

College and Training Organisation Survey 2011

September 2011

Of interest to providers and stakeholders

COLLEGE AND TRAINING ORGANISATION SURVEY 2011

The Skills Funding Agency conducted a college and training organisation survey between 18 May and 3 June 2011. This was the first time that the Agency, or the LSC before it, has conducted such a survey. For that reason there is no baseline for comparison.

The aim was to elicit the views of colleges training providers with whom the Agency contracts about their perceptions of the Agency in three key areas:

- The role of the Agency
- The way we operate
- The way we communicate

The answers were given anonymously, so it is not possible to identify which organisations responded or who said what. It was possible for more than one person per organisation to respond, and it is clear that some of the responses came from organisations which are not currently contracting with the Agency, or have bid for contracts but without success. In future surveys, we intend to segment the respondents between types of provider and those without a current contract.

In each of the three sections, there were five statements about the Agency and respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each statement. They also had an opportunity to add comments.

In the final section, respondents were asked what single thing the Agency could do to help them to achieve their objectives, and their comments are recorded. The statistical analysis of the responses to the statements seems generally more favourable than the balance of the comments received, which suggests that those who are most satisfied did not add as many comments.

Background

At the time of the survey, the Agency was just over a year old, and had introduced a number of new ways of working which were still in the process of becoming embedded. The sector had undergone a number of very significant structural changes, including the separation of the functions of the Skills Funding Agency and the Young People's Learning Agency.

A new procurement system (ACTOR) was in the process of being introduced, and the Minimum Contract Level (MCL) policy, which was announced in the Skills Investment Strategy in 2010, was being implemented together with significant changes to entitlements and funding constraints. Although these changes were introduced with the intention of benefiting the sector, they inevitably produced a degree of turbulence which is reflected clearly in the statistical analysis and the comments collected in the survey. Nevertheless, the Agency decided to proceed with the survey in order to establish a baseline from which we could aim to improve our performance.

At Appendix 2 there is a summary of the survey results providing the statistical breakdown of the responses to each question, followed at the end of each of the three sections by a brief summary of the major concerns expressed in the comments.

A number of the issues highlighted in the survey were already being addressed, for example the review of ACTOR, but the Agency has found the survey results extremely informative and helpful, and a range of immediate and longer term measures are being taken to address many of the concerns raised by providers. These are summarised at Appendix 1. We also plan to carry out some focus group

activity with a selection of providers to understand the results of the survey better, and to explore some of the issues raised in more depth. We intend to repeat the survey annually, and we will update the sector on the progress we have made since the 2011 survey.

Appendix 1

Summary of key actions planned to address issues raised in the survey

In response to the survey results, and having reviewed the Agency's first full year of operation, four key areas for improvement have been identified:

- 1. To reduce as far as possible the amount of complexity involved in the implementation of policies and processes.**
- 2. To make the system for procuring provision more transparent and responsive to the needs of the sector.**
- 3. To improve the consistency and responsiveness of Agency staff in responding to queries from colleges and training organisations.**
- 4. To reduce, rationalise and improve the quality of the Agency's communications with the sector.**

In each of these areas, detailed operation plans have been developed, and the key actions from these plans are summarised below. Clearly there are some areas of overlap between the areas for improvement.

1. To reduce as far as possible the amount of complexity involved in the Agency's policies and processes.

An overarching Simplification Plan has been developed, of which there are four strands:

- A project aimed at reducing bureaucracy for large employers to encourage greater participation in skills development which is being overseen jointly by the Agency, the Employer Reference Group and the National Apprenticeship Service. The intention is that lessons learned from this project will lead to reduced bureaucracy for all providers.
- The Funding Simplification Project aimed at reducing the complexities around budgets, allocations, funding rates, eligibility and learner and learning support. This project was initiated to respond to the publication of *Further Education, New Horizons, Investing in Sustainable Growth* published in November 2010.
- The 'Whole Provider View' Project which is taking an in-depth look at the totality of the interactions between the Agency and a number of colleges over a period of time with a view to rationalising the extent of the interactions with providers as a whole, and conducting a risk analysis of the implications of such a rationalisation.
- A communications strand aimed at providing greater clarity about what key policy communications the Agency will produce and when.

