Listening to the work-based learner:
unlocking the potential of apprentice feedback

John Berkeley

About the author

John Berkeley has been involved with the development and delivery of work-based training policies and programmes for young people since the introduction of youth training schemes in the 1980s. He worked for the Rover Group for twenty-four years and, following the introduction of Modern Apprenticeships in 1994, led the development of the first national engineering sector apprenticeship framework. As Manager, Education & Careers, he was responsible for designing Rover's Integrated Engineering Development Scheme, one of the original sector prototypes, and pioneered the use of comprehensive annual surveys of all trainees to provide a benchmark for year-on-year improvements in quality and learner satisfaction.

Moving to the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Warwick in 1998 as Senior Research Fellow, he designed, developed and piloted SEMTA's* national online feedback system for engineering apprentices.

He has long campaigned to raise the profile and status of work-based training for young people and, in 2003, was appointed as a member of the Government's Working Group on 14-19 Reform and chaired its Apprenticeships Sub-Group.

He was awarded an OBE in 1994 for services to the development of young people.

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Foreword by Margaret Salmon
Chair of the Sector Skills Development Agency

The aim of this publication is to raise awareness of the potential value and importance of learner feedback in work-based learning. It comes at a time of renewed efforts to improve and expand work-based learning throughout the UK, with new programmes being introduced for 14-16 year-olds and the apprenticeship principle being extended to adult learners. There has never been a greater need for effective and systematic learner feedback, to ensure that programmes are 'fit for purpose' and that developments in policy and practice take full account of the views of the individual.

Some young people already enter work-based training with very high expectations. Those who, for example, succeed in gaining an apprenticeship with one of the UK's 'blue chip' employers, often in the face of intense competition, are assured of a high quality programme designed to stretch even the most able. Trainees and trainers alike expect, and frequently achieve, the highest standards.

Other young people, particularly those whose school experience proved less successful than it should, may have very much lower expectations, both of work-based training and their own abilities and, as a result, be more likely to express satisfaction with the quality of provision, no matter what its shortcomings might be.

Learner feedback can play a decisive role in raising expectations and improving standards. It is about much more than merely providing simplistic indices of learner satisfaction, valuable though these are in comparing provision and recognising progress. Our aim must be to ensure that all work-based programmes succeed in releasing the full potential of every individual learner in work for which they are well suited and systematic and effective learner feedback can help us do so.

For far too long, learner feedback often meant little more than inviting completion of so-called 'happiness sheets' that had minimal impact on either learner engagement or quality improvement. However, times have changed. Although the inspectorates continue to report that many providers have yet to implement effective procedures for gathering and using learner feedback, it is now acknowledged to be, in the words of David Sherlock of the Adult Learning Inspectorate, "a cornerstone of self-assessment and subsequent development planning."

However, as this publication illustrates, learner feedback in work-based provision has much wider potential for development, both for the individual and their education and training providers and for sector bodies. If we encourage learners to play an active part in process improvement and can demonstrate that their suggestions will bring about real and lasting changes, we can not only help to build confidence and promote active participation but, hopefully, instil a greater sense of personal commitment to lifelong learning.

Those involved in designing, developing and delivering work-based learning have a major vested interest in its success. Whether you are a school, college or training provider, an employer, or a sector body responsible for driving up standards via the Skills for Business Network, learner feedback is one of the most powerful tools at your disposal. Its effective use demonstrates that you are indeed 'putting the learner first'. Acting decisively on its results proves that you are genuinely responsive to the customer and embedding it as an integral part of your day-to-day operations signifies a commitment to quality improvement that will encourage confidence amongst all those involved in the process.

Introduction

Evaluation is an integral and essential part of any successful training activity and Government-supported apprenticeship programmes are no exception. To be most effective, evaluation needs to be built in to the design and delivery of programmes from the outset, ensuring their continuing responsiveness to changing needs.

The systematic use of formative assessment and progress reviews will provide the necessary reassurance that knowledge acquisition and skills development are proceeding according to plan and that the agreed learning targets are being met. However, in work-based training, as with any product or service, it is meeting the needs of the customer that holds the key to success. Only they can say whether or not the programme is fulfilling their needs and expectations; only they can tell us how they feel about our efforts to help them learn and if our policies and procedures are really working as they should.

Having an effective system of learner feedback and, more importantly, acting decisively on the results, is the best possible proof of the commitment to a genuine learner-centred approach. But trainee feedback is not just another device in the quality assurance toolkit; it's a powerful channel for two-way communication between trainer and trainee, the full potential of which has yet to be exploited. It can itself be a valuable medium for learning, helping to raise awareness of the contribution the individual employee can make to continuous process improvement in the workplace. By actively involving young people in the decisions that affect them most directly, it can play a valuable part in post-16 citizenship development. It can enable the sector skills bodies to gather new and vital data to inform their strategic planning and, at national level, it can provide a crucial litmus test for future education and training policy.

If Britain is to have a truly world-class workforce, equal to the very best of the international competition in terms of skills, knowledge and productivity, we need a high-quality, high-status apprenticeship system and that means listening to the authentic voice of the learner…….. and making much better use of what they have to tell us.

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Listening to the work-based learner is intended mainly for:-
- *teaching and training professionals* in schools and colleges, employers and training providers and those working together in local partnerships
- *companies, local government and public agencies* involved in contracting-out work-based training to external providers
- *policy-makers, planners and quality improvement specialists* in funding and regulatory bodies, sector skills councils and education authorities

Its main purpose is to help:
- raise awareness of the importance of learner feedback as a powerful tool for self-assessment, quality improvement, benchmarking performance and increasing learner satisfaction
- clarify the role of learner feedback in raising the standard of Government-supported work-based training across the UK
- promote best practice in the gathering, analysis, dissemination and use of feedback data
- identify opportunities for using learner feedback as a vehicle for wider skills development, encouraging learner involvement in quality improvement
- demonstrate the potential value of learner feedback for sector bodies and other agencies involved in planning and monitoring work-based training

"Things went well when the learner was treated as an individual and individual needs were met."

From 'Practical ways of improving success in Modern Apprenticeships' [1]

Part A   Setting the scene

The need to take account of the views of young people in Government-supported apprenticeships has been recognised since their inception and a succession of national surveys of those undertaking prototype Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) in the first 14 sectors from 1994 were conducted by the Centre for the Study of Post-16 Developments at the University of Sheffield on behalf of consultants Ernst & Young for the then Department of Employment.

The surveys covered many of the same issues that remain relevant today and the findings will be all too familiar to those currently involved in the development and delivery of apprenticeships. Parents proved to be the most positive influence on young people's decision to become an apprentice and, for those who were discouraged from following the work-based route, the most common negative influences were schools and teachers. The surveys revealed that some apprentices did not think they had received comprehensive and impartial advice and guidance. Trainees were asked about recruitment and selection methods and the gender imbalance and poor take-up amongst those from ethnic minority communities was as strong then as it is now.

When Modern Apprenticeships were first introduced, they were designed exclusively for Level 3 and above and clearly differentiated from other Government-supported work-based training at Level 2. Not surprisingly therefore, the majority of the first MAs were well qualified, with more than half having achieved five or more GCSE passes at Grade C or above, compared to the then national average of 43%. A significant number had completed A-level courses and, in several sectors, some were already expressing concerns over the acceptability of their apprenticeship for subsequent entry to university.

The Ernst & Young surveys only covered the first year of the prototype programmes but it was apparent that the status of the MA, compared to work-based training at Level 2, was of considerable importance to the new trainees and that the most common concern was dissatisfaction with the off-the-job element of their apprenticeship, particularly where this took place in a college. In its conclusions, the final report observed that it was just as important to survey those who were *not* taking part in Modern Apprenticeships, exploring the reasons behind such a decision. It also, wisely, cautioned against trainees being over-surveyed and recommended careful planning of national, sector and local evaluations as the scheme gathered momentum.

Although principally a source of statistical data for research purposes, there have also been a number of regular national surveys of young people, some of which have covered all four home countries. The most relevant of these are the Labour Force Survey and the England and Wales Youth Cohort Survey (YCS) which, together with the Scottish School Leavers Survey, are key sources of data, albeit much stronger on educational provision than the detail of work-based training. These national data sources provide useful information on participation rates, qualifications and destinations but are generally weak on progression and tell us little about the quality

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[1] John Maynard and Vikki Smith, LSDA 2004

of the learning experience itself, especially post-16 and in vocational programmes. Typically, sample sizes of work-based trainees tend to be fairly small and, especially if broken down by sector, provide little opportunity for detailed analysis.

Amongst work-based training providers, while some employers with a well-established and professional approach to training extended their existing course evaluation methods to the new trainees, comprehensive and systematic approaches to apprentice feedback were few and far between. The emergence, during the 1990s, of commercial data collection and analysis tools was driven partly by the initiatives taken by some Training and Enterprise Councils to encourage providers to conduct learner surveys as an adjunct to local auditing of programme quality. At the same time, the FE sector began to take a greater interest in surveying students as part of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) inspection process.

Compared with the high public profile now being given to learner feedback and satisfaction surveys, there was relatively little official encouragement and a 1998-99 FEFC report on *Effective Self-assessment* scarcely referred to it at all, making no mention of learner feedback in its list of good practice or as one of the aspects of self-assessment that were identified as requiring further attention. Despite this, it has been the FE sector that has adopted most extensively the various commercial survey tools and services, examples of which are still used overwhelmingly by colleges as opposed to employers and other training providers.

New horizons for trainee feedback

Since 1994, there have been three distinct phases in the overall development and use of learner feedback in work-based training. The first of these was concerned largely with young people's response to the introduction of Government-supported apprenticeships and compliance with the requirements of TEC/LEC contracts. The second phase, prompted by the advent of external inspection, shifted the emphasis towards quality improvement and the need for providers to gather evidence to support their own self-assessments. The most recent phase followed the emergence of customer satisfaction as one of the key targets for the public services and a much-publicised emphasis on 'putting the learner first'. In England, this saw the introduction of a new national survey of some 25,000 learners, including around 2000 work-based trainees conducted, not by academic researchers but using one of the major commercial opinion poll organisations. This has been followed by a similar national survey in Wales, comprising many of the same core questions, but specifically designed for work-based learners. Interestingly, neither the LSC or ELWa surveys ask learners whether they have sufficient opportunity to comment on the quality of their programme or offer suggestions for its improvement through existing trainee feedback undertaken by those providing their training.

Learner feedback now finds itself centre stage in the latest efforts to reposition public perceptions of work-based training and to promote a new 'family of apprenticeships', albeit with different approaches being adopted across the four home countries. One of the purposes of this publication is to help raise awareness of the different strategies being pursued and to stimulate interest in how learner feedback might be developed for the future.

Its importance in contributing to the evaluation of training cannot be under-estimated and its potential to focus the attention of policy-makers and managers alike on the need for change is now widely recognised. It is probably the single most powerful tool at our disposal for both raising standards and influencing public attitudes. However, it is capable of making a much greater contribution than has so far been acknowledged.

Consulting the customer

Gathering and processing feedback from work-based trainees is a costly and time-consuming process, irrespective of the particular range of methods used, some of which are infinitely more expensive and demanding than others. It is not something to be considered lightly by any employer or training provider and, for some, such as a large Group Training Association managing apprentice training on behalf of several hundred small and medium-sized employers, it can represent a major logistical challenge.

It therefore makes sound economic sense, as well as being good management practice, to seek to obtain the greatest possible benefit for both the trainees and the organisation.

The distinction between feedback and consultation is frequently blurred. However, as many providers concentrate on gathering evidence against the relevant inspection or other quality framework, they can all too easily miss the opportunity for consulting trainees on other matters that are beyond the scope of self-assessment. Not wishing to ask any more questions than are absolutely necessary for fear of putting trainees off, providers often disregard those areas that can be of greatest potential interest to trainees. Being consulted on future sports, social or travel events, on special offers negotiated through the greater purchasing power of the employer or provider or the possible introduction of incentives to encourage existing trainees to 'introduce' potential new recruits can help bring added interest to an otherwise fairly boring activity and provide valuable intelligence for the organisation.

There are many other issues on which providers need to consult from time to time, such as travel to work arrangements or the introduction of new vending and catering facilities, that are of more immediate concern to trainees than the annual self-assessment. Integrating these within the overall trainee feedback system can help introduce variety and encourage more active participation.

Learning for life

As some providers have discovered already, with a little imagination and ingenuity, the trainee feedback process can be incorporated to very good effect as part of the learning programme itself. Reduced to its essentials, and depending upon the choice of methods used, it can become an all-purpose practical exercise, combining communication skills, working with others, critical thinking, problem solving and, if allowed access to the raw data, functional mathematics and presentation skills.

Instead of learner feedback being viewed as the exclusive province of training management, to which trainees are subjected from time to time and, if they are fortunate, given a few scraps of headline information once it is all over, it can be transformed into a means of engaging every learner in a communication process in which they are both the source of the information, active participants in its gathering *and* the principal beneficiaries of its analysis and use.

This type of approach to trainee feedback can help to demonstrate the importance of trust and openness in any learning organisation and illustrate the potential contribution that every individual employee can make to service quality and process improvement when given the opportunity to do so. If employers too can be persuaded to take part in some well-managed group activities, they may well be rewarded with insights into the capabilities of some of their trainees of which they were previously unaware and, in all probability, might also learn a good deal about apprentice training!

Employer feedback has typically been thought of as an entirely separate aspect of self-assessment and, all too often, one that is badly neglected. Creating an integrated approach to learner feedback in which employers can play an active role can be infinitely more rewarding for everyone concerned.

Citizens of the future

Asking trainees for their personal assessment of the education and training being provided and inviting them to come forward with their own suggestions for how it might be improved can be an important part of helping to manage their transition from young person to adult employee. In other words, learner feedback can provide a central focus for post-16 citizenship development, building on what may have been experienced as part of the school curriculum or through other community and out-of-school activities. Once again, some methods of gathering feedback lend themselves particularly well to debate and discussion of issues of direct and personal relevance to apprentices. Here is an ideal vehicle for involving the wider community in work-based training. Careers advisers, Trades Union officials, school and college governors, local authority elected members; all could be encouraged to take a more active interest by being invited to contribute to learner feedback events.

Apprentices could, for example, be trained to interview each other and taught how to resolve conflicts and reach consensus from a range of different opinions about some important aspect of their education and training programme. A Trainee Council, with representatives 'elected' for relatively short periods to ensure that everyone is involved at some stage during their training, could also form part of the feedback system, serving as a means by which to consult learners themselves on the most effective approaches to be adopted.

With appropriate support and encouragement, many providers would welcome the chance to transform their present approach to trainee feedback, experimenting with ways in which everyone involved can gain much more from the experience and some of these new opportunities are explored further in the perspectives that appear in Part D.

Empowering the Skills for Business Network

However, there is one other important group of stakeholders in the apprenticeship system for whom trainee feedback is a vital necessity but which, with one or two exceptions, currently has little or no means of accessing the information it needs to fulfil its multiple roles. Sector skills bodies are responsible for some of the most important aspects of the Government-supported apprenticeship system in the UK. It is they that must produce the education and skills strategies for the future development of the workforce of which apprenticeships form an integral part. It is they that specify the content of apprenticeship frameworks and ensure that these remain relevant to meet the needs of employers. It is they that develop and maintain the occupational standards upon which qualifications for apprentices are based. And, it is they that award the certificates on successful completion of an apprenticeship, ensuring that all the relevant requirements have been met. Many also play a key role in providing and disseminating careers information, supporting employers and providers with training aids and taking the lead in addressing other sector-wide issues affecting apprenticeships, from gender stereotyping and the development of work-related programmes for 14-16 year-olds to adult apprenticeships and Foundation Degrees. In every one of these areas, learner feedback could make a significant contribution.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Government-supported apprenticeships in the UK is their diversity, both in terms of content and the demands they place upon

the trainee and in the type of young person they each attract and their aspirations and potential for future development. Sectors also differ greatly in their composition, in the commitment of their employers to the principle of apprentice training and in the mix of trainees at Level 2 and at Level 3 and above that is considered to be most appropriate to their needs. Given this diversity, sector bodies would benefit greatly from having their own information; from prospective trainees, from those currently in training as apprentices and those who are completing their programme and making decisions on their future. There is no single model for gathering and analysing sector-wide feedback that would be appropriate or practical for every sector. However, the examples of the approaches adopted by SEMTA and by CITB-ConstructionSkills may help to illustrate the potential value of trainee feedback to sector bodies and to suggest possible ways forward.

