
- 45 Given that training providers work extensively with employers and learners, there are major implications for the status and reputation of the system in terms of the message that is potentially conveyed.
- 46 This also has implications for how the survey data should be interpreted. As the qualitative research showed, when stakeholders talk about the FE system, they are essentially thinking about FE and sixth-form colleges.
- 47 The research findings underline the need to communicate to employers the role that the FE system plays in the wider economy. Those who recognise the important contribution of the system – such as local authorities and representative organisations (in other words the ‘Other stakeholder’ category) – should be encouraged to promote this message as widely as possible.
- 48 Training providers, employers who are non-users of FE and schools are all sceptical about the FE system’s impact on improving local communities. However, it is encouraging that employers who have used the FE system are more positive about its impact on local communities than non-users are. These views should be communicated to employers at large.

The FE system is generally well respected

- 49 Three in five stakeholders regard the FE system as well respected, although the majority cite it as being ‘fairly’ well respected (53 per cent) as opposed to ‘very’ well respected (5 per cent). The exception is schools, which are particularly positive: 12 per cent say that the FE system is ‘very’ well respected, compared with 5 per cent of all stakeholders saying this.
- 50 One in five respondents believes that the system is ‘not very well’ or ‘not at all’ respected. Again, respondents mostly opt for less extreme views: less than 1 per cent say that the system is ‘not at all’ well respected, and a quarter of respondents are neutral or unable to comment. Views are fairly consistent across stakeholder groups.

Figure 1: The reputation of FE system

Q How do you perceive the reputation of the FE System?



Base: 874 Stakeholders, 15 March – 11 April 2007

Source: Ipsos MORI

The FE system is making good progress

51 The majority of stakeholders feel that the FE system has improved in recent years.

It's very early days, but things have got better, I'd say quite radically recently.

Local partner

The inspection regime is moving in the right direction. There is less bureaucracy.

FE provider

52 Quality and choice of provision are regarded to be good by seven in ten stakeholders (see Figure 2). Two-thirds also believe that quality has improved – five times as many as believe that it has got worse.

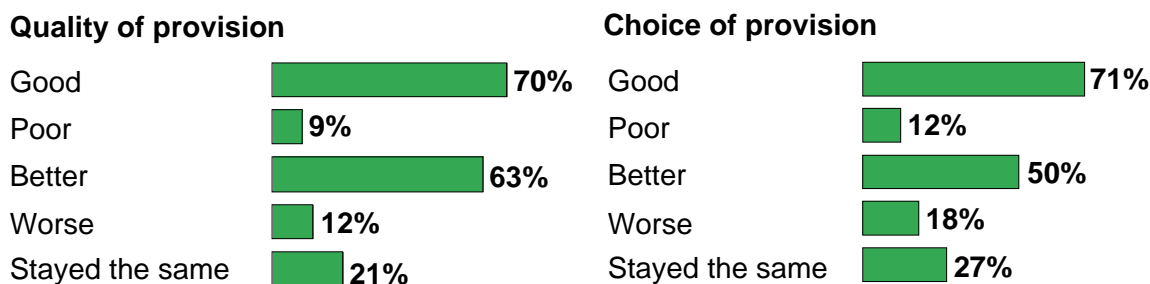
53 However, employers who have used the FE system are more critical about quality (18 per cent say that it has got worse, compared with 12 per cent of all stakeholders). 'Patchy' quality was also raised as an issue by a number of stakeholders in the qualitative research.

54 Stakeholders are less positive about improvements in the choice of provision although, again, they are more likely to say that it has got better than worse. Those within the system – FE and sixth-form colleges, and training providers – are most critical (24 per cent and 25 per cent respectively say that choice of provision has got worse, compared with 18 per cent of all stakeholders).

55 During the qualitative research process, some stakeholders complained that FE providers have increasingly focused on provision that attracts LSC funding, at the expense of greater choice for learners.

Figure 2: Perceptions of quality and choice of provision

Q Do you think the following aspects of the FE system are good or poor? And do you think that these have got better, worse or stayed the same over the past three to five years?