2. To make the system for procuring provision more transparent and responsive to the needs of the sector.

- Following the review of ACTOR recently carried out with sector representatives, the Agency will publish a Procurement Strategy which will set out its approach to using ACTOR and making allocations to successful organisations. The Procurement Strategy, will clearly articulate the intended annual cycle of procurement activity and in doing so will be mindful of the timing of other activity within the needs of the Agency's own business cycle.
- The operational guidance on ACTOR will be reviewed and updated to ensure it reflects the purpose and use of ACTOR within the Agency's procurement strategy and is sufficiently user friendly. In particular, it will distinguish between different types of procurement approach.
- In communicating a procurement activity, a clear timetable will be produced setting out the timescale for each stage of the process.

3. To improve the consistency and responsiveness of Agency staff in responding to queries from colleges and training organisations.

- The Agency's new structure will include a network of Relationship Teams with a responsibility for managing the relationships with colleges and training organisations as well as with local partners and stakeholders. These teams are central to the business model of the Skills Funding Agency and will improve our capacity to focus on local issues.
- Within the new Delivery Division of the Agency, the Central Delivery Service will bring together the management of all routine transactions with providers in one team, and handle all routine incoming and outgoing communications with providers. This will improve the rapidity with which we can respond to enquiries and reinforce the consistency of responses.

- We will take steps to improve the access that frontline staff have to detailed information about new policy developments so that they are better equipped to advise providers.
- A programme of learning and development has been produced for provider facing staff to ensure that they have the knowledge to deal appropriately and consistently with provider queries. This will be complemented by frequent briefing on emerging policy areas.

4 To reduce and improve the quality of the Agency's communications with the sector.

- We will put processes in place to ensure that Agency communications are written in a more consistent style, and that the use of jargon and unnecessary complexity is avoided.
- We will endeavour to minimise the amount of separate communications, and consolidate information wherever possible.
- All external communications will undergo a rigorous quality control check before publication.
- We will clarify with BIS what we will communicate on and what they will communicate on.
- Work is under way to improve the search facility on the Agency website, and to ensure that information on the site is organised more effectively.

Section 1. The Role of the Skills Funding Agency

Question 1.1 The Skills Funding Agency is effective in its new role as a funding and regulating body.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	4.2%	11
b. Agree	59.3%	156
c. Disagree	27.4%	72
d. Strongly disagree	9.5%	25

Question 1.2 The freedoms and flexibilities which have been introduced have enabled colleges and training organisations to manage the available funding more effectively.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	9.1%	24
b. Agree	51.7%	136
c. Disagree	30.0%	79
d. Strongly disagree	10.3%	27

Question 1.3 The Agency has provided the information and data required by colleges and training organisations to enable them to make business decisions.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	4.9%	13
b. Agree	42.2%	111
c. Disagree	37.3%	98
d. Strongly disagree	17.1%	45

Question 1.4 The Agency has made good progress in reducing the bureaucratic burden on the sector.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	2.7%	7
b. Agree	38.4%	101
c. Disagree	45.6%	120
d. Strongly disagree	14.8%	39

Question 1.5 The Agency's role in managing the quality and capacity of the sector is carried out effectively.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	3.4%	9
b. Agree	46.0%	121
c. Disagree	41.8%	110
d. Strongly disagree	9.5%	25

Summary of Concerns:

- The ACTOR system has been difficult to engage with, and it's been difficult to get timely responses to queries.
- Some providers felt that the Agency is not supporting smaller providers and that the MCL policy will result in the loss of good quality provision.
- There is inconsistency across regions in the way that policy is implemented.
- Potential new providers find it very difficult to get 'in the loop'.
- Information from the Agency often comes too late to allow proper planning and decision making.
- The level of knowledge among front line account staff is variable
- Many providers don't understand the flexibilities available to them.