Extending the scope of apprentice feedback

As already indicated, developments in some parts of the UK are opening up further scope for the use of feedback in work-related and work-based learning. Sector bodies have a vested interest in the success of new vocational programmes for 14-16 year-olds that provide an introduction to the skills and knowledge required in a particular occupational area and from which young people might progress to apprenticeships and other post-16 options for further study of the subject.

Seeking the views of 14-16 year-olds is nothing new. In engineering, the sector body surveyed both the first two cohorts of pupils undertaking Part One Engineering GNVQ courses in 1997 and 1998 and, as part of its programme of support for the GCSE in Engineering (Double Award), conducted a survey of pupils towards the end of the first two-year course in 2004. Obtaining such feedback is essential if, having built projections of the likely output of these programmes into their long-term workforce development plans, sector bodies are to have a means of checking that progress towards the targets is on track. The introduction of the Young Apprenticeships programme as part of the Key Stage 4 curriculum in England will also need to be monitored closely by the relevant sector bodies involved in its development and delivery and learner feedback will play a key role in ensuring its 'fitness for purpose'.

However, just as teaching and training 14 year-olds is presenting new challenges to colleges and training providers, gathering detailed feedback from this age group will need careful planning. Although national surveys conducted by NFER and others will undoubtedly assist the overall evaluation of the Young Apprenticeship programme, as the level of participation increases, local partnerships and providers will need direct access to the responses from their learners and the opportunity to benchmark these against the results from other partnerships

At the other end of the scale, there has been some relaxation of the upper age limit for Government-supported apprenticeships and this too has important implications for trainee feedback. From the outset, apprentices have been recruited in larger numbers from the 19+ age group than was originally envisaged and the differences between surveying a 16 year-old and a 24 year-old have always been a factor in the design of trainee feedback systems. Extending apprenticeship provision to those for whom the programme will be more likely to be re-training rather than initial formation will call for different approaches to learner feedback and considerable care will need to be taken when analysing and reporting results, particularly if combining satisfaction ratings with those of much younger participants.

"As we move towards a more personalised approach to learning for 14-19 year-olds, with programmes suited to the individual needs of learners and apprenticeships being given the status they deserve, feedback from work-based learners (indeed <u>all</u> learners) has an increasingly important role to play at every level within the system."

Sir Mike Tomlinson CBE
Chairman, Working Group on 14-19 Reform

Part B   UK policies on feedback and quality assurance

England

The Adult Learning Inspectorate

The Adult Learning Inspectorate believes that the collection and use of feedback from learners is an essential component of an effective quality assurance system that aims to improve the quality of work-based learning.

The Inspectorate would not prescribe how and when learner feedback should be collected as inspection shows that different circumstances require different approaches. Work-based learners typically spend four-fifths of their week in the workplace, with the remaining one-fifth being used for off-the-job learning. To really understand how the components of such a training programme are being delivered and managed, learners need to be asked about their experiences, what works well and what could be improved.

Learner feedback should be a cornerstone of self-assessment and subsequent development planning. The best providers know what their learners think of both the on and off-the-job training elements and the support they receive. They gather data on many key aspects of the training process, such as induction, target setting, on-the-job assessment and the delivery of key skills and technical certificates. Many use a mixture of surveys and focus groups at critical stages in the training programme. The best providers welcome criticism by supplementing formal methods of gathering feedback with easy to use 'complaints' procedures. This enables them to do something about a small problem before it becomes a bigger one. Better providers make year-on-year comparisons of learner views and set themselves improvement targets. Meeting such targets enables sustainable improvements to be made.

Currently quality assurance is the major poorly performing area in work-based inspection findings for the Adult Learning Inspectorate. As at February 2005, of the first 927 published work-based inspections, 56 per cent of providers were graded as unsatisfactory for quality assurance.

The main reason is that many quality assurance systems are simply not doing what they are supposed to do ….. improving training. Although most providers are aware of the need to collect the views of their learners, many fail to do so in a systematic and effective manner and relatively few make best use of the results. It is the exception, rather than the rule, that feedback features as evidence for self-assessment and target setting.

The revised Common Inspection Framework includes many evaluation requirements to which effective learner feedback can make a valuable contribution and the new guidance for work-based training emphasises its importance in reviewing the quality and management of provision. Indeed, in some areas, such as those concerned with meeting learner's needs and aspirations, feedback is likely to be the principal source of evidence.

The *Excalibur Good Practice Database* will continue to highlight practical examples of how learner feedback can make a real difference, helping to raise standards by actively engaging learners in the quality improvement process.

David Sherlock
Chief Inspector

The Learning and Skills Council

Success for All, published in November 2002, set out the Government's agenda for reforming further education and training in England and establishing a framework for quality and success. The *Success for All* arrangements for three-year development planning (*Council Circular 03/09*), published in May 2003, highlighted the thinking about what measures of learners' success would be appropriate for the post-16 sector as a whole in the medium to long term.

Early in 2004, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), jointly with the Department for Education and Skills, Adult Learning Inspectorate and Ofsted, consulted on proposals for *Measuring Success in the Learning and Skills Sector*. The proposals for learner satisfaction at provider level included:

- the LSC's expectation that "all colleges and providers should know their own levels of learner satisfaction and to take effective action to improve their learners' experience"

- the LSC's intention to introduce a methodology for providers to use when gathering learners' views, which is compatible with that used for the national survey, so that effective benchmarking can take place

- the recommendation that processes used by providers would be assessed against robust national standards, which would mean that a provider:

    o seeks learners' views at regular and agreed intervals
    o uses a set of core questions
    o uses a core survey methodology requiring learners to answer questions by telephone or by responding to a questionnaire
    o carries out rigorous comparison of learners' views with the findings of the national learner satisfaction survey
    o uses findings to identify where action is needed to improve learners' experience, and
    o finds out from learners whether action taken to improve quality has proved effective.

The consultation suggests that there is a high degree of support from training providers and colleges for the adoption of a consistent approach for assessing the satisfaction of their learners.

The LSC's own commitment to 'develop structured sample surveys to measure the degree of satisfaction by learners, employers, providers and other interested parties' was set out in its *Strategic Framework to 2004: Corporate Plan* (target 5). The subsequent plan[2] detailed the LSC's determination to '*assist providers in improving their performance, and to increase the proportion of provision that is of good or better quality*'. In order to measure its success in improving quality and raising standards, the LSC set five high-level quality measures[3], one of which relates specifically to the development and maintenance of high-level learner satisfaction.

The LSC will not agree a specific target for learner satisfaction with providers. However, we expect all training providers and colleges to know their own levels of learner satisfaction and to take effective action to improve their learners' experiences. We will judge how effective a provider is in seeking and responding to the needs of learners and the extent to which learner feedback influences the quality improvement strategies set out in providers' three-year development plans.

The LSC, therefore, strongly encourages training providers and colleges to adopt and replicate the survey methodology at local level.

The Council has already published on its web site, in April 2003, the core questions and methodology for the 2001/02 national learner survey so that training providers and colleges can replicate the approach. This will enable them to compare findings with national and regional benchmarking data and help to identify areas of learner satisfaction where they may need to give priority for improving the learner experience. The methodology includes:

- a copy of the 2001/02 questionnaire and core questions;
- details of the sampling approach;
- the means of administering the survey (both telephone and self-completion options are covered); and
- the analysis/reporting output.

The LSC is committed to continuous improvement and will, at regular intervals, review its approach to surveying learners, in particular its processes for selecting a sample of learners. The guidance will, therefore, be modified periodically to reflect any enhancements to the national learner satisfaction survey methodology.

The core questions in the 2001/02 questionnaire remained unchanged for 2002/03 and 2003/04, thus allowing continuity and effective trend analysis. For 2003/04, the LSC has substantially increased the sample size to allow effective reporting at local LSC and regional level. This has meant a reduction in the overall length of the questionnaire, although the core questions remain the same. Versions of the questionnaires used over the past three years are available on the LSC website.

Caroline Neville
National Director of Learning

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[2] LSC Corporate Plan to 2005: Championing the power of learning, LSC, January 2003
[3] Quality Improvement Strategy 2002/03, LSC

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)

The introduction of Young Apprenticeships for 14-16 year-olds in England creates new opportunities for developing learner feedback within Key Stage 4. Local partnerships of schools, training providers and colleges have much to gain by listening to the views of those undertaking the new programmes. Feedback can also play a valuable role at national and sector level. SEMTA, the sector skills council responsible for developing the framework for Young Apprenticeships in Engineering, is using its online *apprentice-feedback.com* system and other sector bodies will no doubt adopt their own approaches.

School Inspectors have always sought feedback from pupils as part of the inspection process but it was only recently that Ofsted took steps to encourage schools themselves to adopt a systematic approach to gathering such feedback. Following trials, two brief questionnaires were published in September 2003, one for use with pupils from Year 7 in secondary schools and the other with Year 12 and 13 students in sixth forms.

Both are forced-choice questionnaires comprising a series of statements about the school or centre, its staff, aspects of the teaching and learning environment and provision of support and pastoral care. The twelve statements designed for younger pupils have been kept fairly simple, such as 'I am taught well' and 'The school is well run', but also include slightly more complex examples, such as 'My work is assessed helpfully so that I can see how to improve it'.

The sixth form questionnaire has sixteen statements, several of which are the same as the pre-16 survey, but which also include examples, such as 'I have well-informed advice from school and/or careers advisers on what I should do after I leave school' and 'The school seeks and responds to the views of its students' that are not currently put to younger pupils. Sixth-formers are also asked whether there is a good range of enrichment courses and worthwhile activities and if their choice of courses suits their abilities and career plans. Both questionnaires encourage learners to offer their own comments on what they like most about their school or sixth form and what they would like to change. The surveys are anonymous and young people are asked not to identify any staff by name.

The questionnaires have been generally welcomed and most schools have readily accepted that learner feedback is an integral part of the inspection process. Only a very small number have chosen not to use the Ofsted questionnaires, although they may well employ other methods of obtaining pupil's views.

There is no statutory requirement for questionnaires to be used in schools and Ofsted does not provide any specific guidance about their use in self-evaluation. There are many other options available to schools for seeking the views of pupils, including school councils, focus groups, school assembly discussions etc., and Ofsted would not wish to be seen to be promoting any particular method.

There is now clear evidence from School Improvement Division that one of the key features of effective school improvement is that the views of pupils are sought and acted upon. In a new development such as Young Apprenticeships, systematic learner feedback will provide valuable evidence of pupils' experiences and aspirations and insights into the effectiveness of local partnerships, playing an essential role in initial and ongoing evaluation.

David Bell
Chief Inspector

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

QCA is interested to know what people think of the various qualifications used by sector bodies in their apprenticeship frameworks, such as NVQs, Technical Certificates and Key Skills. Awarding bodies, together with QCA, need to make sure that those qualifications actually work in practice and feedback from learners themselves would prove invaluable.

When an awarding body brings a vocational qualification to QCA for accreditation, the qualification is checked against a number of key criteria:

- Is the content of the qualification relevant to the job?
- Does the qualification have a level of demand that matches the job?
- Are the assessments, such as tests, at the correct level? Are they fair?
- Is the qualification and its assessments available in a way that takes account of conditions in the workplace?

The performance of a qualification can always be improved once it is in use, so feedback from learners is a very useful check on whether things are working properly. There are some features of qualifications that are relatively easy to change in order to make them more convenient and less of a barrier for learners. For example, when assessments are available more often and in more convenient places, it is then easier for learners to test themselves when they feel ready. The use of IT for e-assessment is becoming increasingly popular and more widespread because it allows more opportunities for assessment, often in the workplace itself.

QCA, together with the awarding bodies, undertakes regular monitoring of qualifications by visiting training centres and speaking to trainers and learners. However, QCA cannot be directly in contact with all of the country's apprentices. If we are to become more responsive to the needs of learners, now and in the future, we need access to more systematic and extensive surveys that include feedback on qualifications and assessment. The overall approach to qualifications development could be greatly improved if more information from learners can be fed back, via national learner satisfaction surveys and from the sector bodies who specify the qualifications for use in apprenticeship programmes, to the awarding bodies who run the qualifications and, ultimately, to QCA who are responsible for maintaining the integrity of the whole system.

QCA welcomes the opportunity to work with sector bodies and designers of trainee feedback systems to help ensure that, in future, the views of work-based learners can play a more significant role in the development of qualifications and assessments.

Ken Boston AO
Chief Executive

Northern Ireland

The Education and Training Inspectorate

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) provides inspection services to the Department for Employment and Learning, which include the inspection of work-based training. The organisations or groups of organisations involved in the delivery of these programmes in Northern Ireland are described as 'supplier organisations'. There are currently about 90 such supplier organisations.

Prior to inspection, supplier organisations are requested by ETI to administer questionnaires to all learners to measure their levels of satisfaction with the training. The questionnaires are short and allow learners with a wide range of abilities to complete them in about five minutes.   The questionnaires were devised by ETI and are currently being updated to take into account the revised *Improving Quality: Raising Standards* (IQ:RS) document, which outlines the criteria used by ETI to inspect the quality of training and employment programmes.

The information from the questionnaires is gathered and analysed by the inspectorate services branch and the results provided to the inspection team. It comprises a range of data including the views of learners on the quality of the training, support arrangements, the learning environment, the tutors etc. The rate of return of the questionnaires varies considerably across inspections from 33% to 95% and appears to be linked to the quality of the management and the location of the supplier organisation. Response rates are lower in socially deprived areas.

Learners are also invited to provide confidentially to the inspection team written comments on any aspect of their training programmes, including areas of concern. These are collected separately and returned in sealed envelopes. There are no specific issues suggested to the trainees; they are free to comment on any aspect, including strengths, and to identify themselves if they wish or remain anonymous. Currently, the questionnaire results are not used for sector analysis or benchmarking purposes. Discussion with learners to ascertain their views of their training programme is also an important part of inspections. While it is recognised that data on learner satisfaction cannot be measured against objective standards, it is viewed by ETI as evidence that is valuable in making judgements when bench marking against other similar organisations.

The contractual requirement by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) that all supplier organisations provide an annual self-evaluation report and development plan constitutes an obligation to consult trainees. The IQ:RS sets out the six criteria by which the quality and rigour of the self-evaluation reports and development plans will be judged by ETI and DEL. They include the requirement for a supplier organisation to demonstrate in its self-evaluation report that it has involved learners in the process through structured surveys, questionnaires, focus groups or inviting them to participate as members of the self-evaluation team or consultative committees.

Having provided self-evaluation reports and development plans to the local contract manager, these are copied to the respective ETI district inspector for review and scrutiny. ETI evaluates the quality and rigour of the self-evaluation reports and development plans against the six key criteria published in IQ:RS and provide reports to the contract managers. If the supplier organisation's self-evaluation report is judged to be deficient in terms of its use of trainee feedback, DEL's contract manager will advise the organisation and ask that future reports demonstrate the more effective use of trainee feedback. There are no written sanctions at this point but, ultimately, if external inspection and re-inspection continue to show poor standards, then the contract for training may be removed. It is early days for self-evaluation and development plans in work-based training in Northern Ireland and the emphasis is to improve the capability of a supplier organisation to carry out self-evaluation effectively.

ETI requires the self-evaluation process to be learner-focused and to draw on the learners' experiences. Effective self-evaluation involves learners in the process because their views are important. During inspections, leadership and management are evaluated using a range of quality indicators including quality assurance.

Effective quality assurance procedures require self-evaluation at all levels to be systematic and rigorous and to be supported with reliable evidence. ETI assesses and reports on the quality of supplier organisation's self-evaluation reports during inspection and include the assessments in the inspection report. ETI expects leadership and management to place the interests of learners first by having effective systems for collecting learner feedback and acting upon the feedback to bring about improvements.

