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National Learner Satisfaction Survey

Further Education
Summary Report 2002/03

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Summary

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) conducts a National Learner Satisfaction Survey each year to investigate the levels of satisfaction reported by learners across the range of LSC-funded providers. The National Learner Satisfaction Survey focuses on the learning experience and the quality of teaching, support and resources offered. It also collects data on the impact that the learner experience has on learners. This report summarises the main findings of the National Learner Satisfaction Survey for further education (FE) colleges (general FE colleges, and tertiary, sixth form and specialist land-based and art and design colleges). With the National Learner Satisfaction Survey in its second year, there has been an opportunity to compare results.

The survey demonstrates extremely high levels of satisfaction with the services provided by around 400 colleges to over 3 million students in 2002/03. There are variable responses, within this generally high rate, between aspects of the services provided by general FE and sixth form colleges. There are also differences in the learners' experience between ethnic groups.

The Learning and Skills Council's National Learner Satisfaction Survey is the largest survey of the views of post-16 learners ever carried out in England. It has been undertaken annually since 2002.

Over 25,000 learners were surveyed in 2003 compared with 13,000 in 2002 and 19,947 of these learners were from the FE sector. Full details of the national survey can be found in *National Learner Satisfaction Survey 2002/03: Technical Data*, along with comprehensive analysis of the FE learners' responses. This summary report focuses on the key findings and messages for further education colleges

This report is of interest to those providing, attending or supporting general FE colleges, sixth form and specialist land-based and art and design colleges, and other specialist FE institutions. Higher education institutions, learning partnerships, schools with post-14 provision and adult education centres might also find the report of interest.

June 2004

Foreword

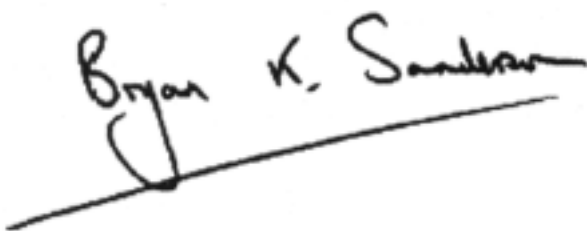
We have now completed the second year of the National Learner Satisfaction Survey and have learnt even more about our learners. Since the publication of the first year's survey findings we have worked with partner organisations and groups of learners to understand how the further education sector might act upon the findings to improve the quality of the learning received for all learners.

During 2003, the findings from the first year's surveys were discussed at a national series of workshops with providers. We were amazed by how well the survey results were received and delighted at how passionate providers were about finding solutions to areas that learners identified for improvement. We are pleased to share some of the ideas and discussions from these workshops in this report and hope to do further work with providers throughout 2004.

We hope you will feel a sense of pride when reading this report, as we did. There is a lot of good news and the findings are a real tribute to all those working in the sector. We want providers to use the findings of this survey and the focus groups to identify areas for improvement and to make a difference. This year, as well as identifying the areas for improvement, we have included ideas from provider workshops on the ways in which the improvements might be achieved. We hope you find this useful.

We strongly encourage all further education colleges and providers to use the national learner survey methodology and core questions, and to benchmark their own institutions against the national picture. This will help colleges to identify priority areas for improvement as well as areas in their own college where learners' satisfaction rates may be better than the national picture.

My message is clear. Only if we listen and respond to learners and work to make sure that learners have the best possible experience, can we say that the quality of further education is truly excellent. We look forward to working with you to raise learners' satisfaction rates even further in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bryan K. Sanderson". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that serves as a baseline for the signature.

Bryan K Sanderson
Chairman, the Learning and Skills Council

What's inside

Key findings

Section 1

Overall Satisfaction with the Learning Experience

- A majority (90 per cent) of learners are satisfied with their learning experience and 63 per cent of learners are either very satisfied or extremely satisfied. Importantly, only 6 per cent are dissatisfied. The proportion of learners who are 'extremely satisfied' has increased since 2002.

Section 2

Section 2: The Quality of Teaching and Management of Learning

- The proportion of learners who are satisfied with the quality of teaching is high at 89 per cent; 62 per cent are either extremely or very satisfied. Compared with last year, the proportion of learners who are extremely satisfied with teaching has risen – especially for sixth form colleges with a rise of 8 percentage points. However, too many learners believe that some of their lesson time is wasted (54 per cent) and this has increased by 9 percentage points since last year.

Section 3

Section 3: Information and Guidance Prior to Entry

- A large majority (91 per cent) of learners feel that they have chosen the most suitable course. Most learners (83 per cent) said that the course met their expectations either very or quite closely. • A significant minority (17 per cent) did not seek advice before joining a course. • More than 88 per cent of learners described the advice they received about choice of course as 'very' or 'fairly useful'. • The main reason given for leaving early is health problems, by 15 per cent of respondents, closely followed by poor teaching.

Section 4

Section 4: Support for Learners

- We found that 61 per cent of learners encounter difficulties while on their course: an increase on 2002. • Few learners seek help for problems. • Across all types of FE establishments the average proportion of learners who made complaints is 12 per cent.

Section 5

Section 5: The Impact of Learning

- Just over three-quarters (76 per cent) of learners said that they enjoy learning and get a 'buzz' from it. Almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of learners who had a negative attitude to learning when they left school are now getting a 'buzz' from it. Further education is turning around many students' opinions on study.

Section 6

Section 6: Buildings and Facilities

- Facilities are rated the same or higher than last year. Further education learners are most satisfied with IT facilities and equipment.

Key questions

- What can we do to make learners who are fairly satisfied become very or extremely satisfied?

Section 1

- What aspects of teaching do learners feel to be less satisfactory? How can we make teaching and learning more stimulating for learners?
- How do we tackle learners' views that some lesson time is wasted?

Section 2

- How can we enhance the pre-entry stages to improve learners' satisfaction?
- How can we improve the way we identify and support learners who are at risk of leaving early?

Section 3

- How can we improve the way we identify, support and retain learners who experience difficulties?

