QIA Quality Improvement Agency

Delivering on our promises:
providers give their feedback on QIA

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Introduction

It would be remiss of the body charged with quality improvement in the FE system not to seek to improve the quality of its own provision. As part of this process, QIA commissioned a survey of providers to establish how well it was meeting their needs and how well it was getting its messages across. The results are encouraging for two reasons. Firstly, they show increased awareness and understanding of the organisation and much-improved levels of satisfaction with what QIA is providing. Secondly, the survey gives clear indications as to where QIA should focus its energies as it tries to raise all those levels even higher.

Senior staff from 441 providers (27 per cent of LSC-funded providers) were interviewed by telephone for The *QIA Stakeholder Awareness, Satisfaction and Understanding survey 2007*. These providers were representative of the whole further education sector, including colleges, work based learning (WBL) and adult and community learning providers (ACL), and all regions.

This document is a summary of a survey of LSC funded learning providers commissioned by QIA and carried out in 2007 by ORC International **www.orc.co.uk**

Awareness and understanding

In terms of awareness, QIA's first and most basic battle is won: 99 per cent of providers have now heard of QIA. More importantly, when this survey is compared with the previous year's survey, it is apparent that both the breadth of awareness and the depth of knowledge about the organisation are growing. In fact, nearly two-thirds of all providers said that they had a good level of knowledge of QIA (65 per cent), a 35 per cent increase from 2006.

With this increase in awareness comes an enhancement of the value providers place on QIA. Over four in five providers (83 per cent) agreed that QIA is 'a good idea to support the sector', a six per cent increase from 2006. Providers also valued QIA's services: 52 per cent agreed that QIA was building on the skills, experience and talent already in the system, and 51 per cent agreed that QIA provides them or their organisation with practical help to improve their everyday work.

Figures also show that the more contact providers had with QIA, the more they benefited, which makes the fact that 88 per cent of providers had participated in a QIA programme or service even more encouraging for the future. Sixty-three percent of all providers had attended a QIA conference, workshop or event in the past six months.

'There is so much change across the whole sector: it's very difficult to sort out the really key issues.'

'QIA need to be the single recognised organisation for quality.'

'I would like to work with them on a more personal level, such as coming into college. A personal touch is needed.'

'The seminars I have attended have been of interest and are useful. I have tried to adopt working processes to incorporate what's been discussed at the seminar.'

Providers find information on quality improvement primarily from QIA's Excellence Gateway (42 per cent) and from Learning and Skills Council (LSC) resources - website, publications and staff (41 per cent).

What does QIA do?

Compared to 2006, there has been an overall increase in awareness of the main roles and responsibilities of QIA. Specifically, there has been a 13 per cent increase in awareness that QIA conveys quality improvement messages to all, and an 11 per cent increase in awareness that QIA encourages improvement in success rates across the FE sector. In fact the only reduction relating to awareness of QIA's roles was fewer providers feeling that QIA takes a strategic overview of teaching and learning standards.

It was clear that providers' knowledge of individual programmes and services was variable and, understandably, often dictated by their priorities. For some areas, however, there was very high awareness; for example, the Skills for Life improvement programme (86 per cent) and the Support for Excellence programme (74 per cent).

These increases in awareness and understanding reflect positively on the efforts of both the providers and QIA to work effectively together. However, the organisation recognises that a significant minority of providers do not take up programmes or services.

Programmes

While 88 per cent of providers had taken part in a QIA programme or service, 50 per cent had participated in two to five and 23 per cent had participated in six to10. Over three in five (66 per cent) participated in the Skills for Life Improvement programme and 57 per cent in the Key Skills Support programme.

Putting theory into practice: satisfaction amongst providers

Although providers may increasingly understand what QIA is *aiming to do*, it is what it is *actually* doing that really counts. Just over three in five providers (61 per cent) were satisfied that QIA champions and facilitates excellence and innovation in the further education system, while 62 per cent felt that QIA is supporting self-improvement through the effective transfer of knowledge and effective practice. A similar number (63 per cent) said they would be likely to recommend QIA programmes to others in similar professional roles. These are encouraging figures but again leave room for improvement.