The use of trainee feedback by supplier organisations is also at an early stage and varies considerably. Only a minority use trainee feedback extensively and effectively as evidence to support judgements in their self-evaluation reports. The majority use some form of questionnaires/focus group approach, although this varies in quality and a few make no use of trainee feedback at all. ETI promotes the use of trainee feedback as an important evidence base for evaluating quality of provision and supporting other findings from inspection. It is generally reliable and provides trainees with an opportunity to identify strengths and areas for improvement in their training programmes. During staff meetings, managers can use trainee feedback effectively as part of their quality assurance procedures.

ETI's main priorities for enhancing and developing trainee feedback are to ensure that:

- the management of supplier organisations recognise that it constitutes an important criteria when the quality and rigour of their self-evaluation report and development plan are judged, and ultimately their quality assurance procedures. Management need to be committed to self-evaluation and the use of trainee feedback;

- trainees are made aware of the importance of their opinions and how they can improve the quality of their training programmes. Induction plays an essential role in this respect;

- employers providing WBT encourage trainees to provide feedback on the quality of all aspects of the training programme.

Marion Matchett
Chief Inspector

Scotland

Scottish Enterprise

Learner feedback is collected by Scottish Enterprise by means of a postal Follow-Up Survey. This is issued to all former participants of National Training Programmes within one month of leaving and then again after 6 months. During 2002 the follow-up survey form was reviewed and amended following background research and consultation. As a result, the response rate was substantially improved on the previous year.

The questionnaire is relatively short and covers two sides of A4. Each questionnaire also has a unique identifier number in order to track respondent's details. A covering letter and pre-paid response envelope is sent to individuals and reminder letters are also issued two weeks after closing date for non respondents. The questionnaire gathers trainee perspectives on the process and tracks progress into education,

employment and further training. The results from the survey are also designed to assist Scottish Enterprise in identifying the critical success factors within training programmes and possible areas of weakness. These include:-

- the proportion of trainees gaining some form of employment
- the proportion of respondents retaining employment with the same employer
- the proportion of unemployed respondents
- correlation between training provider and the resultant employment outcome
- overall satisfaction with training and training providers
- performance and satisfaction within key occupational areas

Scottish Enterprise recognises the importance of collecting the views of the training programme participants in determining the future models for training. However, we consider that the feedback from participants should also be integrated with known performance information from individual training providers and occupational sectors, to provide a complete picture of training provision. To meet this need, Scottish Enterprise is developing a pilot project to disseminate this type of information on National Training Programmes on a public basis using web-based dissemination tools.

Scottish Enterprise also places emphasis on the learners' views/ experience of the National Training programmes through the Scottish Quality Management System (SQMS). SQMS is used to quality assure the systems and procedures of contracted providers of training through annual self-assessment and development planning and external auditing. Individual providers are required to gather the views of their learners as part of the self-assessment process and SQMS auditors sample a number of learners for their views whilst conducting the external audit.

Virginia Bell
Programme Analyst – Skills Development

The Scottish Quality Management System (SQMS)

The Scottish Quality Management System was first launched in 1993 as a quality management framework for all vocational education and training in Scotland. SQMS is the quality standard used for both external and internal auditing of work-based training provision. It covers ten areas of management, resources and programme design, delivery and support, each of which is presented as an overview statement with key questions, known as pointers, by which achievement of the standard is judged, followed by lists of suggested lines of evidence for use in conducting an SQMS audit.

Data from surveys or discussion with learners is a key form of evidence required for many of the 56 pointers. The SQMS guidelines emphasise that collecting data from learners, when carefully planned, need not be onerous and suggest that a single questionnaire could easily cover up to 90% of evidence required on learners' satisfaction. Learners' views and feedback are either primary or secondary sources of evidence when conducting an audit, depending on the nature of the topic being audited.

For example, in reviewing the induction process, although records kept by the provider are a key piece of evidence, if the learners all said it simply did not happen, then the written evidence would be called into question and a finding raised against the organisation. Likewise, if there were records for learner reviews and yet learners had indicated that reviews had not taken place, then again a finding would be established against the organisation.

Within the 'business cluster', learner feedback plays a key role as a source of evidence in Standard 3 Marketing and Customer Care and Standard 7 Communication and Administration. In marketing and customer care, learners are asked about how they were made aware of the programmes (marketing) and how their views were gathered on the quality of the programmes, their progress and their relationships with staff. SQMS would also look for a complaints procedure within provider organisations and learners would be asked if they know about it and who they should complain to if they have an issue. In communication and administration, under the first pointer *Does the organisation have an effective internal communication system?*, feedback from learners on the effectiveness of organisational communications and evidence of learner representation on appropriate committees are both identified as sources. Learners, together with client organisations and key bodies, are also cited as sources for feedback on the effectiveness of external communications.

Within the 'resources cluster, the first pointer under Standard 5 Equal Opportunities asks *Does the organisation have, operate and monitor an equal opportunities policy?* and, alongside documentary evidence of up-to-date policies and procedures, data on learner views on the implementation and monitoring of those policies and arrangements is identified as an important source. Another example where learner feedback is recommended as a means of confirming or complementing documentary sources is in Standard 6 Health and Safety where, under several pointers, the views of learners are highlighted as evidence that a particular programme is being implemented, that the necessary controls are in place and routinely monitored, that the level of supervision is appropriate for the level of risk and that suitable training for the specific task/process has been provided. Standard 6 also highlights the value of feedback from learners as to whether there are effective means of consultation and communication on relation to health, safety and welfare-specific issues.

However, it is within the 'training cluster' that trainee feedback features most extensively, under Standard 8 Guidance Services and Standard 9 Programme Design and Delivery. In the former, learner satisfaction appears under the pointers relating to the initial identification of learning needs, the extent to which learners' prior achievements are taken into account, the provision of induction, ongoing guidance and support and, where appropriate, referral to specialist services and access to guidance on post-programme progression and Lifelong Learning. In the latter, the emphasis is on whether programmes achieve a good match with learner expectations of both content and quality. Among the areas in which evidence of learner satisfaction is recommended are access to teaching, training and assessment, the sequencing and organisation of programmes, the provision of premises, facilities, equipment and materials, staff/learner relationships and learning, training and assessment methods.

Linda Murray
Manager, Skills Development
Scottish Enterprise

Wales

Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn)

Listening to learners and evaluating the actions taken by providers to both gather and use feedback to improve the quality of learning and the learning experience are part of the key elements in Estyn's inspection process.

Most work-based learning providers in Wales operate some form of feedback process. Many use questionnaires, focus groups, or a mixture of both to try to find out how learners feel about the quality of their learning and whether or not it has met their expectations. However, the number of learners who involve themselves in the feedback process remains relatively low. This means that many providers are unable to carry out any meaningful analysis of learners' views due to the low sample level. Where analysis is undertaken, too few providers use the results to improve the quality of learning delivered.

Too often, providers have to rely on their own perception of how the learning experience has been for the learner, rather than use the hard evidence from the feedback process to inform their strategies for improving the learners' experience. The lack of robust learner feedback mechanisms, both in the collection of and use of the results to inform quality development, has been reflected in comments made in the inspection reports of work-based learning providers carried out during 2003/2004. Approximately 70% of providers inspected were judged to have less than satisfactory learner feedback mechanisms.

Despite this, there is some evidence of improvement. Learner feedback is already fairly well established within the FE sector and moves are now afoot to adopt a common approach across the 20 colleges. It is hoped that, in due course, a similar strategy may be considered amongst work-based learning providers.

Estyn views learner feedback as one of the key elements in ensuring the quality and relevance of the learning experience for the individual. In Estyn's view, any learner feedback process needs to be based on a number of key principles including:

- an environment which encourages learners to give open and honest feedback;
- simple systems for learners to use to give feedback;
- a commitment by the learning provider to transparently use the information collected to make changes where required and to make the quality of the learner's training and experience better; and
- ongoing communication between the learner and the provider as a part of the quality improvement process.

Estyn would therefore welcome any feedback process that improves both the quality of the learning experience for the learner and, at the same time, improves the quality and performance of the learning provider.

Susan Lewis
Chief Inspector

The National Council for Education and Training for Wales (ELWa)

A key element of ELWa's responsibilities to learners is that it should understand learner needs and experiences and use this knowledge to continually improve the range and quality of provision. ELWa recognises the strategic value and importance of placing the learner at the centre of everything it does and an important part of this is listening to the feedback it receives from learners. The ELWa Customer Research Strategy has been developed to provide an understanding of learner needs, motivation and satisfaction. This research activity will allow ELWa and its partners in the learning sector in Wales to:

- understand what motivates customers to learn, so enabling us to widen and deepen participation in learning;
- understand what customers think of the education and learning services they receive, particularly those which it funds; and
- track and understand participation within the different customer groups.

As part of the development process, ELWa commissioned a review of the learner feedback information collected by colleges and training providers during Summer 2002. The review found that a useful range of customer satisfaction information is collected regularly and consistently at the level of individual colleges or training providers, but in an inconsistent way. A range of useful examples was collected, particularly from individual colleges as part of their quality systems. However, the review did not look into the quality of the information or the way in which it was used by providers to improve learning provision in response to learners' views. In addition, the review concluded that the inconsistency in approach would make it impossible to compare the results in order to gather a national picture of learner satisfaction.

In response to these findings, and to Estyn's findings that 70% of providers have unsatisfactory approaches to learner feedback, ELWa prioritised the development of a system for gathering a national view of learner satisfaction. The research would enable the identification of priorities for action in driving up satisfaction with the learning experience, and would also aid the development of guidance for improvement of learner feedback mechanisms amongst providers.

In summer 2003, the first National Learner Satisfaction Survey in Wales was undertaken by NOP on behalf of ELWa. NOP has had experience of developing a satisfaction survey in England with the LSC and therefore ELWa used a similar approach and core questions so that the results can be compared with England to some extent. However, a different questionnaire was developed which focussed on some aspects which are specific to Wales e.g. satisfaction with access to learning through the Welsh language.

The survey was developed in consultation with key partners, including sector bodies such as the Welsh SSC Network. It sought the views of over 6,000 learners in ELWa-funded learning. As a large-scale, blanket survey, the National Learner Satisfaction Survey provides a valuable overview of the views of large groups of learners across Wales in order to identify priorities for action and improvement. The survey included the views of 1,000 learners on work-based learning programmes and found that 7 in 10 work-based learners are extremely or very satisfied with their learning experience overall. Specific questions were asked of those individuals on WBL programmes e.g. relevance to job, usefulness to job, satisfaction with employer support, satisfaction with the number of off-the-job hours training each week.

ELWa has also undertaken a pilot survey of WBL leavers six months after they have left the programme to find out what impact their learning has had and to gather their views.

As well as utilising the results from the national survey, it is important for individual providers to gain an understanding of the views of their learners. Many providers already have comprehensive and high quality satisfaction monitoring activities and ELWa would wish to see this continue and improve. However, as discussed above, there is inconsistency of approach, frequency and quality across the learning network.

ELWa aims to remove this inconsistency through it's Quality Framework, which includes a requirement that was introduced in April 2004, for providers of further education, work-based learning and community learning funded by ELWa to submit an annual self-assessment report and quality development plan. Provider self-assessment will be used as the starting point for ELWa's monitoring of performance. The self-assessment requirements emphasise the importance of providers using feedback from learners, employers and communities to inform evaluation of their performance, and to support continuous improvement in the services they offer. Feedback from providers in the context of ELWa's provider performance review pilot has shown strong support for a measure of customer satisfaction. This would help to give a fuller picture of learners' experiences than 'hard' measures of learner outcomes alone.

ELWa has sought the views of learning providers on a possible approach for the future, which would be for providers to continue to develop their individual approaches to monitoring learner satisfaction, whilst at the same time including some consistent questions and methods from the national approach. This would allow comparison and benchmarking of individual providers across Wales on a number of core issues, whilst at the same time allowing the individual flexibility of approach required. Under these circumstances, provider performance reviews would assess the individual approach used by providers and allow performance to be measured against the national core benchmarks.

The development of this measure of customer satisfaction is part of ELWa's consultation with all providers on proposed performance measures for post-16 learning in Wales. This will be the first time that there has been a consistent set of measures for learning outcomes that can be applied across all learning sectors. Over time, the measures will support quality assurance, inspection and benchmarking across the sector; they will be vital to the success of both ELWa's Quality Framework and Estyn's Common Inspection Framework.

The issue of learner feedback is still very much a developmental area for ELWa. The future direction for provider review mechanisms and the Customer Research Strategy will be further developed in the future.

Elizabeth Lyon
Senior Research Analyst

"Work-based learning serves a diverse group of people, from apprentices to mature workers who are re-training. For work-based learning to meet all their needs, we must ensure it is personalised and tailored as far as possible. As we have learnt from our own learner satisfaction surveys at the LSC, the value and importance of learner feedback in that process, and in improving standards, cannot be underestimated."

Christopher N Banks CBE, Chairman, Learning and Skills Council

Part C   Considering the options: national, sector and provider case studies

As already stated, *Listening to the work-based learner* is not designed to be a comprehensive primer on gathering, analysing and using learner feedback, nor to advocate any particular methodology for doing so. However, it does start from the premise that, even with the most sophisticated, comprehensive and cost-effective systems, unless there is some basis for comparison with others, the data will be of limited value as a tool for quality improvement.

The following pages illustrate three possible approaches. Once again, there is no attempt to recommend which of these offers the greatest potential benefits for providers and their learners, for sector bodies or for work-based training in the UK. The prospect of all providers using a single common system will undoubtedly have its appeal and there are certainly advantages in having just one approach that everyone uses and understands. On the other hand, as we strive to create more personalised learning, with programmes, qualifications and assessment designed to be tailored to meet individual needs, many providers will wish to actively engage learners and other stakeholders, not only in the specification and design of feedback systems but in their administration, analysis and follow-up. Exclusive or, worse still, enforced use of a common national system would leave little room for creating a strong sense of local ownership and involvement.

There is also the all-important issue of purpose. A survey designed by national experts is likely to be technically superior to any 'home-made' effort but, unless the use to which it is to be put is the same as that for which it was designed, it may be quite unsuitable. Sector bodies face a similar dilemma. They will need to balance carefully the potential benefits of having access to specific information of direct relevance to the needs of their employers and the sector as a whole, against the need to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort and the serious risk of 'feedback fatigue' amongst providers and learners alike.

Adopting a national approach

The Learning and Skills Council's National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS) has already been hugely influential and the National Council for Education and Training in Wales (ELWa) has now followed suit with a broadly similar approach, albeit taking the opportunity to redesign many of the questions for use in a separate questionnaire for work-based trainees. The largest survey of its kind, it represents a major resource for providers, sector bodies and policy-makers. By generating a wide-ranging set of national benchmarks, it not only delivers the key headline measures of learner satisfaction required by those responsible for funding and promoting work-based training, but offers providers, sector bodies and other agencies valuable yardsticks to compare their performance, the like of which have not previously been available.

As indicated in the earlier section on UK policies, the LSC is urging its local offices, providers and others to adopt some or all of the core NLSS questions in their own surveys in order that these can be compared with the national benchmarks. Several of the commercial data collection and analysis specialists have already incorporated the core questions within their range of products, enabling providers to choose whether or not to include them as part of their trainee surveys. However, several local LSC offices have reported a reluctance amongst some of their providers to adopt the NLSS questions and integration within provider surveys may prove difficult where the style of the two sets of questions is markedly different.

Nevertheless, the use of national 'customer satisfaction' surveys is now firmly established throughout the public services and their use in education and training seems likely to increase in the future.

National learner satisfaction surveys

The LSC introduced its annual survey in 2002 and, in 2003, it covered over 25,000 learners, two thousand of whom were work-based trainees. It is conducted by telephone, using the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing system (CATI) and the work-based sample is drawn from a random selection of individual learning records. The survey is introduced to learners as a means of finding out their views "so that facilities and services can be monitored and improved in the way you want them to be." The published headline results focus on levels of satisfaction with the learning experience as a whole and in four specific areas:-

- **quality of teaching and management of learning**

  This includes issues ranging from the timekeeping and punctuality of trainers and tutors providing off-the-job sessions, the provision of regular feedback on progress and the extent to which trainees are finding their subject interesting and enjoyable to behaviour management in the lecture room or workshop and providers' responsiveness to differences in preferred learning styles.

- **information and guidance prior to entry**

  This is concerned with identifying why and how learners chose their programmes, how advice is sought and how useful it is felt to be. It also explores trainees' expectations and whether these are being met.