Base: 874 stakeholders, 15 March to 11 April 2007

Source: Ipsos MORI

56 The LSC and what was formerly the Department for Education and Skills have made a considerable investment in FE college buildings in recent years, and this is evident in the survey results. Although just half (51 per cent) of the respondents rate the general estate and buildings as 'good', three in five (61 per cent) believe that they have improved in the last three to five years.

57 FE and sixth-form colleges and 'other' stakeholders are most likely to report improvements in the general estate and buildings (83 per cent and 71 per cent respectively). Encouragingly, employers who have used the FE system are also positive (63 per cent rate this element as good, compared with 51 per cent of all stakeholders).

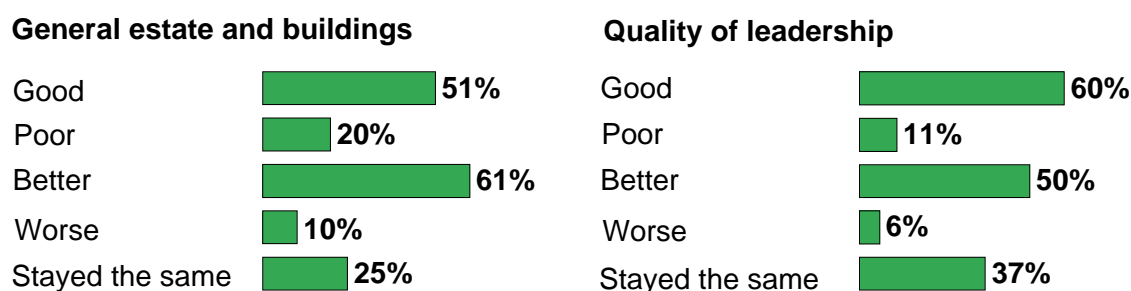
58 These proportions can be expected to increase across the board over the next few years, as the results of investment become more tangible. Just one in ten (10 per cent) respondents believes that the general estate and buildings have got worse, and a quarter (25 per cent) believe that they have stayed the same.

59 The qualitative research showed that stakeholders identified good leadership within the FE system as a key factor in boosting the status and reputation of the system. Three in five stakeholders surveyed (60 per cent) rate the quality of leadership within FE as good, compared with one in ten (11 per cent) who say that it is poor.

60 Half of the stakeholders surveyed believe that the quality of leadership has improved, while just 6 per cent say that it has got worse. FE providers are divided, with FE and sixth-form colleges responding most positively and training providers being most critical.

Figure 3: Perceptions of the general estate and buildings, and of leadership

Q Do you think the following aspects of the FE system are good or poor? And do you think that they have got better, worse or stayed the same over the past three to five years?



Base: 874 Stakeholders, 15 March – 11 April 2007

Source: Ipsos MORI

The FE system has not been as successful with ‘hard-to-reach’ groups

60 Of all its target groups, the FE system is perceived to be most successful at engaging young people (see Figure 4). It is regarded as less successful at engaging adults who require new skills, and at identifying and responding to local needs.

61 However, it is among employers and non-learners that the FE system is perceived to have made the least headway, as conveyed by a stakeholder in the qualitative research.

There is a long way to go for colleges to become responsive and flexible, and to be able to work alongside businesses in a way that the Government and Lord Leitch want them to.