Section 2 Skills Funding Agency Processes

Question 2.1 The process for the earlier indication of funding allocations has been effective and timely, allowing colleges and training organisations sufficient time to plan.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	8.7%	22
b. Agree	56.7%	143
c. Disagree	24.6%	62
d. Strongly disagree	11.5%	29

Question 2.2 The implementation of the policy to introduce a single budget for funding of adult training will enable colleges and training organisations to respond more effectively to labour market needs.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	16.3%	41
b. Agree	61.9%	156
c. Disagree	18.7%	47
d. Strongly disagree	4.0%	10

Question 2.3 The Agency's revised approach to Provider Performance Management and the redistribution of funding has been fairly and efficiently operated.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	3.2%	8
b. Agree	60.7%	153
c. Disagree	26.2%	66
d. Strongly disagree	11.5%	29

Question 2.4 The roles and responsibilities of the Agency staff that colleges and training organisations interact with are transparent and clearly understood.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	7.5%	19
b. Agree	44.0%	111
c. Disagree	34.9%	88
d. Strongly disagree	13.5%	34

Question 2.5 Queries and requests for clarification are dealt with promptly and comprehensively.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	9.5%	24
b. Agree	40.9%	103
c. Disagree	34.5%	87
d. Strongly disagree	16.7%	42

Summary of Concerns

- Late release of information on fundability of qualifications means it's difficult to plan effectively
- Lack of information on how outcome incentive payments will work.
- The ACTOR system makes it difficult for providers to plan ahead.
- Different rules for colleges and other providers mean that private providers are unable to move money as easily.
- On performance management, there's not enough time built into the process to allow a robust business case to be made.
- It seems that lack of Skills Funding Agency resources has resulted in decisions being handed over to a computer – lack of human judgement on rulings.
- Account Managers aren't allowed to make decisions. The people who make decisions are not transparent to providers.
- Front line Agency staff only get Update and Guidance Notes at the same time as providers, so are in no position to advise or answer queries.

Section 3 Skills Funding Agency Communications

Question 3.1 Update, the Agency's weekly round up of business critical information and news for the sector is an effective way of communicating key information to colleges and training organisations.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	27.8%	69
b. Agree	61.7%	153
c. Disagree	8.9%	22
d. Strongly disagree	2.0%	5

Question 3.2 The series of Guidance Notes has been helpful in providing detailed clarification on policy developments and contractual requirements.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	18.1%	45
b. Agree	61.7%	153
c. Disagree	15.7%	39
d. Strongly disagree	4.4%	11

Question 3.3 Direct written communications from the Agency to colleges and training organisations have been clear, relevant and timely.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	7.7%	19
b. Agree	54.0%	134
c. Disagree	31.5%	78
d. Strongly disagree	8.9%	22

Question 3.4 Communications from the Agency are written in plain English and free from unnecessary jargon.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	8.9%	22
b. Agree	66.1%	164
c. Disagree	19.8%	49
d. Strongly disagree	6.0%	15

Question 3.5 The Skills Funding Agency website contains the right kind of information and is easy to navigate.

	Response Percent	Response Count
a. Strongly agree	4.4%	11
b. Agree	48.4%	120
c. Disagree	37.9%	94
d. Strongly disagree	10.1%	25

Summary of Concerns

- Would prefer more direct contact with Account Manager
- Too much duplication of information in Update, Guidance Notes and direct individual communications.
- Guidance Notes take too long to arrive and often requests for providers to take action are at very short notice.
- More briefings would be better than more written communication.
- All guidance should be in a single document.

- Too much jargon, but accept that some of this is necessary in such a complex landscape.
- Website search facility not fit for purpose. The information is there, but very difficult to find.

Section 4 And finally...

Question 4.1 What is the one thing that the Skills Funding Agency could do to assist you in realising your aims and objectives?

Most Common Themes

- Make the tendering process more simple and transparent. Give us better feedback on the process. Provide quicker and more human responses to queries.
- Scrap MCL policy/ Adopt a more sector driven and flexible approach to MCL/ Recognise the quality of many small providers.
- More direct contact with Account Manager/ More face to face briefings to supplement guidance
- Treat all types of providers equally, don't favour colleges.
- Publish clear funding guidance in a single document and stick to it for at least a year.
- Three year funding agreements to allow providers to plan for the future.
- Respond more quickly and confidently.
- Develop a better understanding of what employers want, need, and will pay for.
- Improve the knowledge of all Account Managers and contract staff.
- Help promote the sector – we do a wonderful job.

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