Section 4

- How do we make all learners positive about learning and want to do more?

Section 5

- How can we improve facilities and services to reflect learners' needs?

Section 6

Introduction

1 The importance of taking full account of the views of students and clients is widely appreciated across the further education (FE) sector as a key means to help guide improvement in programmes and services. The reforms to the sector outlined in *Success for All* are being supported by a substantial investment in FE colleges. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) Strategic Area Review (StAR) process, which began in 2002/03, has the needs of learners as its main consideration. Improvements to the sector are being resourced through the funding of three-year development plans, which themselves are informed by what is needed for learners.

2 To assist the sector as a whole in responding to learners, the LSC embarked on a substantial National Learner Satisfaction Survey in 2002. We have now completed the second year of the survey and have learnt even more about our learners. Since the publication of the first year's survey findings we have worked with partner organisations and groups of learners to understand how the sector might act upon the findings to improve the quality of the learning received for all learners.

3 This report presents the findings for the colleges, including general FE, tertiary, sixth form and specialist landbased and art and design colleges. This year, as well as identifying the areas for improvement in the report, we have also suggested how this might be achieved, and I hope you will find this useful.

4 During 2003, the findings from the first year's surveys were discussed at a national series of workshops with providers. This new development provided helpful examples of how colleges can better respond to students' views, given by the staff in colleges who would be most able to effect improvements.

5 We are delighted with how well the survey results have been received and how passionate providers have been about finding solutions to areas that learners identified for improvement. This report gives us the opportunity to share the ideas and discussions from these workshops.

6 We also ran a number of focus groups with learners to explore further some of the issues raised in last year's survey. This too was a great success and we have illustrated this summary report with some of the

insights gained from learners in the focus groups. One key focus group finding was that a 'good teacher listens to their learners'. Their voices may be heard throughout this survey.

7 The survey demonstrates extremely high levels of satisfaction with the services provided by around 400 colleges to over 3 million students in 2002/03. There are variable responses, within this generally high rate, between aspects of the services provided by general FE and sixth form colleges. There are also differences in the learners' experience between ethnic groups.

8 We hope you will feel a sense of pride when reading this report, as there is a lot of good news and the findings are a real tribute to all of those working in the FE sector. I also hope you will join me in the drive to use the survey findings to identify areas for improvement and to make a difference.

9 We strongly urge colleges and providers to use the national learner satisfaction survey methodology and core questions. Information about how to do this is in the section titled enquiries and key publications.

The survey

10 The Learning and Skills Council's National Learner Satisfaction Survey is the largest survey of the views of post-16 learners ever carried out in England. It has been undertaken annually since 2002.

11 Over 25,000 learners were surveyed in 2003 compared with 13,000 in 2002 and 19,947 of these learners were from the FE sector. An early view of the findings for 2002/03 was published in December 2003 in the *National Learner Satisfaction Survey 2002/03: Highlights*. Full details of the national survey can be found in *National Learner Satisfaction Survey 2002/03: Technical Data*, along with comprehensive analysis of the FE learners' responses.

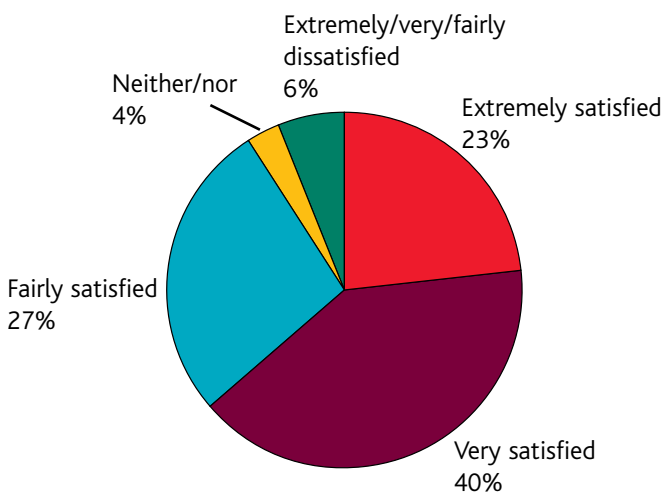
12 This summary report focuses on the key findings and messages for further education colleges. There are two further summary reports. One focuses on adult learning providers, and one on work-based learning providers.

Overall Satisfaction with the Learning Experience

Key findings

Ninety per cent of learners are satisfied with their learning experience and 63 per cent of learners are either very satisfied or extremely satisfied. Importantly, only 6 per cent are dissatisfied. The proportion of learners who are extremely satisfied has increased since 2002.

Figure 1: Overall satisfaction with the learning experience.



13 Satisfaction is similar across all FE provision, although students at landbased and art and design colleges are slightly more satisfied (25 per cent are extremely satisfied and 43 per cent very satisfied) than students at other sorts of college. This level of satisfaction compares well with survey evidence from other public and private services. Compared with last year, the number of extremely satisfied learners has increased by 3 percentage points.

14 Generally, younger learners are less satisfied than older learners, while women are generally more satisfied with their learning experience than men. White learners are generally more satisfied with their learning experience, while those least likely to be extremely or very satisfied are Indian and black Caribbean learners. In fact, for Indian learners, those

who are extremely satisfied are proportionately fewer than last year. However, these differences are in the context of combined satisfaction ratings (extremely–very–fairly) of not less than 86 per cent for any ethnic group. Learners with no qualifications at the start of the programme tend to be the most satisfied with their learning experience.

15 The main scope for improvements will come from making fairly satisfied learners very or extremely satisfied. The small percentage of students who are dissatisfied will be controlled or reduced by the attention given to aspects of student experience that are rated more as negatives among those who are only fairly satisfied. Colleges need to deliver best practice in advice, teaching, managing learning and support, while providing good facilities for study and recreation.

Key question

What can we do to make learners who are fairly satisfied become very or extremely satisfied?