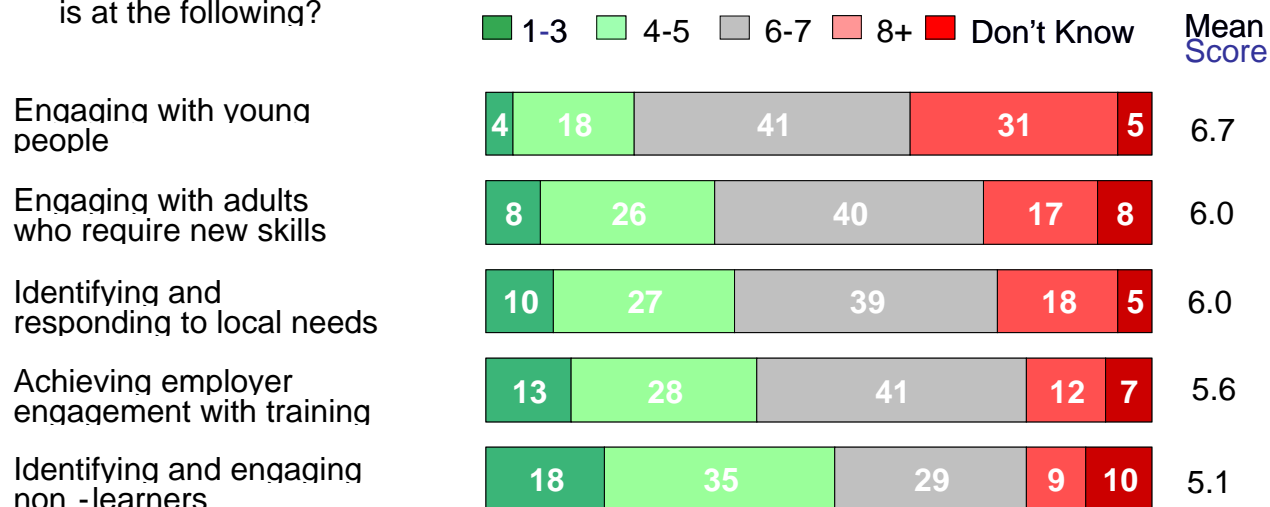
National commentator

62 Overall, FE colleges are the most positive and training providers the most critical, with the remaining stakeholder groups scoring around the mean.

63 As highlighted earlier, it is clear from the research findings that the FE system is not seen as cohesive, and training providers do not see themselves as part of it.

Figure 4: Engagement with target groups

Q On a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is highly unsuccessful and 10 is highly successful), how successful would you say the FE system is at the following?



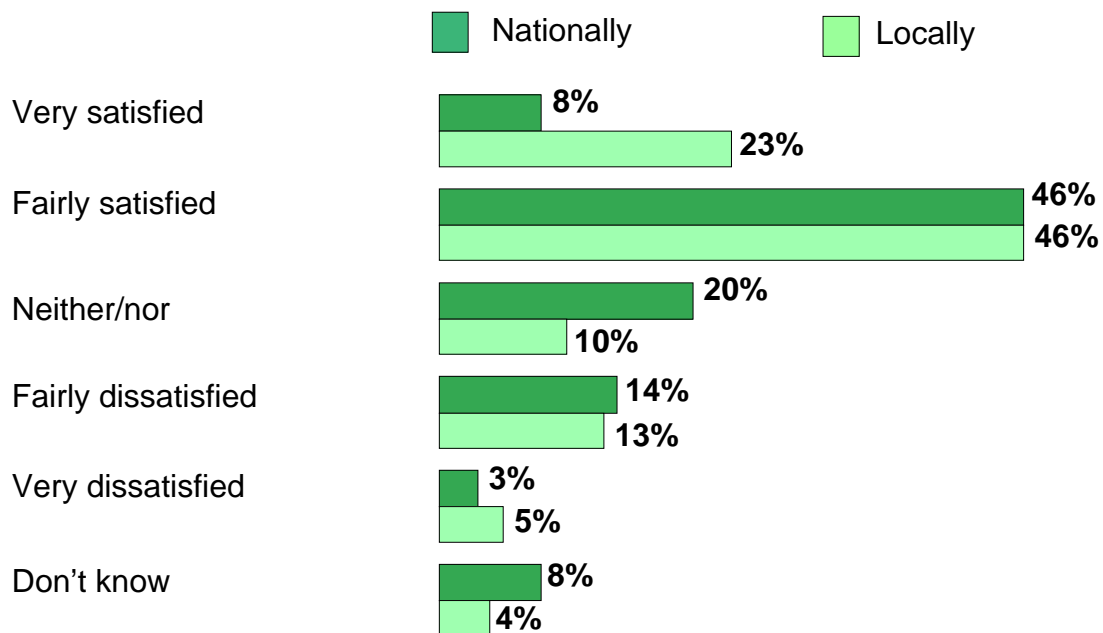
Base: 874 FE Stakeholders, 15 March – 11 April 2007

Satisfaction with FE is higher locally than nationally

64 Overall, stakeholders are more positive about local FE provision than national: the figures are 69 per cent and 54 per cent respectively (see Figure 5). Ipsos MORI research has shown that this pattern is similar for a number of other public services.