According to the survey, the vast majority of providers had taken part in a QIA programme or service, with many taking part in several programmes. Of those who had participated in a QIA programme or service, 82 per cent felt it had a positive impact on their organisation.

The Skills for Life Improvement programme (77 per cent) and the QIA Improvement Adviser Service (76 per cent) were viewed as most beneficial amongst those who had participated in them. This is a pleasing acknowledgement of the programmes' quality but once again we know there are specific criticisms about some of the programmes, which we will address.

The Business Development Manager of a group training association in the North West.comments:

"As a resource, QIA activities and support have been invaluable. The Improvement Adviser, for example, brought a great deal of expertise into the company which was targeted, responsive and empathetic to our own situation. Coming from outside, he greatly strengthened the impact of the messages which we had been promoting. His input was a pivotal factor in our turnaround."

Since QIA was formed, it has been important for it to bring all the elements of quality improvement together so providers know exactly where to turn. It is encouraging, therefore, that 62 per cent of providers agreed that QIA is building an integrated approach to quality improvement across the system. Providers said QIA had been most effective in leading the development and implementation

of the Improvement Strategy but slightly fewer said QIA was effective in working with national partners to implement the Strategy.

Different providers, same commitment

The survey took a broad cross-section of providers, including WBL, FE colleges and ACL. Some of the WBL providers said that it felt as if most of QIA's programmes are aimed at colleges rather than other providers. This is genuinely valuable information to the organisation because it is profoundly NOT the case that it prioritises any one group of providers. It is important that QIA addresses these concerns and ensures we have programmes, services and events that precisely meet the needs of those WBL providers.

The organisation would particularly point to the Support for Excellence programme, launched in August 2007, which has brokered 121 Peer Review and Development (PRD) groups. The programme has been particularly successful in facilitating collaboration between 550 providers in PRD groups involving the whole of the further education system.

'I think there is a need to bring more understanding of the work based learning sector into the policy work as our provision is very different from colleges.'

'A one service fits all approach does not work. They should take a sector specific approach.'

'Promote varied teaching and learning styles for the adult and community learning sector.'

'The concept of QIA is very good but there needs to be a clearer understanding of its role and how this relates to the role of other organisations such as the LSC'

'I would like to receive more communication and updates from QIA so that we are aware of what's going on.'

Communication and the importance of visibility

Communication is a high priority and we aim to make QIA's communications with the sector relevant, useful and free of jargon.

Just under half of providers (46 per cent) were aware that QIA produces the journal *Quality Improvement* and 21 per cent were aware that QIA produces the *Inside Evidence* research newsletter, which is an insert in the journal. Of those providers who knew of the publications, 58 per cent said the journal was useful and 53 per cent that the newsletter was useful.

Another important way for QIA to maintain communications with providers is through conferences. The organisation was pleased to note that 63 per cent of providers had attended a QIA conference, workshop or event in the past six months.

Over three in five providers (62 per cent) felt that QIA was visible within the sector. The importance of high visibility is undeniable: providers who felt that QIA was visible were seven times more likely to feel satisfied that QIA champions and facilitates excellence and innovation in the FE system.

All this points to the fact that improved communication of QIA's role, responsibilities, programmes and services will bring great dividends for all.

What next?

In the survey, providers were asked what improvements they would like to see in QIA. The most commonly suggested areas for improvement were to raise the profile of QIA within the sector (13 per cent) and to have more targeted workshops with clearer content and focus (11 per cent). Overall, 28 per cent of providers felt there were additional areas of support for quality improvement that QIA could usefully provide. There were also clear calls for: more tailored support to meet the needs of individual institutions; more efforts to raise QIA's profile and enhance communications and a greater focus on teaching and learning practices.

Of course, the whole survey reveals other areas for improvement, as well as successes to build on. We now know that providers see QIA as a good idea to support the sector. Many already believe that QIA is supporting self improvement through effective transfer of knowledge and effective practice. QIA's high quality face-to-face work with the sector has been particularly commended. This a strong position for an organisation that has been in existence for a relatively short time.