16 To answer this, we can learn from those who are very and extremely satisfied. So what are these learners telling us about their experience? The answer is that they are more likely to:

- find the pre-entry advice they receive is more useful
- feel that their expectations have been met
- think that they chose the most suitable course
- rate the quality of teaching much higher
- think that session time has not been wasted
- be satisfied with the buildings and facilities
- have few difficulties, but when they do...
- ...find the help provided in the event of difficulties to be 'useful'
- have not made a complaint.

17 Learners who are only fairly satisfied, although generally positive about their overall experience, are significantly less positive about specific aspects of their learning experience:

- pre-entry advice and guidance
- the quality of teaching
- support services
- help and assistance to deal with problems encountered while studying
- the way in which their complaints were handled.

Areas for action

18 Providers have suggested that the following actions could be taken to try to move fairly satisfied learners to very or extremely satisfied learners.

- Ensure a consistent and high standard of pre-entry advice for all users, checking for issues at enrolment or induction (fairly satisfied learners are as likely to seek advice but less likely to find it beneficial).
- Identify the types and sources of advice which work best for different groups of learners, bearing in mind the role that informal sources, such as family and friends, can play (fairly satisfied learners are more likely to think they have chosen the wrong course).
- Continually check for any 'on-programme' difficulties with individual learners or groups of learners. In particular, colleges need to make sure that lesson and workshop time is fully utilised for learning, that lessons start and finish on time, and that teachers manage to prevent disruptive behaviour, or tackle it quickly. Colleges need to monitor these aspects and take action (fairly satisfied learners are more likely to rate teaching quality lower and to think session time is wasted).
- Keep the need for staff development for teachers and trainers under continuous review (materials and staff development can make teaching more effective in meeting learners' expectations).
- Encourage learners to seek help if they experience difficulties (only a minority of those reporting they had experienced difficulties had sought help).

- Make sure that help, for those who seek it, is effective (fairly satisfied learners are less likely to find the help offered to be of use).
- Deal with all complaints (formal and informal) appropriately and effectively (fairly satisfied learners are more likely to have complained; lack of resolution of complaints is a concern for significant numbers of learners).

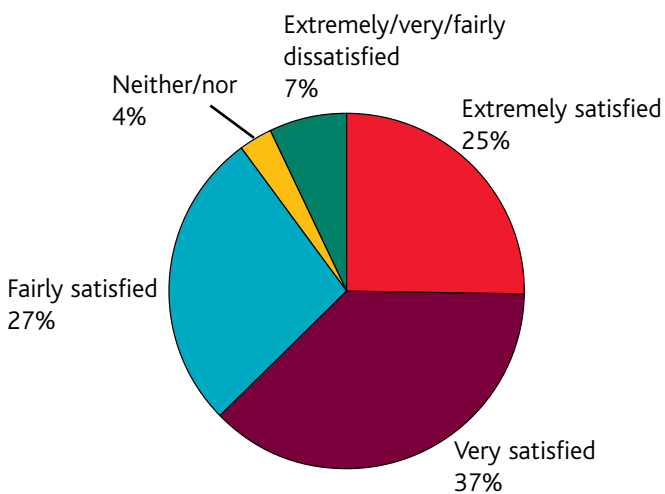
19 Colleges will want to consider the main action areas above in relation to particular groups, including according to ethnicity, taking into account the views of their own learners often gained through surveys. Colleges are urged to assess which actions would produce the best results for their own students in moving them towards high levels of satisfaction. Self-assessment reports and three-year development plans could provide a framework for focusing on learner feedback and strategies for bringing about improvements in learner satisfaction. By using the national learner satisfaction survey methodology and core questions, colleges can compare with the national picture, which will help to pinpoint key areas for improvement.

The Quality of Teaching and Management of Learning

Key findings

The proportion of learners who are satisfied with the quality of teaching is high at 89 per cent; 62 per cent are either extremely or very satisfied. Compared with last year, the proportion of learners who are extremely satisfied with teaching has risen – especially for sixth form colleges with a rise of 8 percentage points. However, too many learners believe that some of their lesson time is wasted (54 per cent) and this has increased by 9 percentage points since last year.

Figure 2: Satisfaction with the quality of teaching.



20 Statistical analysis shows that the quality of teaching has the biggest single influence on learners' satisfaction. The high percentage of learners satisfied with the quality of teaching is a credit to the colleges and their staff.

21 Older learners are more satisfied than younger learners with the quality of teaching. Since last year, satisfaction with teaching amongst learners aged 19 to 24 has fallen to the same levels as for learners aged 16 to 18. Learners with disabilities are generally more satisfied with all aspects of teaching. Learners on GCSE courses give the highest ratings to their teaching. Learners on A/AS Level and General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) courses are less likely

to be extremely satisfied with their teaching. Learners with the highest and lowest qualifications at the start of their programmes were the most satisfied with aspects of teaching.

22 Learners on part-time and/or short courses (the larger proportion of students in general further education colleges) usually have high satisfaction ratings. However, learners on distance learning courses have lower satisfaction ratings and are more likely to say they are dissatisfied with the quality of teaching.

What learners say about teachers and teaching

23 In focus groups of 16 to 18 year-olds it was generally felt that the teacher had a primary responsibility to motivate the learner. Some younger learners, however, felt that some of the responsibility lay with the learner. The focus groups discussed what might motivate or de-motivate a young learner.

24 In these focus groups there was a feeling that teachers need to get the balance right between being both professional and sociable with the learners.

"I prefer a younger teacher that has had a few life experiences and is able to relate to young people, and like talk about issues freely, and if you can do all that then you can be a good teacher"

25 Learners made the following specific comments:

- a good teacher is enthusiastic and friendly, and is positive: a good teacher tells learners that they are going to do well
- learners would like to feel they are on a more equal footing with their teachers
- a good teacher makes learners feel that they genuinely care about them and how well they do in their studies
- a good teacher listens to learners

- African-Caribbean men, in particular, liked teachers who did not talk down to them, and with whom they could 'crack a joke' and feel they had something in common.