Figure 5: Satisfaction with FE provision nationally and locally

Q How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with FE provision...

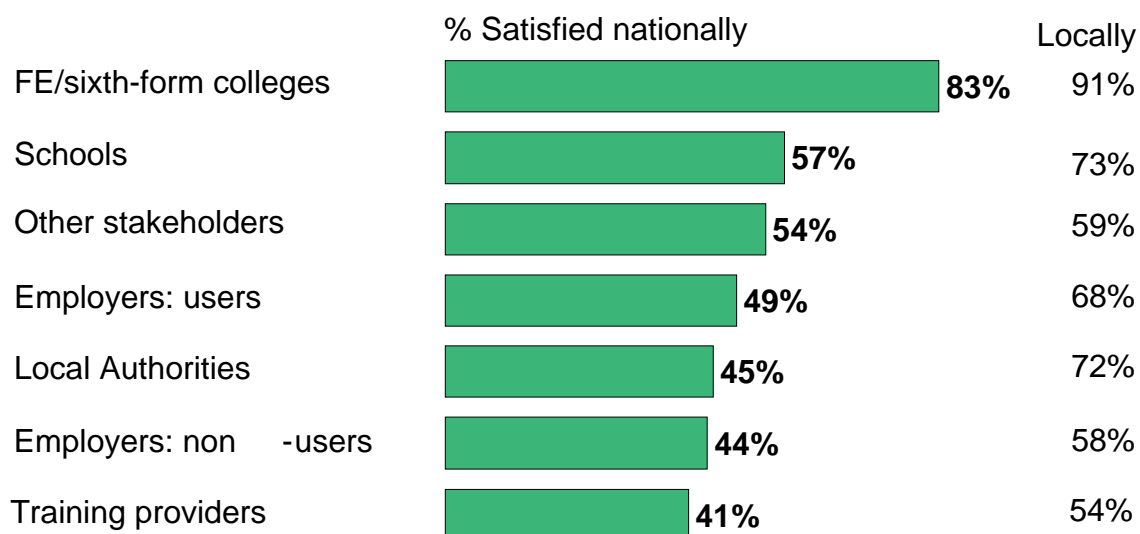


Base: 874 stakeholders, 15 March – 11 April 2007

- 65 The variation in perceptions of national and local provision is evident across all stakeholder groups (see Figure 6). FE and sixth-form colleges continue to be more positive than training providers.
- 66 Encouragingly, employers who have used the FE system are more satisfied with both local and national provision than those who have not.

Figure 6: Satisfaction with FE provision by stakeholder type

Q Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with FE provision?



Base: 874 stakeholders, 15 March – 11 April 2007

Source: Ipsos MORI

67 This pattern is consistent with the qualitative findings. While users of FE are broadly positive about their experience, there is general agreement that the FE system lacks a (positive) national profile: it tends to be either ‘invisible’ or perceived to be ‘second best’ to higher education.

Its local reputation is often very good and students, their families and employers often see their colleges as amazing resources ... but nationally it is still invisible.

FE provider

FE has improved a lot, but it’s still not really perceived as being as good as universities. There’s still a sense that the whole FE system is second division.

Representative body

When do you ever hear about it apart from in the specialist press? I don’t think there’s much of a national profile.

Local partner

68 Stakeholders attribute the FE system’s low national profile to a number of factors, including the absence of a sector champion. The qualitative research shows that stakeholders believe that raising the status and reputation of the FE system requires the key players – FE and sixth-form colleges, work-based learning providers, the Association of Colleges, the Association of Learning Providers, the LSC, and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) – to work together to promote the system. This is not something that currently happens.

The LSC is doing very little to try and improve the image of the sector. The AoC is a lousy champion, spends more time moaning about money than it does talking about the great things that the sector does do.