- **support for learners**

  This examines the difficulties learners may be encountering, the help and advice they receive and how any complaints they may have made were handled.

- **the impact of learning**

  This is concerned with the benefits that learners believe they have gained from work-based training, their previous attitudes to learning and their views on future education and training.

The survey consists of some sixty questions, 34 of which are directly related to feedback. The remainder are concerned with gathering a variety of personal and demographic information on the learner, their previous education and their work-based programme. Most questions, such as *How long is your training?* or *How likely will you be to undertake further learning in the future (say in the next 3 years)?* have just one answer, chosen from a list of options offered by the interviewer or based on a

rating scale. However, ten are multiple questions in which the respondent is either presented with a series of statements (*I am better at learning on my own now, I now take a more active part in the community, I feel more confident socially*) with which they agree or disagree, or is asked to give a rating from *very poor* to *excellent* in terms of quality (eg. individual aspects of teaching, management of specific issues experienced on the programme).

Nine of the feedback questions seek further clarification on previous answers. For example, having asked whether the learner has ever made a complaint to their employer about their training, there are two follow-up questions on the subject of the complaint and the trainees' satisfaction with the outcome. Two-thirds of all the questions are regarded by the LSC as 'core' questions and it is these that are recommended for use by providers and other for benchmarking purposes.

From a sector body standpoint, the survey provides insufficient detail to allow the specific apprenticeship framework involved to be identified as learners are only coded against the main occupational cluster (eg. Hospitality/Sports/Leisure and Travel) when asked *What subjects or skills are you studying/training?*

In Wales, ELWa has created separate survey scripts for FE students and work-based trainees, avoiding the frequent use of terms associated with educational institutions (eg. course, lesson, teachers etc.) that occurs in the all-purpose LSC version. ELWa refers instead to trainees and assessors but neither survey attempts to gathers feedback on, or to distinguish between, the trainers, instructors, assessors and workplace supervisors involved in work-based training and the tutors and instructors responsible for delivering vocational education and off-the-job training in a college or on a providers' premises. Neither does the effective integration of on- and off-the-job learning, a long-standing priority for ALI and Estyn inspectors, currently feature as part of the NLSS.

The Welsh version also includes a number of new questions, covering additional subjects and drilling down into the detail of the survey. For example, the ELWa script not only asks how many hours a week are spent in off-the-job training but also the potentially very revealing *Do you feel that you have enough time in off-the-job training per week towards your qualification or do you feel you should have more?* Other ELWa questions are particular to Wales, being concerned specifically with learners' preferences and experiences of teaching in Welsh.

In its guidance on the National Learner Satisfaction Survey, the LSC states that:

"…whilst the NLSS will highlight broad issues and throw light on specific learner groups, it cannot reflect the specific challenges and priorities of the local LSCs or of individual colleges or providers. It can, therefore, be difficult to isolate those findings which are of most relevance at a local or college/provider level and to 'own' the results. Following on from this, local data are essential in order to identify the priorities for action within a particular area or institution."

Encouraging local LSCs, colleges and providers to consider repeating the NLSS at local level, in addition to their existing learner feedback arrangements, the LSC stresses the undoubted value of benchmarking against the national data, suggesting that it will promote "standardisation of satisfaction survey instruments within the area and allow all interested parties to take full advantage of the development work which has gone into the NLSS."

Two key aspects of methodology have been highlighted as important in maintaining the comparability of local and national surveys. The first is sampling, a major factor for

local LSCs but an issue that will affect few providers, for whom a census of as many trainees as possible will be the preferred approach. The second is the interviewing method. Providers will seldom be able to justify the cost of commissioning an independent telephone survey. However, the LSC has published calibration factors to allow comparison between telephone and self-completion methods for benchmarking purposes.

Finally, there is the all-important issue of the coding and analysis of the NLSS core questions. Providers may prefer not to have to develop their own tools to process and correlate the national survey data and the availability of public and commercial products that can do so is likely to be a key factor in their willingness to incorporate the core questions within their existing survey arrangements. A new research tools interactive website, which the LSC will launch during 2005, will include a benchmarking module to assist providers with this issue.

Examples of sector initiatives

Some employment sectors have a long tradition of employer regulation and involvement in work-based training and apprenticeships, dating back to the medieval guilds. In others, sector bodies have their origins in the statutory training boards set up under the Industrial Training Act of 1964 or, much later, following the introduction of National Training Organisations.

Sector Skills Councils are the latest to evolve and it is two of the largest of these that have so far taken the greatest interest in learner feedback for their work-based trainees. However, they began with rather different priorities and chose different approaches to gathering and analysing feedback from their apprentices. The third example illustrates how Skillset, SSC for the audio-visual sector, is planning for the future.

CITB-ConstructionSkills - Construction Apprentices Survey

The construction industry is one of the largest employers in the UK. Rapidly changing technology and the increasing demand for new recruits requires high quality training in specific skills areas. CITB-ConstructionSkills is the Sector Skills Council but, in order to help ensure a supply of sufficiently qualified people, it also acts as a Managing Agent, providing guidance and support for learners through a network of Area Offices and New Entrant Training Officers, as well as funding training and providing programmes through the National Construction College.

As part of its role as a Sector Skills Council, and to meet the requirements of the Adult Learning Inspectorate and the LSC in England, the Local Enterprise Companies in Scotland and ELWa in Wales, CITB-ConstructionSkills commissions an annual survey of new entrants to the industry. This has been conducted since 1998 by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and provides a vital source of feedback from those apprentices whose learning is being managed directly by CITB-ConstructionSkills.

It is one of the few opportunities to discover more about the trainees and their motivation for undertaking training, their background and their future plans. The data can feed into marketing and recruitment campaigns, and also inform assessment procedures, enabling the organisation to identify candidates who are likely to be successful and benefit most from construction training.

The Construction Apprentices Survey examines learners' experiences of their training in line with the Common Inspection Framework and covers the following areas:

- Achievement

- Teaching, training and learning practice

- Resources

- Assessment and Monitoring

- Meeting learners' needs

- Support

- Leadership and management

The questionnaire contains questions relating to:

- learners' background including their qualifications

- the course and training programme they are following

- learners' career choice and the main influences on this

- learners' experience of the Construction Skills Learning Exercise and employer interviews

- assessment of learners' needs

- learners' views on their training programme and induction

- advice and support that learners were given regarding their future.

For the 2003 survey, a total of 6,683 questionnaires were sent to the home addresses of learners in England, Wales and Scotland, using details held on the CITB-ConstructionSkills database of construction apprentices. A reminder letter and second copy of the questionnaire was sent to all those who had not responded after three weeks. A total of 3,089 completed questionnaires were returned by the end of February, representing a response rate of 46 per cent.

2003 Survey Results

As in previous years, the majority of CITB-ConstructionSkills new entrant trainees were white males aged 16 or 17, although the proportion of learners aged 18 or older had increased since 2002. In most cases, learners had a higher level of academic achievement than the previous years' entrants – in particular the proportion of learners who attained five GCSEs grade A*-C.

For a Sector Skills Council, such large-scale data on its apprentice population is invaluable. The survey not only provides detailed information on the national profiles of construction trainees, including general and vocational qualifications achieved prior to entry, but also details of the pattern of off-the-job training and the specific occupations involved (see Table 1).

Information of this kind is not available from any other source and allows detailed comparisons to be made from year to year, highlighting trends to which the sector may need to respond. Other trends revealed by the survey include the proportion of trainees that enter an apprenticeship having already completed a construction-related project whilst at school.

Table 1: Occupational areas of training

Occupations	2003 %	1998 %
Wood occupations	48	52
Brickwork	22	21
Painting and decorating	8	14
Plastering	4	3
Roofing	3	3
Scaffolding	3	<1
Plant mechanic/maintenance	2	1
Plumbing	2	1
Flooring	1	1
Masonry	1	1
Civil engineering	1	1
Other	3	<1
No response	1	2
N=	**3089**	**3099**

Comparisons of other responses over time reveal that an increasing proportion embark on a career in construction because of the good levels of pay that young people associate with the industry. Moreover, a higher proportion of new entrants held long-term aims such as starting their own business. In deciding upon construction as a career, direct contact with the industry through work-experience and contact with employers and CITB-ConstructionSkills were found to be particularly helpful by new entrants.

Learners are asked about the selection process, how they felt about their employer interviews and how these could be improved. Such feedback is extremely invaluable, providing insights that cannot easily be obtained by other means.

Most trainees believed that their induction had given them sufficient information about the training programme and had provided the necessary details of the content and assessment processes involved and the commitment required of them.

In general, learners felt well supported by college and CITB-ConstructionSkills staff. However, a smaller proportion of respondents were found to have discussed their longer-term future than had done so regarding more immediate training needs. Therefore, there could be scope for exploring the need to provide enhanced information and guidance to new entrants about their future progression, both within the training programme and the construction industry generally, at an early stage of their apprenticeship.

Future Developments

After five years experience of using this particular approach to gathering and analysing trainee feedback, CITB-ConstructionSkills is now reviewing its priorities and methodology for the annual Construction Apprentices Survey. Far better supply side intelligence is required to support the development of the new Sector Skills Agreements and the existing model, which could be regarded as more akin to academic research, may need to be replaced by a more customer-focused,

'market research' approach. Whilst the Sector Skills Council will still aim to collect some of the same key information - trainee characteristics, motivations, ambitions, etc. - not least to maintain the opportunity for year-on-year analysis of trends, it is likely that more emphasis will be placed on asking trainees to rate various aspects of CITB-ConstructionSkills' own performance as a Managing Agent, and then measuring these against young peoples' expectations.

In order to get better quality data and increase response rates, it is likely that future surveys would be carried out by telephone rather than post, and also include the use of focus groups to follow-up on key issues and give more scope for trainees to discuss improvements in the training and support they receive. As part of this review of learner feedback in the construction sector, CITB-ConstructionSkills will also be considering the feasibility of widening the scope of the survey, contacting apprentices with other managing agencies in order to provide a broader view of provision across the sector. This could potentially enable all construction providers to benchmark the quality of their provision against others delivering similar programmes.

So far, only new entrants have been surveyed but the new system would be extended to cover trainees who have completed their apprenticeship, collecting valuable achievement and destination data. It may also include employers, investigating how they rate the recruitment and learning process and encouraging feedback on the national framework for construction apprenticeships and how that might be improved.

Reviewing the sector's approach to trainee feedback will provide an ideal opportunity to consider the usefulness of adopting some of the National Learner Satisfaction Survey core questions as a means of benchmarking across sectors.

SEMTA – apprentice-feedback.com

The engineering industry has the largest number of Government-supported apprentices of any employment sector and SEMTA, the Sector Skills Council for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies, had its origins in the Engineering Industry Training Board set up in 1964. SEMTA covers a diverse range of employment, from aerospace and shipbuilding to forensic science, but it is in engineering that apprentice training currently plays the most significant role.

SEMTA's National Training Framework Committee (NTFC) was established in 1993 to develop and introduce the prototype Engineering Modern Apprenticeship and has continued to keep the apprenticeship frameworks under regular review. Composed of representatives of employers, Group Training Associations, colleges and other providers, Trades Unions and government agencies, the NTFC first turned its attention to learner feedback in 1999. It noted that, despite the increasing public focus on learner satisfaction and obtaining feedback on the quality of training, inspection reports suggested relatively few employers and training providers were operating effective feedback systems, and even fewer were making good use of the data to improve training delivery and learner support. It was also apparent that, apart from those inspection reports, the sector itself had no up-to-date and reliable sources of information on the experiences, opinions and future intentions of its trainees.

Believing that having access to such information was essential, the solution for SEMTA appeared to be the development of a common feedback system for all engineering trainees that could:-

- offer employers and providers a ready-made tool for gathering and analysing feedback, eliminating the need for wasteful duplication of effort in developing their own systems
- enable sector-wide data collection and quality benchmarking for use in strategic planning and target-setting, and
- help raise the overall standards of apprentice training by encouraging all employers and providers to participate in a common system of direct benefit to themselves

It was hoped that a national trainee feedback system would not only generate positive evidence of trainee satisfaction to be used in promoting work-based training to young people, their parents, teachers and careers advisers, but also provide an efficient and cost-effective means by which to obtain the views of apprentices on a range of wider issues with policy implications, from their experience of careers guidance in schools to their aspirations for entering higher education.

Preliminary consultations with engineering employers and Group Training Associations (GTAs) indicated support for the introduction of an online system and produced a list of potential project partners interested in becoming involved in subsequent development work. These ranged from major private sector companies and a branch of the armed forces, to a wide cross-section of GTAs, serving many hundreds of small and medium-sized engineering employers. Their existing arrangements for feedback varied considerably, as did the practical issues associated with trialling the system.

The development and piloting of *apprentice-feedback.com*, in consultation with the Adult Learning Inspectorate and with support from the Department for Education and Skills, involved all of the project partners in the design of questionnaires, specifying the format of reports and providing regular feedback on progress. Two surveys were developed for use during the pilot, one for trainees in the first year of their apprenticeship and the other for those who had already completed their first year of training.

The First Year questionnaire was designed to be administered to trainees, many of whom would have completed, or be nearing the end of, their initial off-the-job workshop training and would therefore be able to comment on its quality and suggest how it could be improved. For most, it would also be less than a year since their recruitment, selection and induction, on which they could also be asked to reflect in terms of their satisfaction with these processes. Finally, it was hoped that they would also be able to comment on the advice, guidance and influence they had received, prior to applying for their engineering apprenticeship.

The full range of subjects covered in the First Year survey questionnaire were:-
- Personal details, including type of apprenticeship, training status, region, age, gender, ethnicity and disability
- Qualifications gained prior to starting training
- Career choice information, including personal preferences for post-16 progression, parental and teacher advice, provision of information on apprenticeships and factors affecting the choice of apprenticeship
- Details of the initial selection process, satisfaction with the induction programme and coverage of Employment Rights and Responsibilities
- Evaluation of initial assessment, understanding of the training programme and its qualification components
- Satisfaction with initial engineering workshop training
- Details of progress reviews and satisfaction with various aspects of trainee support

- Experience of teambuilding activities
- Equality of opportunity
- Progression to employment and Higher Education
- Overall impressions and suggestions for improvement

Additional subjects covered in the Post First Year questionnaire included:-
- Understanding of, and progress in, the NVQ, Key Skills and Technical Certificate components of the training programme
- Evaluation of on- and off-the-job education and training provision
- Conduct of NVQ assessments
- Career and further learning intentions and aspirations, including attitudes towards language skills and inter-cultural competence

The debate over whether or not the survey process should be anonymous was an important feature of the pilot and remains a subject for further consideration. Those that maintain the questionnaires themselves (and therefore each individual's responses) should be identifiable, not only argue that this would allow more effective follow-up of trainees' criticisms and problems but that higher response rates could be achieved as a result, by monitoring non-completion. However, as several providers demonstrated during the pilot, it is not necessary to compromise the anonymity of the trainee in order to manage the feedback process.

The approach taken by the military establishment is a good illustration of what can be achieved in a properly administered feedback process. Training staff first prepared what they describe as an 'idiot's guide' to using the Internet for completing the survey. This consisted of a very simple 16-step checklist which told the trainee what to do, or to type, at every stage of the process, from visiting the website in the first place to closing down the system when he or she had finished. It was tested first on colleagues to ensure it was completely foolproof and was then given to every trainee during the face-to-face briefings that were held with each group of apprentices.

Training staff had already identified that, if they were to manage the process effectively, it was essential to be able to monitor which trainees had, or had not, completed the survey. In discussion with the system designers, it was agreed that they would use the facility whereby, having completed a questionnaire, a trainee can send an e-mail to their training officer requesting a follow-up. Trainees were simply instructed, as Step 11 on their checklist, to enter their name and course number at the CONTACT ME prompt.

Every morning, the Training Officer responsible for co-ordinating the pilot would print off the messages he had received from trainees and feed the information back to course instructors so that they could encourage any in their group who had still to complete the survey. By utilising an existing facility within the system, the organisation was able to monitor the process, without affecting trainees' anonymity or the confidentiality of their feedback.

2003 Survey response and results

Response rates varied considerably and several factors appear to have had a significant impact.