"The ones who keep the magic going are the ones who would sometimes go to a club or a rave, because you can get on with them more than the ones that sit at home and watch Mastermind."

Table 1: Motivating and de-motivating factors.

Motivating factors, 16 to 18	De-motivating factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teachers ● Desire to succeed/go to university ● Fear of the consequences of not doing well at college ● Interesting teaching methods that really involve the students ● Social aspect of going to college and seeing your friends ● College schemes to motivate learners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being treated like a child by the teacher/college ● Being forced to take certain subjects (for example, General Studies) ● Having too much work to do ● Favouritism ('some teachers just seem to have favourites, and they help those individuals they find it easier to work with').

Source: focus groups

Key questions

What aspects of teaching do learners feel to be less satisfactory? How can we make teaching and learning more stimulating for learners?

26 Certain aspects of teaching give rise to very high levels of satisfaction among large numbers of students. The obvious implication is to apply these ways of teaching as widely as possible. These aspects of teaching are listed below. The percentages shown are the proportion of learners in the survey who are extremely satisfied with each aspect of teaching. Extremely satisfied is the highest rating.

27 Teacher/learner relationship factors:

- how well teachers relate to learners as a person (54 per cent)
- making the subject interesting or enjoyable for learners (44 per cent)
- understanding learners and how they like to learn (38 per cent)
- the support they give to learners, for example, in improving study techniques or time management (39 per cent).

28 Management of learning factors:

- knowledge of subject (68 per cent)
- managing the group of learners (41 per cent)
- quality and availability of teaching materials (41 per cent)
- providing prompt and regular feedback on progress (41 per cent)
- planning lessons (40 per cent)
- setting clear targets to help you improve (38 per cent).

29 The survey found that sixth form colleges scored significantly lower than general FE colleges on the relationship measures, although there was no significant difference on management of learning.

Areas for action

30 The views expressed here by learners go to the heart of improving their satisfaction with the college experience. The survey findings were also discussed in focus groups of college staff. They came up with a number of recommendations for action.

- Teacher training and continuing professional development has to be effective and take into account the needs of new teachers, young teachers, and those coming directly from business or industry (addressing the need for the right skills for a continually changing role).

- Teachers should be provided with effective, ongoing personal and professional development and the time to undertake it, to improve their teaching skills and update their subject knowledge.
- Professional development should focus on developing those aspects rated less highly by learners, specifically:
 - i understanding the different learning styles and needs of learners and gaining skills in different ways of delivering learning
 - ii strategies for managing larger groups of learners
 - iii feedback and motivation skills including setting learners' improvement targets
 - iv providing support to learners in more generic skills such as time management and study techniques.
- Teachers should be confident and skilled in different ways of delivering learning, for example, use of different teaching styles and alternative teaching materials.
- Experienced staff should work as mentors to assist teachers, through lesson observations and constructive feedback in developing their skills, again the focus could be on the less highly rated aspects, such as managing large groups, learning styles, giving motivational feedback and target setting.
- New teachers should be given a reasonably light teaching timetable in their first term to allow them to plan lessons effectively and devise teaching materials; their performance should be reviewed systematically and regularly during the first year.
- Staff who are the sole teacher of a subject in their college should be allowed and encouraged to network with their counterparts in other institutions, so that they do not feel isolated professionally. Subject websites for the exchange of expertise and good practice would be useful.
- Effective exchange of information and good practice on learning styles and teaching materials will also assist teachers to improve the learning experience.

31 These recommendations can be taken forward within colleges, and supplemented by views of their own students and staff. Although essential they need to be set in the context of efficient and effective

management of teaching and learning. This context may include the need for more attention to the housekeeping arrangements for teaching, notably well-planned timetabling and clear communications to students and staff regarding standards expected for punctuality and attendance at lessons and activities.

32 Themes two and three of *Success for All* also deal, respectively, with materials for learning and the development of staff. Results from the FE learner survey – and responses of college staff to them may be used to inform the developments.

Key question

How do we tackle learners' views that some lesson time is wasted?

33 Too many learners believe that some of their lesson time is wasted (54 per cent); this has increased by 9 percentage points since last year. Sixth form college learners are most likely to report wasted time (63 per cent), although satisfaction on this measure is down in general FE colleges as well.

"Some of the teachers at college are behind you all the way and they're really positive about the subject. And other teachers are always late and I've had teachers that don't teach at all."

34 Wasted time can be avoided by finding solutions to the following problems, reported as the main reasons for time being lost:

- other students arriving late, highlighted by 65 per cent of those saying time was wasted
- being left hanging around with nothing to do (31 per cent)
- other students making a noise or disrupting class (29 per cent)
- teachers and tutors arriving late (23 per cent)
- lessons being badly planned or disorganised (23 per cent)
- lessons finishing too early (21 per cent).

35 Lack of resources or equipment was also reported as wasting lesson time by more than 20 per cent of those responding in this category.

Areas for action

36 College staff made additional suggestions on how to use time more effectively.

- Experienced teachers, rather than new and inexperienced members of staff, should be given groups of learners known to be disruptive or difficult.
- Training on how to deal with disruptive behaviour is crucial.
- Effective systems need to be established to avoid classes being cancelled, rooms being double-booked or lessons running late, finishing early.
- Effective communications systems need to be in place to deal with the effects of unexpected teacher absences.

37 In the context of a very positive survey, students' experience of time wasted in lessons and workshops is a significant area of concern. College managers will wish to assess the extent to which these factors affect learner satisfaction in their own college.