Surveys like this help the organisation to understand why providers do not participate and they guide QIA in its efforts to show these providers how effective the partnership could be. Only then will this organisation have achieved its aim of serving the needs of the whole sector and every provider within it.

QIA is determined to reach that minority which either does not know enough about what QIA offers or has not yet experienced significant positive impact through QIA. Figures throughout this survey reveal that the more a provider knows about QIA, the more highly they regard it.

In the months to come the organisation will place greater emphasis on improving providers' understanding and experience of QIA's work. This particularly applies to: building the systems and capacity for self-improvement; helping colleges to respond to strategic reforms; providing practical help to improve their everyday work and helping organisations deliver their own priorities.

QIA will address the reasons why some providers have not participated in any QIA programmes or services and the organisation will give consideration to the full range of suggested areas for improvement that were gathered through this research. In fact, QIA has already begun taking action in a number of areas and looks forward to telling providers about them.

A private training provider commented that involvement with QIA is a very good way for the provider to identify where it is doing well and where it needs to focus its energies to improve quality. However, the provider has concerns that not everyone see QIA in the same way:

"Do people generally see QIA as a support agency or do some see it as linked to inspection? QIA is a great way of accessing support but does the rest of the sector know that?" [1]

Therefore communication is key and the organisation has already taken steps to improve. QIA believes its journal and newsletter are important, practical communication tools and will continue work to increase their readership and also to ensure their contents reflect feedback from providers about what is most useful to them.

The survey revealed that nearly three-quarters of providers felt that the QIA will help raise the quality of learning provision - an 18 per cent increase from 2006. The organisation is determined to prove them right.

'QIA should focus on practical ideas of delivery improvement techniques, rather than just the theoretical.'

'They have been a really big help to us.'

[1] Quote taken from case study on a Bedford-based private training provider with charitable status. Full case study can be viewed at www.qia.org.uk/researchandcontext/index.htm

Quality Improvement in Action
Case Study 1: FE College

This large general FE college offers courses from entry level to Level 4 and programmes in nearly all areas of learning. It has been involved in several QIA programmes, but in particular the National Teaching and Learning Change programme (NTLCP). The College has engaged several subject learning coaches (SLCs) In the Faculty of Technology.

The NTLCP resources have proved extremely useful in continuing to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The SLC training has not only been of benefit to its participants, but has also been influential in terms of wider staff development.

The College has been a strong supporter of the SLC programme provided by the NTLCP, which it considers to have been excellent. In fact, the SLC role has been adapted for the College's own Developing Teaching and Learning Programme (DTLP) which uses SLCs and Advanced Practitioners together as teaching and learning coaches. Thanks in part to the NTLCP and the SLC programme, the College increased its good or better lessons by 12 per cent in the last year.

The College has also been involved in: the Peer Referencing pilot programme; SfL Improvement Programme; Improvement Adviser Service; and Support for Success. The College believed QIA programmes had been informative in terms of supporting initiatives that the college has been doing, but their impact is hard to judge because it is difficult to isolate a specific factor.

The Head of Professional Development Standards at the College commented that QIA 'was trying to establish itself' and that:

" …they are supposed to be the overarching quality improving agency, but I get the feeling that they are not so much incorporating other quality agencies as vying for position as a separate body.

Quality Improvement in Action
Case Study 2: FE College

This group training association provides a full engineering training service for local companies. In addition to apprentices, it has provision for 15-16 year olds from local schools and adults doing short courses.

A key challenge faced by the provider is how to maintain its long-standing reputation for high-quality provision in the face of changing times. There have been shifts in the expectations of learners about their relationships with tutors, and engaging their interest and enthusiasm is an ongoing challenge. Moreover, tutors who might have been employing traditional teaching methods for many years need to learn new approaches.

The provider is currently involved in: s4s WBL Regional Quality Improvement Network; The National Teaching and Learning Change Programme; and the Improvement Adviser Service.