National partner

- 69 Another reason for the FE system's low national profile is its complexity, as well as the lack of a clear pathway for learners. These factors mean that the FE system finds it difficult to appeal to young people, parents and employers. These factors also make it difficult for those in positions of influence – many of whom probably do not have first-hand experience of the FE system – to understand and promote it.

It's very complicated – a labyrinth of regulatory and representative bodies. ... There is often confusion over the remit of the FE sector.

MP

There's a pathway to higher education, but the pathway for further education appears not as well trodden. It's not as clear or as well articulated to young people who want to travel the paths of a more 'parochial' environment to post-16 and then go on to higher education.

Local partner

- 70 The survey data shows that a third of employers (36 per cent) – users and non-users of FE alike – say that they have little or no understanding of the FE system.

- 71 The perception is that the FE system is non-aspirational and 'second class' to higher education. The focus on Level 2 qualifications and the expansion of higher education in recent years have both accentuated this.

'Higher' is aspirational and 'further' is a kind of weasel word, isn't it?

National commentator

When a politician or civil servant thinks about education, they think primary, secondary and university. We need to get them to understand that that's not what most people do.

Representative body

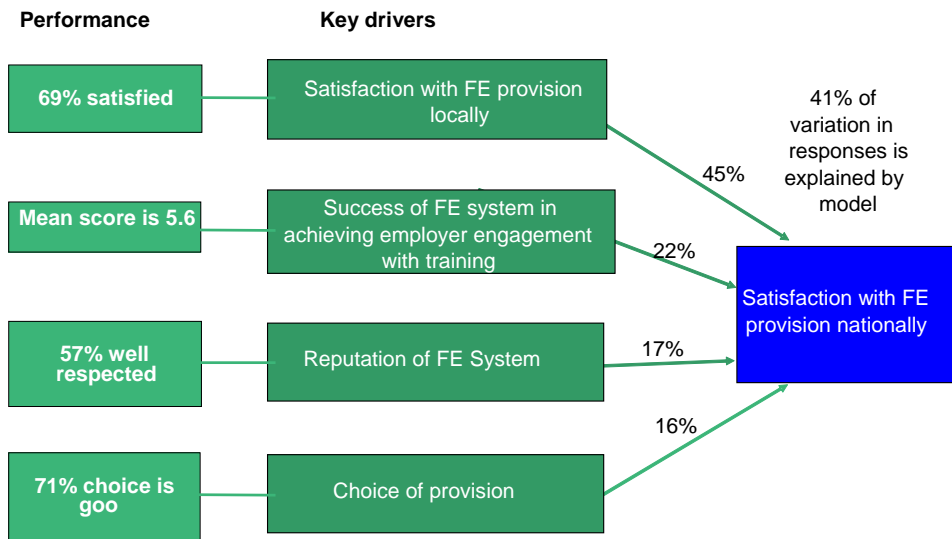
What drives stakeholder satisfaction and advocacy?

- 72 Key Driver Analysis (KDA) was conducted to determine the key drivers of stakeholder satisfaction with – and advocacy towards – FE provision nationally.
- 73 Figures 7 and 8 present the results of the multivariate analysis, showing the relative importance of various aspects. The models demonstrate a ‘fit’ (R2 values) of 41 per cent and 49 per cent respectively: 41 per cent and 49 per cent of the variation in levels of satisfaction and advocacy with FE nationally can be ‘explained’ by the included factors. (It is not possible to identify causal relationships using this type of model – only correlations.)

Satisfaction with local provision is key driver of attitudes towards the system

- 74 As can be seen in Figure 7, in order to raise stakeholders’ satisfaction with FE provision nationally, the FE system needs to ensure that (in order of significance):
- stakeholders are satisfied with their local FE provision (this factor alone accounts for 45 per cent of the variation in satisfaction with FE provision nationally and should, therefore, be a key focus)
 - it is engaging employers
 - it is well respected
 - choice of provision is perceived to be good.