Information and Guidance Prior to Entry

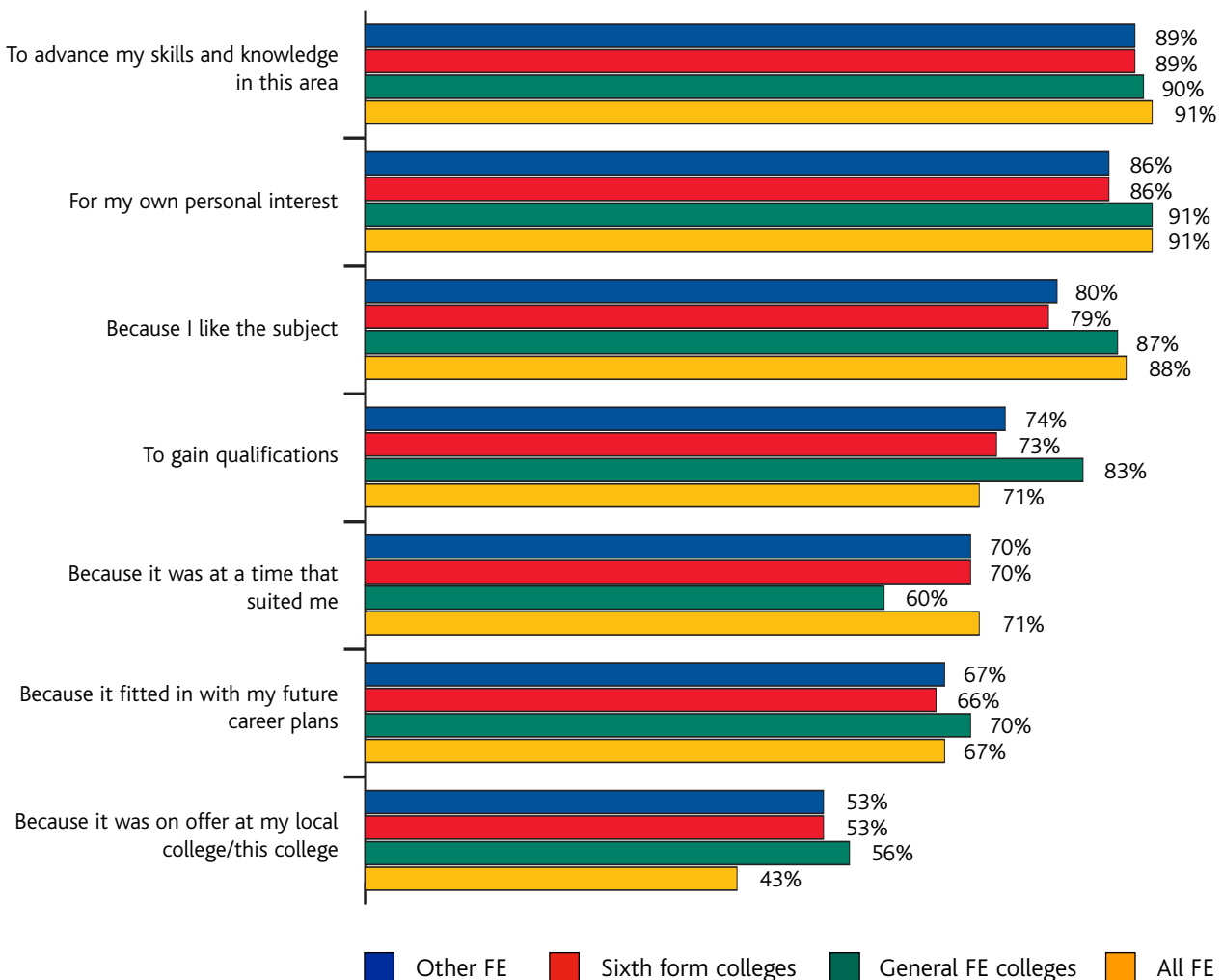
38 The survey assessed why and how learners chose their courses, how advice was sought and its value. Learners were asked whether they were made to feel welcome; whether they chose the right course; and if it matched their expectations.

Key findings

A large majority (91 per cent) of learners feel that they have chosen the most suitable course. Most learners (83 per cent) said that the course met their expectations either very or quite closely.

39 Learners aged 25 and over are more likely to choose the course for career or qualification aims rather than because they liked the subject. Learners aged 16 to 18 are the most influenced by social aspects. Younger learners were also most likely to seek information and advice pre-entry. However, they are also less likely than older learners to find the advice useful. These points should be seen, however, in the context of very high proportions feeling they had chosen the right course.

Figure 3: Factors which influenced choice of course by provider type (most common mentions).