Firstly, there is a marked difference between the two major private-sector employers and the GTAs as a whole. The reasons for this are quite clear since the circumstances under which they operate their respective training schemes are completely different. Company trainees represent a largely captive population, employed within a system

characterised by well-established channels of communication, clear lines of management control and a culture in which trainees have a strong vested interest in complying with their employer's requests for co-operation. At one of the employers, approximately 80% of those asked to complete a questionnaire did so, without any incentives being offered.

One GTA reported that "trainees are probably more open and honest about their views using the online system. Even though our system has been anonymous in the past, the fact that questionnaires are filled in as a class activity made some trainees feel uneasy about airing their true feelings."

Response rates were highest when providers used effective methods of communicating necessary information to trainees, either in face-to-face presentations to groups of apprentices as part of their normal training programme or using electronic communications. The GTAs and employers that achieved the highest level of response were those that presented the surveys primarily as an integral part of their organisations' ongoing process of continuous quality improvement.

Finally, the other key factor was access to the Internet. Several providers reported that it was shop floor-based, predominantly craft apprentices, who were least likely to have ready access to an Internet terminal at work. The system was designed so that, where necessary, questionnaires could be produced in paper form and the results entered at a later stage. Amongst the GTAs, off-site trainees were almost always sent a paper questionnaire to complete, rather than being encouraged to use a home computer or an Internet café for completing the survey online. Given the fact that, for the purpose of the pilot, both questionnaires (especially that for Post First Year trainees) were extremely long, it is hardly surprising that poorer response rates were achieved using this approach. When, as at the military training centre, trainees were actively encouraged, and regularly reminded, to use the internet to complete their surveys and were offered no alternative, the results were extremely positive, with trainees accessing the system late at night in order to complete their response.

Most of the questions in both surveys were linked to the relevant external inspection framework being used by the various providers, namely the Common Inspection Framework in England and the Estyn framework in Wales. Providers can choose to have their results presented in a variety of different formats, from high-level summary reports through to detailed analyses of how trainees' views relate to the specific criteria set out in the appropriate inspection framework. The system was also designed to produce action plans for providers, based on trainees' feedback, and to provide brief summary reports for the trainees themselves.

Perhaps the most powerful tool is a benchmarking facility that allows a provider to compare the views and levels of satisfaction of their apprentices with those of other providers, subject to a strict protocol that protects the anonymity of individual providers. Providers can compare their results with the entire population of trainees, or with selected groups of providers, such as those from a specified region. For both summary and inspection framework formats, in addition to the relevant results for that particular provider, the report shows the mean result for all providers in the category selected for benchmarking, together with the lowest and highest results for all providers in that category.

This opportunity for a provider to identify the range of results for a particular aspect of the survey has proved an extremely valuable feature of the system.

The *apprentice-feedback.com* system is completely secure, with each user having a unique logon and passwords, which are also used to protect the anonymity of the

trainees completing each survey. Providers only have access to their own results, together with such comparative data as the benchmarking facility will permit. At national level, SEMTA personnel cannot identify individual providers but have access to the aggregate data and can analyse by region and other parameters, as long as there are sufficient numbers of providers to protect confidentiality.

The SEMTA surveys piloted in 2003 were very detailed. The questionnaire for First Year trainees contained 74 separate questions, with a total of 343 possible answer options, and that for Post First Year apprentices was even larger, with 105 separate questions, giving a total of 466 possible answer options. However, the system is user friendly and very simple to operate.

Just under 1200 engineering trainees took part in the pilot surveys. The First Year questionnaire concentrated on issues such as recruitment and selection, induction and initial engineering workshop training and most Advanced Apprentices [4] (55%) said that, so far, their experiences had been better than they had expected. Only 7% of all apprentices indicated that their training to that point had not been as good as they had anticipated. Induction scored fairly well, with 71% of Level 3 trainees and 68% of Level 2 trainees [5] saying that it gave them most or all of the information they needed at the start of their apprenticeship. Most felt that their previous achievements and experiences had been taken into account in planning the first year of their training and overall levels of satisfaction with initial engineering workshop training were high.

As in the CITB-ConstructionSkills example, SEMTA used the survey to gather information on prior educational achievements and, amongst the pilot sample, no fewer than 57% of the 641 First Year trainees were revealed as having eight or more passes at GCSE Grades A*-C.

However, it was the results concerning information, advice and guidance that attracted greatest attention, both within the engineering sector and beyond. Only 19% of Advanced Apprentices had been advised at school to apply for an apprenticeship and, when asked how much information they had been given on work-based training as school, over 80% of all trainees said 'not very much' or 'none at all'. Almost two-thirds of Advanced Apprentices had been most strongly advised to stay on at school or college to study GCE A-levels, rather than to enter an apprenticeship. Parents, who were the most influential in deciding whether to apply for a training place in the first instance, also favoured the A-level route and 35% of Advanced Apprentices said that, in their opinion, the careers advice they had been given at school was influenced more by what their school wanted than what would be best for them.

The Post First Year survey explored, in some detail, trainees' understanding of the main qualification components of their apprenticeship and the progress they were making towards completion. As many as two-thirds believed that they could be making faster progress towards completing their qualifications and the training programme. Three-quarters described the overall quality of on-the-job training as either good or very good but many were less satisfied with their college courses. This was one of several areas in which project partners acted quickly as soon as they received such findings, meeting with the FE colleges involved to discuss opportunities for improvement.

From the outset, the Level 3 engineering apprenticeship framework was designed to encourage trainees with the necessary aptitude and motivation to progress to high

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[4] Previously Advanced Modern Apprentices in England.
[5] Now known as Apprentices, but previously Foundation Modern Apprentices in England

level learning and the pilot survey provided the first real evidence of the importance of this for the trainees themselves. Just under half of all those questioned said it was very important for them to have the opportunity, once they finished their apprenticeship, to get further qualifications, such as a degree of BTEC Higher National. In another example of how sector-wide feedback could be used to inform and influence policy-making, trainees were asked whether, in their opinion, more young people would choose an engineering apprenticeship at 16 if, like A-levels, it was accepted for entry to university, 38% said they thought it definitely would and a further 40% thought it would probably do so.

Once again, overall impressions of the training were generally favourable, with 84% describing it as at least as good, if not better, than they had expected and 87% said they would recommended an engineering apprenticeship to other young people.

Future developments

Following the pilot surveys and a review of the success of the trial, SEMTA's National Training Framework Committee agreed that the *apprentice-feedback.com* system should be introduced across the UK, starting in England and Wales and extended to Scotland and Northern Ireland as soon as links to the SQMS and ETI quality frameworks are developed. The initial suite of 12 questionnaires covers new recruits, trainees at the end of their first year of training, post-first year and final year trainees, enabling employers and training providers to select the most suitable survey content for their purposes. Surveys include selected core questions from the Learning and Skills Council's National Learner Satisfaction Survey.

The extension of the system to include surveys of employers has been strongly supported by Group Training Associations and this, together with questionnaires for use with providers' own training staff, is likely to be a feature of *apprentice-feedback.com* in due course. With the widening of the 'family' of apprenticeships in England to include Young Apprenticeships for 14-16 year-olds, SEMTA also plans to use the online feedback system to gather feedback from these young people.

Skillset: Sector Skills Council for the audio visual industries

Skillset covers broadcast, film, video, interative media and photo imaging, a fast-growing sector dependent, like many others, on the skills of its workforce. At present, the numbers of young people undertaking apprenticeships remains small. For this reason, a system for gathering learner feedback from apprentices has not been established. However, Skillset has created a mechanism for obtaining feedback from trainees who participate on Skillset funded training schemes, such as the Freelance Training Fund and the Film Skills Fund. One of the criteria that a training provider must meet in order to obtain funding is to identify how they will gather feedback and evaluate the scheme. This must include feedback on the scheme from the trainee, and a tracking report on the learner to show their progression on completing the course. This information is fed back to Skillset and is used to gauge whether the schemes are successful and, alongside other criteria, to determine whether they should be funded in the future. Skillset may also undertake its own evaluation of the scheme to assess how successfully it has met the needs of the participants.

Skillset recognises the importance and potential value of a formal feedback system in developing its future strategies and meeting the needs of trainees and employers. It has identified three key areas in which such a system could directly benefit Skillset's operations:
Impact for Skillset – providing valuable information that can be fed into future developments of the apprenticeship framework; presenting a clearer picture of the

practicalities of completing the apprenticeship programme, eg: relevant and realistic learning outcomes and the demands of work-based training combined with knowledge-based learning; producing informative statistical information that can be used within Skillset and by the sector.

Impact for employers – they would have greater involvement in the development of apprenticeship programmes, providing a direct forum through which to express their needs and recommendations in terms of programme content and design and leading to stronger, more effective employer links.

Impact for trainees – encouraging self-reflective evaluation; enabling trainees to contribute towards future qualification developments, helping to improve provision by drawing on personal experience; reinforcing the perspective of progression, by reflecting back on the course before looking ahead to further training or employment.

Skillset has identified three initial priorities for the introduction of an effective feedback system for its sector:

- Creating a structured framework for feedback, capable of incorporating requests for specific information – so that the data gathered is meaningful and has specific value to individual areas of the SSC, its employers and the sector
- The inclusion of employer feedback – on both the trainee and the apprenticeship programme (content, design, meeting employer and sector needs etc).
- Raising the profile of feedback and integrating it as part of trainee self-evaluation – to ensure the feedback process provides the widest possible benefit.

Alternative forms of collaboration

What are described here as 'collaborative' approaches to gathering and analysing trainee feedback take two quite distinct forms. In the first, following a local LSC initiative, providers in an area have worked together to agree a joint approach, design a feedback system and operate it for the mutual benefit of all concerned.

In the second, collaboration might be described as 'virtual', in that providers choose to use a commercial data collection and analysis product that enables them to compare their results with those of others, but without any contact necessarily taking place between the participating organisations.

Coventry & Warwickshire Learning and Skills Council

In May 2002, a number of work-based training providers met with the local Learning and Skills Council in Coventry and Warwickshire to examine how learner feedback could be improved, specifically through asking better questions and then benchmarking the results. All of the providers present felt there was a need to tackle the various issues raised and the LSC decided to commission Ci Research to investigate how the findings could be taken forward. An initial proposal was developed for an improved learner feedback process and providers were invited to attend a Good Practice Forum to review the proposal and have the chance to amend aspects of it – or even reject it completely.

Representatives of 22 local providers took part in the event and all were generally supportive of the proposal for a common approach, acknowledging that there was already some duplication but identifying several important issues, including how such a scheme would impact on national providers with their own well-established procedures. They also raised various technical issues, such as the potential difficulty of using the same questions across the full range of work-based trainees and the relative merits of 5 and 7-point rating scales. Providers agreed that they currently undertook

surveys in complete isolation from one another and rarely shared the results and it was therefore proposed:-

- To develop a core methodology that would have the full support of providers and would build on existing good practice
- To agree a set of core questions and explore how individual providers might add to the core to meet their own particular needs
- To develop a process that was
  - easy to implement
  - would provide information to help improve performance, and
  - would support the Common Inspection Framework

Ci Research was tasked with developing a new approach to learner satisfaction measurement, that would help learning providers capture learner opinions and translate this information into a means of developing and sharing good practice.

A number of criteria were set for the methodology that would be employed, namely:
- There must be simplicity in any approach that was adopted
- The methodology should mean no additional work for providers
- It should overcome issues of competition between providers
- It should explore individual elements of the learning programme and examine their contribution to overall satisfaction,
- It should focus on good practice,
- It should be self-sustaining in the future (i.e. should not require external support to deliver).

It was emphasised that although providers would have to include questions in a number of core areas, there would be flexibility to add additional questions if required and the process would not replace existing surveys or other feedback arrangements but be accommodated within them. Adopting a common approach would also not take away the need for providers to do their own analysis. However, the existence of core questions would enable benchmarking of results, with the best performing provider in each of the areas being identified. The results of other providers would remain confidential to them.

Following development of a draft set of questions, providers were once again given the opportunity to comment and suggested that:
- The number of core questions should be reduced to allow greater flexibility
- The language used needed to be kept as simple as possible
- Where necessary, learners should be able to given assistance in completing questionnaires

Opinions varied on how many open-ended questions designed to encourage individual comments and suggestions for improvement, should be included. Some providers believed the number should be kept to a minimum and used only as 'follow-ups', while others argued that more use should be made of such questions to gather positive feedback.

The core areas to be covered by the collaborative feedback system were agreed as:-
- customer care/expectations
- recruitment and marketing
- initial assessment
- induction
- the learning programme
- off-the-job training

- assessment, achievement and outcomes
- signposting
- guidance and support
- the learning environment
- facilities for learning
- quality of information throughout the learning programme

The benchmarking would be undertaken by the LSC, but this would require providers to share their results at set, and as yet undetermined, times in the year. The results of the learner feedback would be used in the provider review system and the process, if adopted, would negate the need for the LSC to undertake its own survey of learners.

The first set of core questions, designed for new starters and titled *First Impressions*, include three opportunities for respondents to suggest improvements and all the forced-choice questions use a 5-point rating scale (eg. very good, good, average, poor and very poor).

Recruitment and Marketing
How would you rate the information you received before starting?
What did you think about the time you had to wait between your interview and start?
Induction
How would you rate the induction you received at the start of your programme?
How could the induction have been improved?
Initial Assessment
How well did we assess your needs?
How well do you think your individual learning plan meets your needs?
How happy are you with your plan of training?
How could it be improved?
Overall satisfaction
How would you rate the service from us?
How could we improve?

The second set, designed for all those in training, also included opportunities to offer comments.
Learning Programme
How well are you kept informed about your progress?
How useful do you find the review meetings you have with us?
Off the job training
How useful is your training to the job you do?
How could the off the job training be improved?
Overall Satisfaction/Expectations
How well has the training met your expectations?
If worse than expected, why was that?
How would you rate the service from us?
How could we improve?

Finally, a third set of core questions, intended for leavers, addresses the remaining issues identified by the Coventry and Warwickshire providers.
Assessment
How fairly did we recognise your achievements?
Facilities
How would you rate our facilities?
If 'poor' or 'very poor', why is that?
Guidance and support
How helpful were the people involved with your training?
If not helpful, why was that?

Signposting
How well did we advise you about your future options?
Quality of information throughout
How would you rate the information you received from us during your training?
What other information would you have found useful?
**Expectations and satisfaction**
How would you rate the service from us?
How could we improve?

Some may have reservations as to whether a single question on an issue as multi-faceted as facilities, guidance and support or assessment can provide more than the most superficial feedback and may be concerned that, far from probing critically these key aspects of quality, this approach could potentially encourage complacency. However, it must be remembered that providers are not using the core questions alone or in isolation. In many cases, it is likely that an individual core question could be preceded or followed by several others, introduced by the provider, to follow-up or elaborate on the relevant issue. Also, neither the LSC nor the providers regard the questionnaires as the only mechanism for feedback.

The approach to some questions may also raise doubts as to the ability of learners to provide a valid and reliable answer. For example, what criteria would a trainee use in order to assess *"How well did we advise you about your future options?"* Once again, the individual provider may include additional text to help introduce or clarify the purpose of a core question, taking into account the needs of the particular trainees concerned. Ultimately, the questionnaire can be used as an initial means of identifying areas in which there may be a problem, and then following that up using other methods.