Figure 7: Key drivers of stakeholder satisfaction with FE nationally



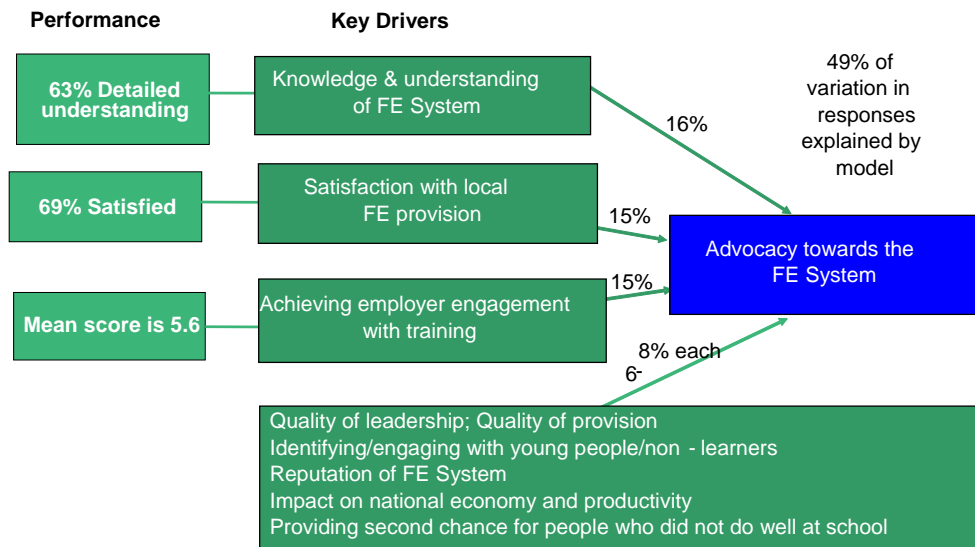
Base: 809 stakeholders who expressed an opinion, 15 March – 11 April 2007

- 75 In focusing on these drivers, the system needs to pay attention to all stakeholder groups. Currently, there is a 'perception gap' between FE and sixth-form colleges (which are significantly more positive about the system's performance) and the rest of the stakeholder population.
- 76 This 'gap' clearly needs to be brought to the attention of FE and sixth form colleges, so that they can address it .

Raising stakeholder advocacy towards the system requires efforts in a greater number of areas

- 77 However, it is advocacy rather than satisfaction that is the key measure – the extent to which stakeholders will speak up for the system, without being asked. Three in ten respondents (28 per cent) said that they would do so (this rises to 82 per cent among FE and sixth-form colleges). A fifth of stakeholders (19 per cent) would speak highly about the system if asked.
- 78 By contrast, 18 per cent of stakeholders would be critical. This figure nearly doubles (to 33 per cent) among training providers.

Figure 8: Key drivers of stakeholder advocacy towards the FE system



Base: 855 Stakeholders who expressed an opinion, 15 March – 11 April 2007

Source: Ipsos MORI

79 As can be seen in Figure 8, raising stakeholder advocacy requires efforts in a greater number of areas than for satisfaction. However, the top three factors alone account for 43 per cent of the variation in the tendency to be an advocate: the following areas should be prioritised.

- Increasing knowledge and understanding of the system – particularly among employers, who currently have the lowest levels of understanding of all stakeholders.
- Raising stakeholder satisfaction with local FE provision – focusing in particular on the relationship between training providers and the FE system.
- Increasing the system’s effectiveness in identifying and responding to local needs – again, focusing on training providers (who are most critical in this respect).

What discriminates stakeholders’ views of FE?