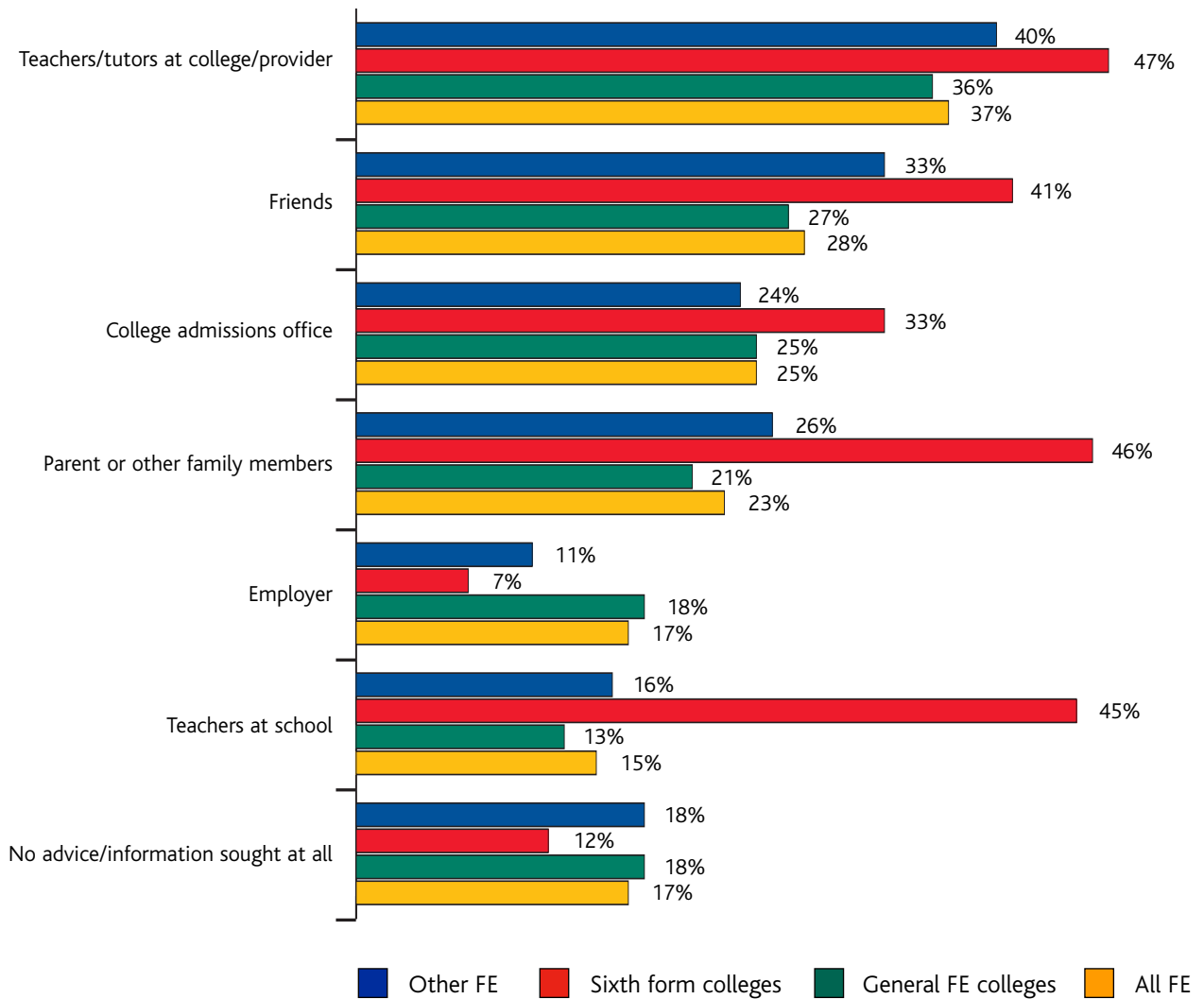
Key finding

A significant minority of learners (17 per cent) did not seek advice before joining a course.

40 Almost a fifth of learners (17 per cent) did not seek advice before enrolling on their course. Learners at sixth form colleges are the most likely to seek advice and also the most likely to go to several sources for advice.

41 Learners aged 55 and over experienced the fewest difficulties. Learners from minority ethnic groups are likely to have sought advice from more sources than other learners. However, they are less likely to say that the course met their expectations very closely. Learners taking GNVQ or A/AS Level courses are more likely to feel that they have chosen the wrong course and are less likely to say that the course met their expectations.

Figure 4: Sources of advice about course/provider type.



Key finding

More than 88 per cent of learners described the advice they received about choice of course as very or fairly useful.

42 However, the proportion finding advice very useful does differ for each source of advice. The percentages of learners who sought advice from a source and found it very useful are given in brackets:

- teachers/tutors at college/provider (64 per cent)
- information and guidance office (56 per cent)
- connexions (55 per cent)
- college admissions office (54 per cent)
- friends (50 per cent)
- employers (50 per cent)
- parents/family (48 per cent)
- teachers at school (46 per cent)
- school careers advisor (43 per cent).

What learners say

43 Many of the learners in the focus groups for 16 to 18 year-olds mentioned the support that they had received in choosing which courses to take. Some sixth form college students attended open evenings or taster days and were asked to respond to a questionnaire to find out which courses were suitable for them. A few learners, however, did not think that answering this kind of questionnaire was worthwhile as they were advised that they should take courses that they felt they would not enjoy. This might have been because tutors saw these courses as natural progression while the students wanted to choose differently.

44 Some young students were given information sheets detailing the courses available to them. None of the learners who mentioned these felt that they were very helpful or informative because they were too promotional. Young learners said they would have preferred someone from outside the school to have given them more objective information. Some suggested radio or television programmes to help them decide which subjects to take would be helpful, along the lines of the bitesize programmes.

45 Taster days had an impact on some young learners' expectations of their courses. Overall, it seemed that many learners thought that the taster days had been helpful when deciding which courses to take. They also felt, however, that a wider range of subjects should have been covered during taster days. More worryingly, some learners thought that the taster days had given them unrealistic expectations of what their courses would be like, as they were overly promotional.

46 For learners generally, the single most important reason for choosing a course was to advance knowledge and skills (consistently between 89 per cent to 91 per cent across all college types), with obtaining a qualification lagging in fourth place behind personal interest and liking for the subject; although still important for around three-quarters of students in general FE and 83 per cent in sixth form colleges. In general FE colleges this placed the importance of qualifications slightly ahead of the convenient time factor. Learners aged 16 to 18 in both sixth form and general FE colleges chose their courses at least in part because they fitted in with their career plans. There were, however, significant differences. The need for vocational relevance appeared a more immediate concern for many learners at general FE colleges, many of whom did not have any intention of going on to university. Sixth form college learners who chose their courses for career related reasons, on the other hand, did so because they believed their courses would lead to further study, rather than to a job.

47 The focus groups for learners aged 16 to 18 also explored the reasons for learners' choice of institution. One group felt that, for students who had the option of staying on at a school sixth form, there were a variety of 'push' and 'pull' factors that influenced their decision to go to college:

48 The push factors which they identified included:

- learners wanted a change
- the head of their school sixth form had encouraged them to go to college
- learners did not want to wear a uniform
- teachers in the school were stricter than those at college
- and for some, they disliked the single sex environment in their school.

“(We were) all girls in one school, so it was really cliquy and I just thought I don’t want to be with the same people and the same arguments for another two years.”

49 The pull factors which were identified included:

- the college and its courses had a good reputation
- a college gives plenty of chance to meet new people
- some saw college as a step towards university
- going to college seemed like a natural progression
- they would have far more free periods at the college than they would in a school sixth form.

Key question

How can we enhance the pre-entry stages to improve learners’ satisfaction?