Figure 1
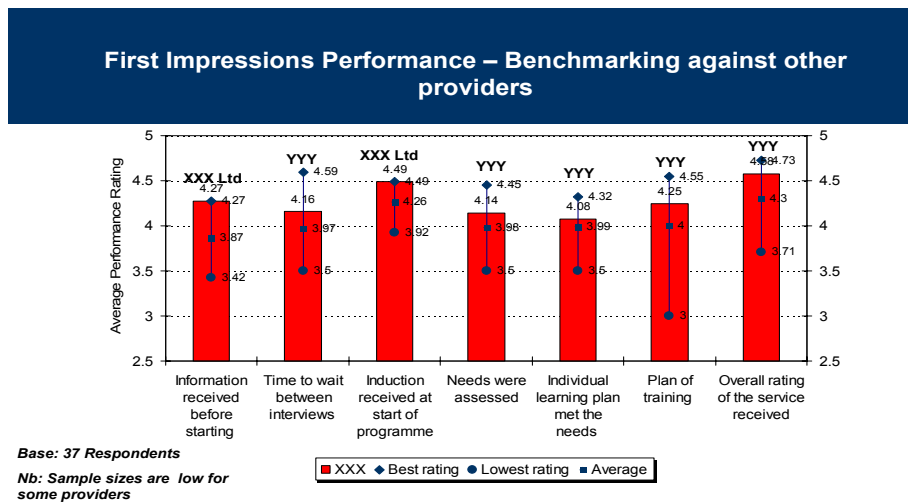
Having administered their feedback surveys, incorporating the core questions, providers input the responses, including the comments and suggested improvements, using an Excel spreadsheet supplied by the LSC. The benchmarking protocol excludes providers that submit fewer than 20 responses. The resulting analysis can be presented in several different ways, including bar charts for individual questions (see Figure 1) and scattergrams plotting the position of each provider against axes for two of the groups of variables being surveyed (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
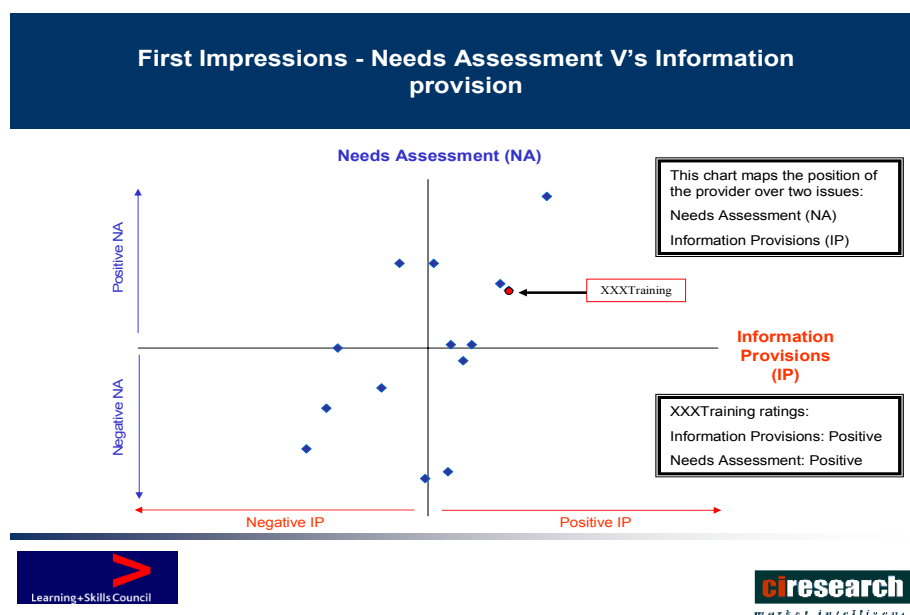
Providers have now used the system for two years and feel comfortable that they are able to share their best practice in a forum that promotes improving learning and overcomes competition issues. The essential principle behind this satisfaction measurement system is to improve all provision and for all providers to be able to generate more success in learning.

The next step is to extend the process to the voluntary and community sector providers in the area and to enable them to benefit from identifying best practice and understanding what their learners think.

Commercial learner feedback systems

Some providers choose to use a commercial data collection and analysis service and the following examples illustrate the different approaches that are now available, including online surveys.

Reference Point Limited

Reference Point is a specialist software company that launched its first system designed specifically for learner feedback in 1995. Called *Easi-Quest for Further Education*, the software included sample questionnaires linked to the then Further Education Funding Council inspection framework. It was initially aimed at colleges with poor inspection results in the belief that these would have the greatest interest in using learner feedback to help improve their performance. In practice, the opposite was true and almost all of the early take-up was from colleges that had performed well in inspection, suggesting that those with the greatest need are often the least likely to encourage constructive feedback from their learners.

In 1997, the Company introduced *Quality Monitor,* a new software package designed specifically for work-based training providers. Developed in partnership with a Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and marketed via strategic alliances with other TECs, *Quality Monitor* surveys were aligned with then Training Standards Council inspection criteria and, over the next four years, QM was actively promoted via TECs

and adopted by over 1000 providers. Although *QM* includes ready-made survey questionnaires, providers can also use the software to create their own and to analyse the results.

The system offers a range of report formats, in statistical and graphical form. Results can be presented giving numbers of respondents and percentages for each question and individual answer option or used to show the correlation between the answers to two questions. The graphical report forms can be selected from a wide variety of options and are ideally suited to the presentation of results as PowerPoint slides.

In the immediate aftermath of the TECs being wound-up, some of the impetus behind trainee feedback appeared to be lost. However, the Company now reports renewed interest in using survey software, with the Internet providing the perfect medium for rapid analysis and benchmarking. [6] Reference Point has now launched its own online system with eight standard questionnaire templates, including surveys for new starters and early leavers and with additional questionnaires for employers and for providers' own training staff. Questionnaires are linked to the Common Inspection Framework criteria and the system provides access to a benchmarking facility and the instant analysis and reporting that is only possible via a web-based system.

After subscribing to the system, a new user can have a survey available for use almost immediately and *Quality Monitor Online* also allows agencies and other relevant bodies to share or access some of the results. Some providers are continuing to use paper questionnaires, produced by the system, for data collection before loading responses for subsequent analysis.

Case Study

STL Sheffield currently has approximately 1500 learners at any one time across its six centres in South Yorkshire and the East Midlands. The organisation covers five occupational sectors – Retail & Warehousing, Business Administration & Customer Services, Hospitality, Hairdressing and Care of the Elderly, to which it has recently added Sport & Leisure

They have been using the system for several years. Before that, they had a manual system, sending questionnaires to learners only. When returned, these were individually analysed by managers who wrote comments on them and took action as appropriate. There was no group analysis for trends.

Quality Monitor was first brought to the Company's attention by the local Training and Enterprise Council, which was piloting it in the area. STL's manual system had been adequate enough when dealing with relatively low numbers but as volumes increased, it no longer met their needs and they agreed to take part in the pilot. They hoped the system would provide pointers to continuous improvement action and contribute to the self-assessment process by providing evidence against external inspection standards. They began using *QM* in 2001, producing reports biannually in April and October. Questionnaires were given to all learners at the start of their programme and again at the mid-point and on completion and were also sent to employers. Although it is impossible to say how many learners have completed the questionnaires over the years, the following table shows the number of participants in the April to September 2003 period.

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[6] SEMTA's apprentice-feedback.com system uses a web-based adaptation of *Quality Monitor*

Questionnaire	Responses
Learners Starting Programme	325
Learners During Programme	216
Learners Finishing Programme	38
Total learner responses	**579**
Employers	81

Response rates varied considerably, from 100% of all new starters to less than 5% for those finishing their programme!

After two years of using *QM*, the Company realised that it was not making the best of the system:-
- Managers did not really understand the results and found it difficult to see how they linked to the Common Inspection Framework to identify action for improvement
- Response rates were low for some questionnaires
- Managers took the view that "If it's 80% or over, it's OK" rather than looking critically at the feedback in a more holistic way

STL's Systems Development Manager, who had no background in *QM* but had been involved in survey question design for a number of years, was asked to review the system and make recommendations for improvement. He held a half-day workshop with managers to identify what they wanted from the questionnaires. Having decided at Director level that STL would continue to use *QM*, the Systems Development Manager was given the task of producing a revised set of questionnaires, with the aim of:-
- Making the outcomes easier to interpret
- Highlighting the links to the Common Inspection Framework
- Encouraging managers to analyse the root causes of issues and take action to address them
- Making the questionnaires more user-friendly and Company-focussed, reflecting the day-to-day realities of the training process

Drafting the revised questionnaires took about five days and these were then presented to the managers in another half-day workshop, after which they were refined into a final version, with a 'map' showing all of the links to the CIF.

The Company ran a one-month pilot with the new questionnaires in March 2004 with the results evaluated in April. Although there were some minor initial problems with scoring that produced some odd results, only minor changes were necessary and the new questionnaires were introduced from May 2004. The questionnaire for new starters now has 33 questions, all but two of which are linked to the CIF. For example, trainees are asked *"Has someone from* (the Company) *discussed with you how you prefer to learn?"* and this provides valuable evidence of the extent to which methods and styles of training are being selected to meet learners' individual needs. For yes/no questions such as this, 4 points are scored for a positive response and zero for a negative response. Where there are more options, such as in *"How satisfied are you with the guidance you had when choosing your course?"*, 'very satisfied' is given 4 points, 'fairly satisfied' is given 3 and so on. The in-training survey has 63 questions, 62 of which are linked to the CIF, and that for leavers totals 52 questions, with 50 of these being mapped against the inspection framework.

STL staff are confident that their revised system will deliver the information they need. In the longer term, it is felt it would make sense for providers and the LSC to be collecting comparable information that also linked to Ofsted and ALI standards. In this way, providers would be able to compare their results against the standards,

other local providers and national benchmarks. Core questions from the National Learner Satisfaction Survey could be added to the *Quality* Monitor questionnaires, although this could result in overload for learners. Even better, the NLSS should be able to provide local analysis from the data it collects to save providers having to do it all again. The Company believes that online feedback is not a practical option at present as a very high percentage of its learners do not have web access at work or regularly attend its training centres.

QDP Services Limited

QDP Services was established in 1996 and currently provides a questionnaire-based learner feedback service for around 160 organisations, many FE colleges in England and Wales, together with several learndirect hubs and a growing number of other training providers. This network of users represents a substantial cross-section of the FE sector and provides an opportunity for colleges to benchmark their results against those of other similar institutions in the same area and with the national data collected by QDP. The Company currently holds benchmarking data from over a million learners and benchmarking reports are readily available in two formats. One shows each of the issues addressed in quartiles as an outcome of each survey undertaken; the second compares results with national averages, together with 'league positions' for each issue. Specific benchmarks are provided for such variables as the type of provider and learner, size and location of provider, mode of attendance, age, gender and ethnicity and, where the necessary data is available, the NLSS core questions.

At the heart of the system are a wide variety of ready-made questionnaires designed for use with learners, teaching/training staff, employers and parents. Those for learners comprise 17 different surveys, ranging from induction and early leavers to 'bite-sized' short courses and New Deal provision. Two are designed specifically for work-based learners, covering those attending college courses as part of their programme and college- or provider-based apprentices. However, these model questionnaires are intended to be modified to meet local needs as well as being personalised with the providers' logo.

A typical model questionnaire for a full-time college student comprises around 100 possible survey items, two-thirds of which are described as core items, plus essential demographic information and a box for comments. Questionnaires take the form of personal statements, with which the respondent is asked to agree or disagree using a constant four-point scale, with 'not applicable' as a fifth option. Users are not expected to adopt all of these but to delete or amend as necessary. For example, a model statement *"My lecturer uses a variety of teaching and learning methods"* may be modified by a provider to read, *"My teacher uses lots of ways to help me learn"*. Additional statements may also be added in order to identify further details about course content, learner support or other issues that may be especially relevant to a particular group of learners.

An example questionnaire designed for work-based training providers includes a total of 77 statements, plus questions on gender, age, ethnicity, disability etc., and the opportunity to make general comments at the end about the programme and how it could be improved or regarding the training provider. These statements cover a wide range of subjects, from initial guidance and induction to assessment, support and programme quality.

Some respondents may find the questionnaire format a little simplistic, with every statement following a similar pattern, designed using as few words as possible. However, users can draw from a substantial bank of items when choosing what will

be best suited to their particular learners and QDP is careful to ensure that, in revising the wording of items, their meaning is not changed in ways that would prevent reliable benchmarking of results. Also, although having the same answer options for every item can become repetitive, according to QDP's users the quality of the data is not affected and administration times are likely to be shorter than where there is greater variety and more care needs to be taken before selecting the appropriate response.

Once the content of the survey has been finalised, the requisite number of questionnaires are printed and despatched in batches for the particular groups of learners to be surveyed, ready for classroom administration. This could be by course, occupational area or other appropriate grouping. The Company also offers an online version of the process and a telephone interviewing service, the latter intended mainly for use with staff, employers or parents, together with Early Leavers and Destination surveys.

With the questionnaires completed, QDP Services arranges for them to be collected and processed, with a full set of reports being provided in hard copy and on CD, usually within a fortnight. These can be configured under the relevant headings of the Common Inspection Framework but other features highlight the preponderance of FE colleges within QDP's network of users. For example, a 'league table' report of all the courses offered by a particular college lists these in rank order and can be chosen to indicate the overall pattern of learner satisfaction or to focus on particular aspects of a survey, such as the quality of teaching and learning.

The Company's standard report presents all the relevant data in both graphical and statistical form. Users can choose from a range of options, for example comparing all their learners with QDP's national average or showing how one particular occupational area compares with the overall sample.

Against an abbreviated version of every statement from the relevant questionnaire, the report shows the 'rating', together with how the results differ from those of the chosen comparison group. The 'rating' is a weighted percentage of those who responded that they 'agree completely' or 'agree mostly' with the appropriate statement. A bar chart then shows the percentages that gave these two responses, together with the total of those that disagreed with the statement. The report also shows the number of respondents for each item, an important indication of likely reliability, and finally the actual numbers and percentages for each of the five possible answers to each statement. Demographic data is provided on a separate page, again with numbers and percentages.

Internal benchmarking reports can also be created, for example to compare performance between different departments, occupational areas or categories of learner and all comments are recorded verbatim by QDP, albeit with the names of individuals and offensive language removed, for presentation to the user by department, course or other preferred sub-division.

Amongst users of QDP's services, feedback of results to learners varies considerably and the Company recognises that this is an area that deserves to be given greater attention in future. Reports can be produced to highlight key strengths and weaknesses and some colleges have used these in poster form or communicated with learners in other ways. QDP Services organise user group meetings at least twice a year in different parts of the country to share ideas and experiences and senior managers from colleges will sometimes take the lead in helping to develop and test new materials. Close links are also maintained with the inspectorates and QDP's recently established Advisory Board provides a further vehicle for consultation.

One particular feature of the Company's questionnaires is the option for users to make use of incentives for learners and others, with a view to boosting response rates. Users can choose to include, at the end of the questionnaire, a tear-off slip bearing the individual's name and course or other identifier, indicating that they wish to be included in a prize draw. The user provides the prize or prizes and QDP select the winners from completed forms during the processing stage. The Company has no data to indicate what effect such incentives may have on response rates. However, they report the experience of one organisation that conducted a survey in which one third of those taking part had the opportunity to be entered in a prize draw, a further third were told that £1 would be donated to charity for every completed questionnaire, and the remainder were offered nothing. The last group apparently produced the highest proportion of responses!

Summarising the options

For providers, the main choices are to

1   Adopt the core questions from a relevant national learner satisfaction survey, adding your own in order to gather information of particular relevance to your organisation (eg. addressing specific weaknesses highlighted in the most recent external inspection report) or to meet the need for more detailed feedback to support your self-assessment and development planning. You could choose to develop, administer and analyse the results of such a survey using your own internal resources or, alternatively, to sub-contract the process to a specialist organisation, either on a wholly bespoke basis, or using an off-the-shelf paper-based, online or telephone survey package that allows the content to be tailored to your specification. Although operating entirely independently, you would be able to benchmark the results of your feedback on the core questions against the published national data.

2   Use one of the commercially available feedback survey products that offer the opportunity to benchmark your results against the collective feedback from all the other organisations using the same system. Once again, this could be paper-based or online and may provide scope for including additional questions. Where much of your training is for one particular occupational area and such a service is available from the relevant sector body, this option would provide improved opportunities for benchmarking on a like-for-like basis.

3   Collaborate with other local providers, possibly with access to funding and/or support, to develop and operate a collective approach to gathering and analysing feedback from trainees, retaining control over the content and timing of surveys but with the advantage of being able to benchmark your results against others in the local training market.

4   Contract out the entire process of gathering and analysing your trainee feedback to a specialist organisation, including the development of a system designed specifically to meet your needs, taking into account the particular criteria that are most relevant. This may or may not include all of the national core questions but could provide an element of benchmarking.

5   Conduct your own internally designed surveys, based upon what you need for self-assessment, development planning or other purposes, allowing year-on-year comparisons of performance. You could make use of a commercial software package designed specifically for producing feedback questionnaires, but would have no opportunity for comparing your results with those of other providers.