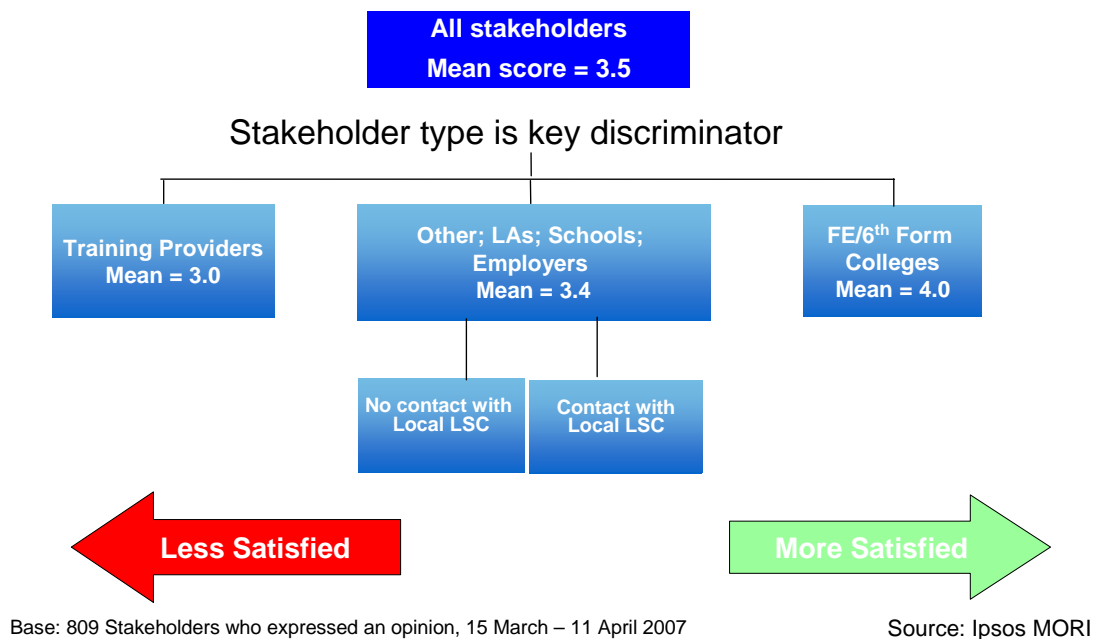
80 CHAID analysis was conducted to establish key discriminators in explaining stakeholders’ satisfaction with – and advocacy towards – the FE system.

81 The responses on satisfaction were given a numeric value of between 1 and 5, where a score of 5 is ‘very satisfied’ and 1 is ‘very dissatisfied’. The mean score is 3.5.

Stakeholder type is the key discriminator of satisfaction

- 82 As can be seen in Figure 9, the strongest discriminator is stakeholder type, with FE and sixth-form colleges most satisfied, training providers least satisfied and all remaining stakeholders lying in between these extremes.
- 83 Among this latter group, those who have had contact with a local LSC in the past 12 months are more satisfied than those who have not. This highlights the important role that is played by local LSCs in promoting the FE system to external stakeholders.

Figure 9: CHAID analysis of stakeholder satisfaction with the FE system



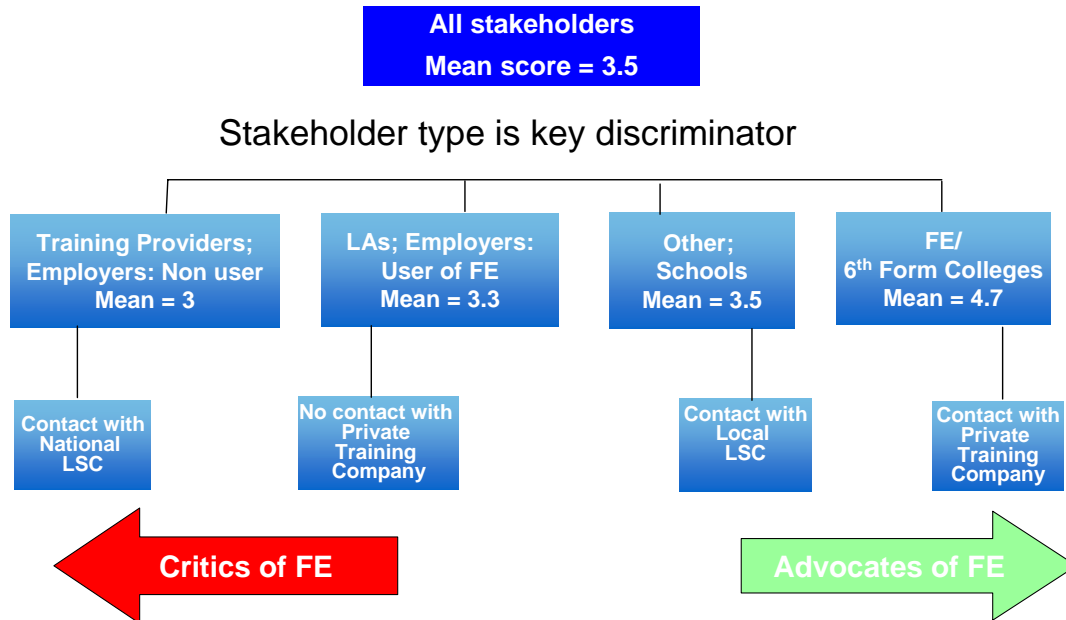
- 84 The responses on advocacy were also given a numeric value of between 1 and 5, where a score of 5 denotes 'would speak highly without being asked', and 1 denotes 'would be critical without being asked'. The mean score is 3.5.