50 There is valuable evidence here for all types of college to use in improving pre-entry guidance. For the students who said they had received no pre-entry advice (19 per cent in general FE, 12 per cent in sixth form colleges) there is the need to include them in future. To have such significant numbers of learners outside the advisory systems can build in false expectations and potential failure for some. The advice and information that learners receive before starting a course plays a crucial role in determining their satisfaction later on. To increase learner satisfaction, we must make sure, in descending order of priority, that:

- expectations are realistic for learners and are understood and met by staff
- learners get their first choice of provider or course
- advice is provided for all and is effective.

Areas for action

51 Suggestions have come from college staff for ways to improve pre-entry guidance.

- High standards of careers advice and planning are essential to help learners (and their parents) make the right choices.
- It is important to make sure the learners do not have false or unreasonable expectations about course content.

- Colleges should liaise with schools and Connexions personnel and offer authentic taster sessions to potential learners.
- Enrolment and induction periods are crucial times during which colleges can try to make sure that learners’ expectations are realistic. Although a learner may be keen to take a particular course, there may be another course at a different level which may be more suitable.
- Effective information, guidance and advice are necessary at the enrolment stage to make sure that learners are following the most appropriate course for them.
- Induction and initial assessment are essential to make sure that learners are on the most appropriate courses.
- Ongoing information, advice and guidance are also necessary to make sure that learners can change courses if required.
- Early on in the first term, colleges could arrange a ‘course change day’ on which learners could move to a more appropriate course.

52 In the light of the survey it is important to add the need to make sure that learners on courses at all types of college feel their skills and knowledge are improving. This will not link always to qualification-related outcomes, but clear measures of progress will need to be planned and recorded. Learner satisfaction will also be affected by the timetabling of provision the ‘convenience factor’. This is particularly evident in general FE colleges, but also influences nearly two-thirds of sixth form college students.

Leaving early

Key finding

The main reason given for leaving early is health problems, by 15 per cent of respondents, closely followed by poor teaching.

53 It is a cause of concern that health and personal difficulties are significantly more likely to be the reasons why learners actually leave courses, rather than consider leaving. Some of these difficulties may be pre-existing conditions and be unavoidable. Poor teaching quality is very important, at 14 per cent. The main reasons for

Table 2: Reasons for leaving/seriously thinking about leaving.

	Early leaver	Still studying but do not expect to complete the course	Still studying but thought of leaving
Unweighted.	1,197	205	1,937
Weighted.	1,225	199	1,866
Health reasons.	15%	7%	5%
Tutor poor/problems with teaching quality.	14%	20%	19%
Too much work.	12%	10%	19%
Personal problems/pregnancy/difficulties with childcare/family commitments.	12%	4%	7%
Wrong course for me.	11%	18%	8%
Got a job.	8%	6%	5%
Work too difficult.	6%	9%	14%
College/provider badly run/organised.	6%	10%	11%

considering leaving or not expecting to complete the course are teaching quality and volume of work.

54 Younger students feel they are more likely to leave because they find the work too difficult or because they feel they are on the wrong course. Older learners are more likely to leave due to health problems. Learners aged 19 and over are more likely to have found work after leaving.

55 Women are more likely to leave due to the teaching quality or too much work. Young women are more likely to find the work too difficult. Men are more likely to have found work after leaving. Learners with disabilities are more likely to leave due to health reasons. Asian learners are more likely to leave due to personal difficulties, childcare or family commitments.

56 White early leavers are more likely to find work after leaving. Learners taking A/AS Levels and access to higher education (HE) courses are more likely to cite the quantity of work as a reason for leaving early. Learners on GNVQs are more likely to think they are on the wrong course. Learners working towards professional qualifications are more likely to leave due to the teaching quality.

Key question

How can we improve the way we identify and support learners who are at risk of leaving early?

Areas for action

57 College staff in the focus group, made a number of suggestions to help students stay on and complete their courses.

- Potential early leavers need to be identified as soon as possible, for example, through initial assessment, attendance monitoring and patterns of poor performance.
- Absent learners should be followed up immediately by telephone and text messages to learners/parents. Support services should readily be made available to these learners.
- A flexible policy is required to allow learners who leave early to come back to college at a later date.

58 In addition, the impact of the health factors should be assessed in the local college context. This may be a matter for college Health and Safety Committees to monitor, and to influence the welfare services provided. College counselling services and referral to external agencies may assist students with health problems and other personal factors affecting retention.

59 Once again, the development of both teaching and support staff to help learners through difficulties experienced while studying could make a vital difference to retention.

Support for Learners

60 This section looks at what difficulties, if any, learners experienced, as well as the usefulness of advice sought to support them. Health difficulties are dealt with in the context of early leavers in the section above. This section also goes on to look at the handling of learners' complaints.