For sector bodies, the main choices are

1   To do nothing! Although this is not an option that is open to work-based training providers, some sector bodies may conclude that the gathering and analysis of feedback from even a small sample of trainees is either beyond their resources or would offer insufficient benefit for the sector, in terms of identifying opportunities to raise standards, improve support for employers and providers and monitor learner satisfaction.

2   To arrange for those currently delivering the relevant sector frameworks to periodically share their experiences, and the evidence gathered from providers' own learner feedback, in order to identify common issues and trends and agree a sector-wide response. In this way, a sector body would demonstrate clearly its commitment to 'listen to its learners', without investing the time and resources necessary to develop its own independent system of data collection and analysis.

3   To undertake periodic surveys of work-based trainees, either employing its own resources or commissioning a specialist organisation to do so on its behalf. However, in order to pursue this option, a sector body needs to be able to identify a sufficiently large proportion of its trainees, from which a statistically representative sample can then be selected. In many cases, sector bodies have no means of doing so at present and would be dependent on the co-operation of employers and providers, through whom such surveys might be conducted.

Nevertheless, such an approach could provide a great deal of useful data, although whether this would be more valuable that merely drawing off the relevant data from a national learner satisfaction survey would depend on the aspects to be investigated and, crucially, whether the proportion of the national sample from that sector was sufficient for the purpose. In 2003, the number of work-based trainees surveyed by the National Learner Satisfaction Survey in England was, coincidentally, 2003. However, the proportion of apprentices from, for example, the Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy sector, was only 7%, or 140 trainees. With around 22,000 Hairdressing apprentices in training at the time, this may be thought to be an unrepresentative sample when reduced to sector level.

There are also other potential problems. For example, in the most recent survey, only 28 (1.4%) claimed to be undertaking an Apprenticeship (previously FMA) and 41 (2%) an Advanced Apprenticeship (previously AMA). The explanation is simple. Question 1 of the survey asks, "*what _qualification_ are you currently taking?*" and includes both apprenticeships in the list of options, alongside NVQs, GCSEs, A-levels etc. The interviewer is instructed, if the respondent mentions more than one, to prompt for that "which they spend most time doing." For any apprentice, irrespective of whether or not they had previously identified themselves as such, the answer will inevitably be the NVQ, hence the results.

4   To introduce a comprehensive and free-standing system of learner feedback, designed specifically to meet the needs of a particular sector and providing both the sector body, and those delivering work-based training for that sector, with a common approach to the gathering and analysis of feedback from trainees. The only example of such an approach at present is SEMTA's system for all UK engineering apprentices.

Designing fit-for-purpose feedback systems

A number of key factors emerge from the previous sections, all of which have a direct bearing on the approach adopted for learner feedback and the choice of methods

to be used. We have seen that there are a wide variety of purposes for gathering feedback from work-based learners and a number of interested stakeholders at different levels, each with their own particular priorities. Some approaches may be more appropriate than others, depending upon the circumstances. Work-based trainees are not a single, homogeneous group but represent a very wide spectrum of learners, with different needs and preferences. A failure to tailor the design of a feedback system to meet those needs could be disastrous.

Resources, both human and financial, are a key factor to consider. Some methods of gathering and, perhaps more important, analysing feedback from work-based learners are not only more expensive than others but demand specialist skills and/or equipment that may be beyond the scope of many smaller training providers. In some situations, the need to make comparisons with other training providers is a minor concern; in others, it is a vital issue, with the opportunity to benchmark as a major factor in the choice of methodology.

The effectiveness of the methods used must also be a prime consideration. Given the time and cost involved, the resulting data needs to be of sufficient validity and reliability to fulfil its intended purpose. Gathering information and opinions, especially from large groups, is a highly specialised activity and this publication is not aimed at the expert researcher, neither is it intended to provide more than a brief overview of data collection and analysis techniques. However, in reviewing how learner feedback can be developed and improved, there are some basic ground rules that both training providers and sector bodies may find useful to consider.

The scope of the survey

Learner surveys can be conducted at a number of levels, each of which has its own relative advantages and disadvantages.

Designed, administered and analysed by individual employers/ training providers for their own trainees

Advantages:

- Content can be specifically tailored to individual contexts and programmes
- Trainees may have greater 'buy-in' to the survey, thereby generating a better response rate
- Feedback of results is more immediate with more opportunity for linking with improvements of benefit to those taking part
- Sampling is straightforward, using a 'census' approach given the relatively small population sizes in each employer/provider
- Can generate valuable information on trends if the questions remain constant and surveys are repeated over time

Disadvantages:

- Trainees may have concerns about confidentiality which may influence the response rate and/ or inhibit the nature of the responses and learners' willingness to express critical opinions
- Potential problems with questionnaire design, given the reliance upon the organisation's own resources, leading to uncertainties over reliability and validity
- Unless a core of common questions is used, there is no scope for benchmarking the results against other employers/ providers or sectors
- In most employers/providers, the small sample sizes involved will mean there is only very limited scope for sub-group analysis eg. by level of Apprenticeship.

Designed in co-operation with other employers/ providers – for administration by all employers providers to trainees in a particular sector or across a particular geographical area

Advantages:

- Employers and providers have access to a ready-made system rather than having to create their own
- Instead of questions having to be all-purpose and applicable to every trainee, they can be sector- or area-specific and tailored to the relevant programmes
- Employer/provider input into design can help to build co-operation and ensure acceptability of the questionnaire to employers/providers at grassroots-level and more active buy-in to an agreed feedback strategy
- Within a sector or geographical area, results can be benchmarked by employers/ providers thereby improving their value as a tool for identifying areas for improvement/raising quality
- Generally, larger sample sizes allow greater scope for sub-group analysis, improving the statistical reliability of the results
- Depending upon the design of the system, employers and providers may be able to gain the benefits of using an agreed common core of questions whilst choosing to retain some of their own
- Production of sector-wide data can help to inform the sector body's Workforce Development Plans/strategic priorities for developing the skills of their sector and the relevant apprenticeship frameworks. It also represents an opportunity to enhance the service it provides to employers, thereby helping to develop more active engagement with the SSC
- Production of area-wide data can help to inform the local funding and regulatory body's strategic priorities for developing the skills of the workforce and represents an opportunity to extend its links with the local community, thereby helping to encourage employer engagement and promote collaboration amongst providers
- Similarly, with carefully designed questions and suitable protection of confidentiality, results for individual providers can be used to inform inspection and support self-assessment.

Disadvantages:

- May duplicate the feedback mechanisms that employers/ providers are already using which, if retained, could result in reducing the response rate by 'over-surveying' trainees
- There may be difficulties around questionnaire design (eg. trying to be all things to all providers/employers), especially if there is no flexibility that allows retention of existing survey content
- Need to co-ordinate timing of the survey administration, especially where there is a mix of roll-on/roll-off and fixed entry arrangements in use. Although surveys can be limited to a fixed window so that data is generated from trainees at the same point in time, this may be logistically difficult in practice if administered by individual employers/providers
- There may be difficulties in employing a standard methodology, such as an internet-based system, where some trainees have better access than others, potentially introducing bias into the survey results. Although this can be countered by using a mixed-methods approach, this too can lead to difficulties that are explored later.

Designed, administered and analysed at national level, for use across all sectors and all types of training programme, with individual employers/providers encouraged to use the same questions for their own local surveys

Advantages:

- A core set of questions allows benchmarking across and between sectors and programmes
- Potentially a shorter set of questions may help to improve response rates
- Within geographical, programme areas and sectors, results can still be benchmarked by employers/providers, thereby improving their usability as a tool for identifying areas for improvement/raising quality
- Generally, much larger sample sizes allow increased scope for sub-group analysis as they can improve the statistical reliability of the results
- Administered centrally, therefore timing can be more easily co-ordinated across all sectors
- Breaking down the results to provide sector-wide data can help to inform sector bodies' Workforce Development Plans/ strategic priorities for developing the skills of their sectors and the relevant apprenticeship frameworks. It also provides a potential opportunity to enhance the service to employers, thereby helping to develop more active engagement at sector level
- Breaking down the results to provide area-wide or regional data can help to inform the local funding and regulatory body's strategic priorities for developing the skills of the workforce and represents an opportunity to extend its links with the local community, thereby helping to encourage employer engagement and promote collaboration amongst providers

Disadvantages:

- May duplicate the feedback mechanisms that employers/providers are already using, or which have been introduced on an area-wide or sector basis and which, if retained, could result in reducing the response rate by 'over-surveying' trainees
- A common set of questions across all sectors will produce more generalised findings and limits the scope for employing tailored sector-specific questions about particular programmes or programme features
- Trainees may be less responsive to a more general survey; ie. they need to be able to see what's in it for them before they will take part and, if questions are too general, they may not see how the questionnaire relates to their particular type of training/sector and is likely to be of direct benefit to them
- There may be difficulties arising from the need to employ a single methodology that could appear impersonal, unrelated to trainees' day-to-day experience and quite separate from their employer/provider.
- If administered centrally, the availability and quality of sample frames (ie trainee contact details) will need to be thoroughly investigated beforehand, including Data Protection considerations. Costs for assembling, cleaning and standardising samples are likely to be very expensive.

The methods to be used

Learner surveys can be conducted using a variety of methods, each of which has its own relative advantages and disadvantages. The following table sets out the main points associated with those that are most frequently used for learner feedback.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Paper-based self-completion questionnaires (can be distributed in the post, supplied individually at the workplace, training centre or college or completed in group sessions)	• **The cost of collecting the information is relatively low allowing a larger sample or census to be undertaken.** • **Can incorporate illustrations, listing options etc.** • **May be suitable for automated processing using optical mark reading equipment** • **Can be supplemented by conducting focus group discussions to follow-up specific issues with those who have contributed to the survey**	• **Low response rates** • **Differential response rates, i.e. certain groups are more likely to respond than others; e.g. those with polarised views (those very satisfied or very dissatisfied). As a result, the final sample may not be sufficiently representative of all trainees** • **May exclude trainees with low literacy levels or other special needs** • **Less suitable for complex questions** • **May be difficult to assure anonymity and confidentiality, especially in smaller organisations**
On-line self-completion questionnaires	• **Many young people prefer computer-based interaction to paper-based questionnaires** • **Once the initial investment has been made, costs of collecting the information is relatively low so larger samples or censuses can be conducted.** • **Anonymity and confidentiality can be assured** • **Can incorporate illustrations and other visual aids, listing options etc.** • **Trainees appear more willing to complete longer surveys on-line than in paper-based format** • **Fast turnaround of data and basic automated reporting** • **The data is automatically 'cleaner' than traditional self-completion using paper-based questionnaires (ie. there are no blanks unless allowed and trainees are not discouraged from changing a response)** • **Instant monitoring of response rates and electronic management controls**	• **Initial investment required in software and survey design for new systems** • **Internet access and usage may be concentrated among certain groups, eg. trainees in larger companies/ more high-tech sectors. This means that the survey may not be fully representative** • **Best suited to respondents with their own personal access to the internet (at home or at work) and who are already computer literate** • **Limitations on questionnaire length, otherwise response rates may be adversely affected**
Telephone surveys	• **Higher response rates** • **Possible to control who responds, e.g. set quotas to achieve representative number of interviews by gender, age, etc** • **Fast turnaround of data with results available at any point during survey process**	• **Less appropriate for smaller organisations** • **Cannot use visual prompts** • **Subcontracting to specialist organisations may depersonalise the feedback process** • **Care needs to be exercised to ensure the sample is representative** • **More difficult to assure trainees of anonymity and confidentiality** • **Limitations on interview length – as a general rule no more than 20 minutes**

Face-to-face interviews and focus groups can also be a useful adjunct to other methods, allowing attitudes to be probed more deeply and specific issues, including those originally identified through survey questionnaires, to be investigated further. The main disadvantages are that such methods are time-consuming and impractical for large numbers, can suffer from inconsistencies and produce results that may be difficult to quantify. Interviewers and facilitators need to be completely neutral to the information being collected to avoid contaminating the results.

Ultimately, the choice of methodology for a trainee feedback system is affected by many factors:

- the size of the organisation involved,

- the purpose/s of the survey/s,

- whether simple rating scales are sufficient or the data to be gathered calls for opinions and comments on complex issues requiring explanation,

- the available expertise in survey design, data collection and analysis,

- how many trainees are to be surveyed,

- where and who they are,

- how easily they can be identified/contacted and by what means,

- whether they are to remain anonymous,

- the timescales within which surveys must be conducted and

- how frequently subsequent surveys are to be administered,

- whether trainees are to be given feedback on the results and/or follow-up action,

- and, of course, the budget and other resources available to support and sustain the feedback system.

"Satisfied trainees result in higher levels of retention and productivity, so measuring satisfaction must be a key consideration for every employer and training provider."

Margaret Gildea
Director of Learning & Career Development, Rolls-Royce plc

Good practice principles

The checklist identifies some of the key features of an effective approach to learner feedback for work-based trainees. It can be used to review current practice and identify potential areas for improvement. It can also serve as a checklist for those planning, designing and implementing new systems.

1 = Represents existing practice
2 = Represents practice which needs further development
3 = Represents practice which needs considerable development and support

Features of an effective trainee feedback system	1	2	3
Preparation, planning and organisation			
A climate of trust exists in which learners feel able to be open and honest in their criticism and management and staff welcome and encourage such criticism as an opportunity for self-improvement			
A senior manager is appointed to co-ordinate all aspects of learner feedback			
Trainees are involved at all stages of the planning, design and testing of the feedback system, consulted on the choice of methods and survey content			
All the relevant partners, such as employers, schools, colleges and careers services, are involved in the design, development and promotion of the system, securing their commitment to take action in response to the results			
The feedback system is seen by everyone involved to be a high priority for the organisation, emphasising the importance of learner satisfaction and quality improvement as its primary objectives			
Learner feedback forms an integral part of the organisation's strategic planning and quality assurance processes, not a 'bolt-on' activity			
The purposes of feedback and the subjects on which information and opinions are to be gathered from learners are clearly identified, understood and agreed and are subject to periodic review			
Feedback is focussed on those matters in which learners are competent to express an opinion and are able to provide reliable information			
Feedback is also sought from prospective learners, providing vital data on marketing, recruitment and selection from those who were not offered a training place, were offered and declined, or accepted but failed to start			
The likely pros and cons of offering incentives to optimise learner response are considered fully when planning the feedback system			
Surveys are supported by other means of gathering feedback, where appropriate providing confirmation and clarification of results			
Managers and staff have discussed and agreed how they and the relevant partners and stakeholders will respond to learners' suggestions			
Where benchmarking is a feature of the system, agreed protocols exist to protect the confidentiality of feedback data and respect the potential commercial sensitivity of performance comparisons			
Before designing or reviewing a feedback system, a comprehensive list is drawn up of all the possible areas in which feedback could help improve the organisation processes and the outcomes for learners			

Design and development			
Feedback is designed to cover the full range of learner support, advice and guidance and not just the quality of programme delivery or elements of learner satisfaction			
The purposes of feedback are communicated effectively and clearly understood by everyone likely to be affected by the process and its outcomes			
Learners are encouraged to regard the feedback system as entirely impartial by the choice of data collection and analysis methods and/or the use of neutral partners or survey specialists			
Capturing the views and experiences of early leavers is treated as an important priority			
A clear distinction is drawn between those issues or areas of activity in which learner feedback is the sole or primary source of evidence, those where it is a secondary or confirmatory source, and those to which it is not relevant at all			
Every aspect of the feedback system is designed to be suitable across the full range of abilities of those being surveyed, with alternative approaches employed for those with special needs			
No single method of gathering feedback is relied upon for all purposes			
Feedback is designed to provide an important component of the evidence base for self-assessment and external inspection, allowing the maximum opportunity for learners to contribute to the process			
Feedback is designed to provide clear evidence of year-on-year improvements in performance, compliance and learner satisfaction			
Feedback is designed to distinguish clearly between learners' personal opinions and statements of fact			
Feedback is designed to differentiate clearly between real strengths and that which should be regarded as normal or standard practice			
Trainees are given the opportunity to help identify and prioritise areas for improvement, for example by rank ordering those aspects of training delivery and/or learner support where changes could bring about the greatest difference to motivation, achievement and progression			
The system can be shown to produce evidence that meets five key tests:			
▪ it is valid, measuring what it is intended to measure			
▪ it is quantifiable, providing clear and unambiguous data			
▪ it is sufficient, providing as complete a picture of the relevant aspect as is necessary for the purpose			
▪ it is up-to-date, not seeking information that learners might find difficult to recall with any accuracy or where variations in recall might invalidate the results			
▪ it is authentic, every reasonable effort having been made to prevent contamination of, or interference with, learners' responses, comments and suggestions			
Surveys consist of clear and unambiguous questions that do not take too long to complete			
Wherever possible, multiple questions and the use of unnecessary or inappropriate jargon are avoided			
Sufficient personal/demographic data are collected from respondents to enable comparisons to be made between different groups of learners			
Questions on the self-assessment process, awareness of past results and suggestions for improvement form an integral part of learner feedback, with trainees able to say how satisfied they are with opportunities to contribute			
Surveys are piloted to check for problems of interpretation or completion and modifications made where necessary			