The provider is very enthusiastic about QIA and believes the impact on the company of being involved with QIA programmes has been enormous. The company says QIA has avoided falling into the trap of convening too many conferences and network meetings which repeat material from elsewhere, and it doesn't indulge in too much jargon which goes above the heads of the audience.

Despite supporting QIA programmes, pressures in the workplace mean that the provider still needs to be selective when deciding whether to attend conferences. It would he helpful to them if QIA could give would-be attendees more information about the relevance of events to their particular circumstances.

Though there had been no attempt to quantify it, the impact on the company of being involved with QIA programmes was believed to have been enormous:

The Business Development Manager comments:

"The benefits from QIA programmes far outweigh the occasional niggle: what QIA provides is absolutely first class." [2]

[2] Quote taken from case study on Stockport Engineering, a group training association which provides a full engineering training service for access by local companies in the North West. Full case study can be viewed at www.qia.org.uk/researchandcontext/index.htm

Quality Improvement in Action
Case Study 3: FE College

This specialist vocational FE college, funded by the LSC, provides vocational programmes for 14-16 year olds from local schools, vocational qualifications for full-time 16-18 year olds, and courses for full-time and part-time students over 19 years old.

The College, in particular the subject area of Construction, has been involved in The National Teaching and Learning Change Programme (NTLCP). In addition, five members of staff have been engaged on the subject learning coach (SLC) programme. The provider has also participated in other QIA programmes, including: the SfL Improvement Programme; the Improvement Adviser Service; Support for Success; Peer Referencing Pilot Programme; and Train to Gain.

NTLCP resources have proved extremely useful for continuing to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The SLC training has been beneficial to its participants and has made a significant impact in Construction. Ninety per cent of the Construction staff are new to the college, and one of the challenges was to get the teaching staff in the Construction team fully qualified.

The SLC for Construction started the programme on Cohort 3 and recently completed it at Level 4. He described his first involvement with NTLCP at a two-day roll-out event as 'like a breath of fresh air'. He added that this 'outstanding' event acted as a springboard, giving him an 'immense amount of confidence' in using the materials.

Practitioner training and development was also considered effective, but where it was management-focused, it was less so, because this group was more difficult to target. Practitioner networks and network meetings have been quite effective and motivating for staff. The web-based information and support was generally regarded as very useful and a good source of information.

The provider did, however, question whether there had been sufficient integration between different QIA programmes, which may have resulted from insufficient consultation with managers in colleges before embarking on programmes. There is a huge wealth of experience in colleges which the QIA must tap into

Quality Improvement in Action
Case Study 4: FE College

This private training provider with charitable status delivers E2E, NVQ training for a range of apprenticeships, and design & build projects for graduate engineers employed by large national companies.

Apart from improving motivation and engagement amongst its trainees who are becoming less content with traditional teaching styles and relationships, the provider's main challenge is to ensure that its staff are equipped to deliver newer teaching styles and content.

The Quality Manager attends s4s Regional QI Network meetings run by LSN. He finds these extremely helpful as they not only keep him abreast of developments on the quality front, but they also enable him to see how other providers do things and he can then identify areas where perhaps his organisation could do things differently.

The provider is also involved in the S4S Accelerated QI Project which is looking at how success rates can be improved. Participation in the QI Project had been a very positive move for the provider, though at times the volume of communications related to the project was very high. The provider commented:

"It is important to remember that providers' ultimate responsibility is to ensure that their day-to-day operations keep going, customers are looked after and their deadlines met: they do not work for consultants or for QIA and cannot give them absolute priority. Consultants engaged in these kinds of initiatives need to be more sensitive to these matters, otherwise' providers' willingness to engage could be affected."

The NTLCP resources had an impact on the young people's motivation and engagement with the programme. The provider's progression rates from E2E are about double the national average.

Involvement with QIA is a very good way for the provider to identify where it is doing well and where it needs to focus its energies to improve quality. However, the provider has concerns that not everyone see QIA in the same way:

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QIA Quality
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