Stakeholder type is also the key discriminator of advocacy towards the FE system

- 85 Again, stakeholder type is the strongest discriminator and FE and sixth-form colleges are the most positive. Training providers and employers who have not used the FE system are most critical.
- 86 Among this latter group, those who have had contact with the LSC in the past 12 months are more critical of the FE system than those who have not. The reason for this is unclear from the data, and further research with these stakeholders would be useful as a means of disentangling this.
- 87 Among local authority representatives and employers who are users of FE, those who have had contact with private training providers in the past year are more positive about the FE system than those who have not.

88 Schools and other stakeholders who have had contact with a local LSC in the past year are more likely to advocate the system than those who have not. This reinforces the important role that is played by local LSCs, and the need to ensure that they are 'on message'.

Figure 10: CHAID analysis of stakeholder advocacy towards the FE system



Base: 855 Stakeholders who expressed an opinion, 15 March – 11 April 2007

Source: Ipsos MORI

Future priorities

- 89 The most commonly cited key priority for the FE system over the next two to three years is employer engagement and being demand-led (see Table 2). The system currently attracts a mean score from stakeholders of 5.6 out of 10 for its performance in this area, and thus there is scope for improvement.
- 90 FE and sixth-form colleges, training providers, as well as those outside the system – local authorities and other stakeholders – all perceive this as a key priority.
- 91 Other key priorities identified by stakeholders include the following.
- Improving the range of provision on offer is a key priority for school heads, local authorities, employers and other stakeholders.
 - Reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is a key priority for training providers, employers, schools and other stakeholders.
 - Meeting local and national skills needs is a key priority for local authorities, training providers and schools.
- 92 In addition, FE and sixth-form colleges emphasise raising attainment among young people and adults, and improving buildings and infrastructure.

Table 2: Key priorities for the FE system

Q What would you say are the two or three top priorities for the FE system over the next two to three years?

	Total	FE and sixth-form colleges	Schools	Training providers	Local authorities	Employers	
Base: 874 stakeholders	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Engaging with businesses/demand-led	35	45	17	42	44	23	49
Improving range of provision on offer	23	12	42	22	31	21	22
Reducing NEET young people	23	16	21	28	24	24	22
Meeting local/national skills needs	19	16	23	23	25	15	20
Raising attainments – young people and adults	15	19	18	18	13	10	11
Improving infrastructure/buildings	7	17	5	5	8	4	5
Don't know	6	–	2	2	2	15	3

Source: Ipsos MORI

Note: the top three priorities for each stakeholder group are highlighted.

Implications

- 93 The system is making good progress, but more needs to be done to raise its national profile. The system needs to be clear and consistent about its role, and it needs to present a united front. This means ensuring that training providers are ‘on message’ and that there is greater collaboration between key players such as the LSC, Association of Colleges (AoC), Association of Learning Providers (ALP) and others.
- 94 The system should also seek the involvement of senior stakeholders to act as ambassadors. Forty-seven per cent of stakeholders are advocates of the FE system, and research conducted by Ipsos MORI has consistently found viral advocacy to be the most potent form of communication.
- 95 There is a need to simplify the system so that it is more easily understood by the target groups – young people, adult learners, parents and employers – as well as by those in positions of influence. Linked to this, work needs to be done on developing a clearer pathway for learners.