Implementation and use			
Learners are encouraged to be open and honest by a guarantee of anonymity			
Learners are given opportunities to provide feedback at regular intervals throughout their programme			
When presenting the system to trainees, emphasis is placed on the opportunity to identify improvements that will benefit them, rather than on external inspection or provider performance			
The administration and analysis of feedback is seen to be impartial, to respect the opinions of trainees and protect the confidentiality of the results			
Feedback is timed to take place when learners are most likely to be able to provide accurate and reliable responses			
Learners are given clear instructions on the completion of surveys and a commitment that feedback will be provided on the results within a specified time limit			
Learners participate willingly because they feel a sense of ownership and involvement, can see the importance that is being attached to obtaining their views and expect improvements to be made in their training, support or conditions as a direct result of the feedback system			
Learners are given the necessary time and have access to the facilities they need to contribute fully to the feedback process without influence or interference			
Where necessary, focus groups are used to investigate and clarify issues raised in feedback surveys			
Learners and non-training staff are used to facilitate focus groups to ensure that feedback is not contaminated by those whose performance could be the subject of discussion			
Teaching learners how to lead discussion groups and record conclusions and recommendations encourages active involvement with the feedback process and contributes to wider skills development			

Follow-up and evaluation			
Results are compared with previous performance and benchmarked against other feedback data from comparable groups			
Learner satisfaction with the feedback system and the benefits and costs of gathering and analysing feedback are regularly evaluated as part of the process of continuous improvement			
The results of feedback are provided to all trainees as soon as possible after completion of surveys and other methods, not only reporting the findings but outlining the follow-up action to be taken			
Feedback of results to trainees is kept as simple as possible, acknowledging weaknesses as well as celebrating strengths			
Imaginative presentation of feedback data encourages learners to value the process and prompts trainers and managers to take effective action in response to the results			
Following dissemination of results to learners, training staff and others, decisive action is taken, and is seen to have been taken			
Changes made as a result of trainee feedback are publicised widely to enhance the credibility of the process			
Targets are set for future feedback results, such as improvement in satisfaction levels, increased proportions of learners who would recommend the programme to others, reduction in numbers reporting harassment or discrimination etc			

> *"The most important thing about the feedback system is what*
> *difference it is going to make for us"*
>
> *Comment on SEMTA's online system from an engineering apprentice*

Part D   Looking to the future: four perspectives on the potential of trainee feedback

1   The Learning and Skills Development Agency

Feedback from learners on the quality of their learning experience should be used to inform the content and delivery methods for particular programmes. Feedback is also important for planning and on-going programme development at an organisational level. At the same time, learner feedback processes promote reflection and self-evaluation by individual learners which should be used to direct and improve their own learning.

General principles of good practice from LSDA research and support programmes have been incorporated throughout this publication. However, two examples help to illustrate the importance and value of learner feedback in work-based provision.

In the first, reported in *Practical ways of improving success in Modern Apprenticeships* [7], a provider set out to evaluate its experience of delivering training programmes to determine whether retention and achievement was being promoted.

When the team looked at what factors contributed most to learner achievement, they realised that 'things went well when the learner was treated as an individual and individual needs were met'. When feedback from early leavers was analysed it confirmed that motivation to learn and achieve had stopped because the learner had not been central to the delivery process. Early leavers had either been put on the wrong course or had received insufficient support from the provider (in terms of resources and training facilities) or from the assessor (in terms of time, materials and consistency of approach).

In the second example, the *MALNAC* project - Modern Apprenticeships, Literacy, Numeracy, Application of Number and Communication - was concerned with the individual development of Key Skills within Modern Apprenticeships and, in several cases, the use of trainee feedback processes to support this.

Focus groups with learners were run to gather responses to various approaches to teaching and learning. These were highly effective in gathering useful information to help improve learning and delivery.

Most important to the trainees was relevance, contextualisation and concrete examples of how their learning in key skills will be useful. Most learners wanted:

- their experience to be different to school
- to be 'treated like adults'
- all teaching and training to be relevant to their particular area of work.

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[7] John Maynard and Vikki Smith, LSDA 2004

For example, construction apprentices welcomed numeracy teaching when it was presented as pricing up the building of a wall. The use of trade language and terminology was also found to be very important to apprentices. Feedback from learners on their experience of the course thus acts as a vehicle for programme improvement and development. There were few participants in each group and so processes of communication and change were relatively informal, direct and responsive.

Ultimately, the use to which trainee feedback can be put is largely dependent on the quality of information gathered. There is, therefore, a need to help learners develop the confidence and skills to get more involved in interactions with trainers and tutors and to encourage those responsible for programme development and delivery to put greater trust in the learner to identify opportunities for improvement.

Dave Horsburgh
Senior Development Adviser

2   The Apprenticeships Task Force

In 2003 the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown MP, asked me to set up an employer-led Task Force to engage more employers in Apprenticeships. As part of its remit, this independent group developed employer case studies, which illustrated the business benefits of taking on apprentices.

Based on these case studies the Task Force found that robust trainee feedback mechanisms did help employers engage more effectively in Apprenticeships. An organisation with Apprenticeships knew that apprentices provided a positive return on investment and helped gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. The nationally accredited training often resulted in highly skilled employees delivering a higher quality of work than non-apprentices. Trainee feedback played a crucial role in this process, leading to better outputs, increased learner satisfaction and higher programme completion and retention rates.

Task Force members who were involved in delivering Apprenticeships said that feedback mechanisms linking trainees, employers and training providers helped to integrate their companies' continuous quality improvement programmes into Apprenticeships. This demonstrated that effective trainee feedback systems did make a difference in the workplace.

Task Force employers employ a wide range of trainee feedback mechanisms, which effectively underpin their training programmes. British Gas, for example, asks apprentices to fill in six-monthly feedback questionnaires. The results are discussed at management meetings and the survey findings, as well as the actions being taken, are disseminated to all personnel involved in the apprenticeship programme, including trainees, Assessors, Verifiers and the trainees' operational managers. In 2003, the quality of the British Gas training programme was improved as a direct result of trainee feedback. Trainees had suggested that they could be more involved when they were accompanying gas servicing engineers on customer visits. Action was taken to train the engineers in how to engage the apprentices more on their call-outs. This resulted in a more fulfilling trainee experience and higher learner satisfaction.

Another company arranges 'free lunches' with senior management and operates a quarterly 'apprentice forum'. These meetings enable apprentices, training staff and operational managers to get together informally to review the programme and

develop better working relationships. One of the concerns expressed was that, during first year off-the-job training at college, little effort was made to ensure that apprentices felt part of the organisation. As a direct result of the feedback, the company doubled the frequency of its visits to trainees and arranged for the college to provide them with additional support.

Positive feedback from trainees can also have a significant impact on the promotion of Apprenticeships to young people and employers alike. Employment sectors striving to attract able, well-motivated applicants will benefit greatly by being able to present convincing evidence of learner satisfaction amongst their existing trainees. Yet some of them have no means of gathering such evidence on a regular and systematic basis. Employers will be more inclined to invest in Apprenticeships if learner feedback from similar organisations in their sector shows that young people are proving to be a real asset to the businesses in which they work.

Employers have a direct and long-term vested interest in the quality of their Apprenticeships and the learner satisfaction of their young employees. Trainees, who are actively encouraged to make suggestions for process improvements in their own training, and become involved in contributing to annual self-assessment, will appreciate much more readily the importance of customer satisfaction and the unrelenting drive for quality.

Sir Roy Gardner
Chairman, Apprenticeships Task Force

3 The Association of Colleges

Best practice in colleges is to make learner feedback an essential and integral part of its wider quality assurance processes. This is a cyclical process, which starts with an evaluation of the individual's perception of the learning experience, and a review of performance against the college's mission and delivery plan. Together these inform the college's development plan for the next year/s.

Formative evaluation may be collected formally at learner milestones such as the conclusion of the diagnostic period or the induction period, or informally during mentoring and tutorial sessions.

The prime intention of formative evaluation is to inform and improve the learning process for the individual and also to learn lessons that may be applied more generally throughout the institution. It will influence both the delivery and management of learning.

For Apprenticeships, formative feedback from trainess includes the added dimension of the application of that learning in their place of work. Through trainee feedback, institutions can check that the appropriate opportunities are being provided by employers for the practice and application of skills, knowledge and attributes in the trainee's place of work that have been developed in off-the-job learning.

Correspondingly, feedback provided by trainees to their employer about the relevance and clarity of the training they receive off the job ensures training is fit for purpose. Close working relationships need to be developed by provider and employer to ensure that appropriate action follows learner feedback. Colleges will often designate a member of staff as liaison officer, responsible for developing such links and ensuring improvements are embedded.

Summative feedback from the learner develops the trainee' evaluative skills and encourages reflective practice. It provides invaluable information to both provider and employer about the total learning experience, and offers both employer and provider the opportunity to discuss with the trainee their future plans and aspirations, and how these might be linked to further learning. As such it is a valuable tool, not only in reinforcing learning that has taken place, but encouraging progression for the individual.

For the institution, trainee feedback at the end of the training period feeds in to a wider process of course review. Providers will, at this stage, be comparing retention and achievement of the cohort against target. They will use individual learner feedback to identify good practice and innovative delivery methods where performance is above expectation; and to identify and improve delivery and communication where outcomes are unsatisfactory. Given a continual improvement strategy, providers will be seeking to apply successful strategies throughout their provision. This will be built into their institution's self evaluation and action plan, which in turn informs the college's development plan for the following year.

Quality Assurance systems of this nature, that link learner feedback intrinsically into instiutional self improvement and planning is well developed in many colleges. In the area of work based learning such approaches to improving delivery would be equally applicable in other delivery settings.

Colleges may, indeed , be able to play a key role in working with others to develop their feedback systems and to compare trainee perceptions. In this way, workplace learning can be developed both for the benefit of the individual learner, and the provider that serves their needs.

Judith Norrington
Director of Curriculum and Quality

4   The Citizenship Foundation

Citizenship became a subject of the secondary school National Curriculum in England in September 2000. Young people are now being introduced to the concept of citizenship at school and it would be ironic if, having entered the adult world as an apprentice, their active citizenship development should cease abruptly. Indeed, the report *Citizenship for 16-19 year olds in Education and Training* (1999) made just this point. The model proposed had three components: social and moral responsibility, political literacy and community involvement.

The majority of work-based trainees are employees, young members of an adult community, with rights and responsibilities and with an opportunity to develop as active members of that community as an integral part of their apprenticeship. In short, apprenticeships offer a context in which just this type of Citizenship might be encouraged, developed and enhanced. Apprenticeships should be about more than merely the acquisition of practical skills and knowledge; they should provide a carefully planned transition from dependent school pupil to independent young adult. The workplace provides a key environment in which the young person can and should develop the skills and knowledge introduced through the school curriculum.

Here, involving young people in providing feedback on their training and encouraging them to identify how that experience might be improved, for their benefit and that of others, is a real opportunity for them to rehearse their citizenship

skills and develop their citizenship knowledge. So far, such feedback has been seen largely as a means of gathering evidence of compliance with the external quality assurance regime (ie. annual self-assessment and inspections) and/or to provide information for internal performance improvement.

However, it has the potential to do much more than that. Trainee feedback is an opportunity to encourage engagement with process improvement and organisation development that will be entirely new to most 16+ year-olds. In seeking the opinions of young people, and demonstrating that those opinions and suggestions are valued and are acted upon, the employer or training provider is involving trainees in practical democracy, treating young people as responsible adults whose views are important. Trainees are registering a "vote" which can have a direct and beneficial effect on their experience. Young people can gain a comparable experience in some schools through participating in the School Council or, at college, through student union involvement but relatively few get the opportunity to do so. In the work based training context, the need for *all* to feedback provides an *active* citizenship opportunity for all.

There are several ways in which employers, training providers and sector bodies can exploit the opportunity presented by trainee feedback to enhance the learning process, contribute to the development and maturation of their young people and utilise the feedback process much more fully as a vehicle for active citizenship. Such activities not only extend the value of the feedback but can help develop learners' confidence in themselves, their industry and their chosen field of work.

They also help to underline the value of 'getting involved' and 'making a difference', whatever the cause or context and however far we might be from a 'formal' political moment such as a general election or a national referendum.

Tony Breslin
Chief Executive

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Some final 'dos and don'ts'

DO concentrate feedback on those aspects that are most <u>important</u> to measure, rather than those that are <u>easiest</u> to measure

DON'T underestimate the time and resources required to design and develop an effective feedback system, ensuring that the views of learners, staff and others involved have been taken fully into account

DO consider establishing a joint group to oversee the whole process, from design and development through to implementation, report-back and evaluation, with appropriate representation from learners, training staff, employers, Trades Unions and other interested parties (this could be the same group that oversees and reviews the self-assessment process)

DON'T be tempted to regard <u>any</u> degree of satisfaction as indicating a 'strength'. Learner satisfaction <u>should</u> be the norm

Looking ahead

The emphasis on learner feedback and its potential impact on policy development and process improvement seems likely to continue and, quite probably, to increase.

The Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform [8] included specific reference to its importance, making clear that only by consulting learners will we discover how they feel about the education and training system and whether future reforms are working as they should. As the reforms of the English education and training system set out in the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper [9] are implemented over the next 10 years and beyond, learner feedback has a major contribution to make.

A report on *Apprenticeships in the UK – their design, development and implementation* [10] has already identified the need for Sector Skills Councils to become more involved with the improvement of learner and employer feedback systems and some are now requesting sectoral analyses of the LSC's National Learner Satisfaction Survey data for just this purpose.

In England, the revised Common Inspection Framework to be used in schools, colleges and training providers by the Adult Learning Inspectorate and Ofsted from 2005 places much greater emphasis on the impact of quality improvement. Trainees are uniquely well-placed to provide evidence of such improvements in programme content and delivery and in learner support. An effective feedback system can therefore provide a great deal of valuable data, both for self-assessment and for inspection. The new guidance for providers of work-based learning highlights repeatedly the need to recognise feedback from learners as a key source of evidence against many of the Common Inspection Framework criteria. In particular, when considering *How well do the programmes and activities meet the needs and interests of learners?*, the guidance makes clear that this includes how well "…information about learners' views of the programmes are used to evaluate the provision, identify good practice and contribute to improvements".

Finally, developments in the UK and elsewhere illustrate the opportunities being created by new technology to provide more sophisticated approaches to learner feedback and, more significantly, to link it with other aspects of the education and training process. One such project in the West of England, which starts with the development of individual learning plans before moving on to the improved management of work experience, may well provide a model for such seamless continuity. In Norway, an online system of learner feedback is now obligatory for all pupils in years 7 to 10 of compulsory education and is also being used on a voluntary basis for apprentices. As with SEMTA's apprentice-feedback.com system in the UK, each learner is given a user name and password to protect anonymity and providers can access their own results for discussion with the student council and follow-up with improvement actions. However, the national results will be available online[11] as part of a wider effort to promote democracy and extend the influence that learners can have on the system, as well as contributing to quality evaluation and development.

With computer-based systems for providers being developed to enable successive elements of data from an individual learner to be held together, without compromising anonymity, feedback looks set to become a distinctive feature of the education and training system.

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[8] Published October 18th 2004

[9] Command 6476, published February 23rd 2005

[10] Produced for the Sector Skills Development Agency by Pye Tait Limited, September 2004

[11] www.skoleporten.no

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