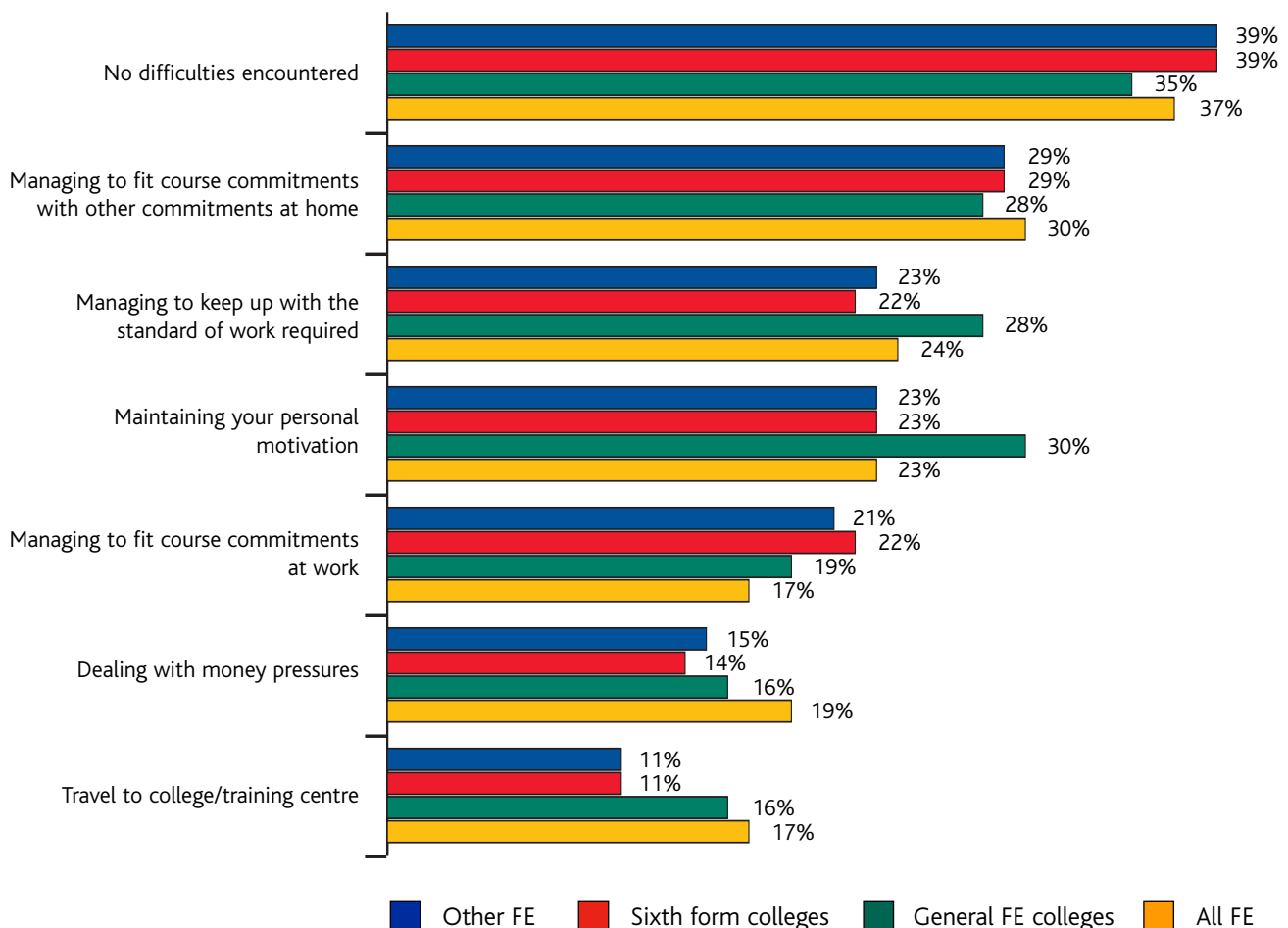
Key finding

We found that 61 per cent of FE learners reported encountering difficulties while on their course.

61 The percentage of learners experiencing difficulties is 11 percentage points higher than last year. Proportions are similar in general FE and sixth form colleges. The three most common difficulties reported are:

- fitting course commitments with demands at home (particularly for women but affecting nearly a third of all students)
- maintaining personal motivation
- keeping up the required standard of work.

Figure 5: Percentage of learners reporting encountering difficulties.



Key finding

Few learners seek help for problems.

62 Only around a quarter (27 per cent) of all learners experiencing problems have sought help or advice. The proportion was significantly higher for learners in sixth form colleges (32 per cent) and specialist FE colleges (31 per cent). Most learners experiencing problems do not seek any help.

63 Overall, two-fifths (41 per cent) of learners who received help felt the help or advice had been very useful, and an additional 35 per cent found it to have been fairly useful. However, this leaves almost a quarter of learners who had sought out help or advice finding it unsatisfactory. Overall, learners in sixth form colleges were somewhat more satisfied, with the proportion who found help very or fairly useful at 83 per cent, compared with 76 per cent of learners in general FE colleges.

64 Maintaining motivation is most likely to be a problem for learners aged 16 to 18. Learners aged under 25 are more likely to seek help or advice for their problems. Younger learners are less likely to find help and advice for their problems useful.

65 Learners in social classes D and E are more likely to face financial problems rather than problems fitting the course in with their domestic commitments. However, they are more likely to find the help and advice available to be useful.

66 Learners in social classes A and B are the most likely to make a complaint and are less satisfied with the response to their complaint.

67 Learners with disabilities aged 16 to 18 are much more likely to have encountered difficulties, of both learning and personal types. However many of them seek help or advice, although with variable results. Mixed race, black African and black Caribbean students are more likely to face difficulties, at around 65 per cent and 70 per cent of learners respectively. Coping with financial pressures is a greater reported problem for black students than other groups.

68 Learners on access to HE courses are more likely to struggle in juggling their course with domestic commitments, to maintain their motivation and to cope with financial pressures.

69 Learners are most likely to face problems on access to HE courses, or courses over one year in length. A third of students on retail, customer services, sports, leisure, and hair and beauty courses have sought help with difficulties. Learners least likely to have problems are on engineering, technical, manufacturing, business administration, professional and ICT courses. Learners with higher qualifications on entry are less likely to have problems keeping up with the standard of work. However, they are more likely to struggle in balancing courses with other commitments. Other difficulties such as travel, financial pressures and maintaining motivation are most likely to be experienced by learners with Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications on entry. These learners are more likely to seek advice and help for their problems.

Learners' complaints

Key finding

Across all types of FE establishments the average proportion of learners who made complaints is 12 per cent.

70 The definition of making a complaint in the survey was solely for the students to decide. Complaints might not always have been lodged through a formal system. The two most common subjects for complaint are the poor quality of teaching, (particularly in sixth form colleges) and lack of equipment or poor/inadequate learning materials. Far more young learners with disabilities made complaints (21 per cent), as did black African students (18 per cent).

71 A comparatively high proportion of students on the following courses make complaints; access to HE, GCE AS/A Level, and courses lasting one to two years. Learners on GNVQ courses are much less likely to be satisfied with the outcomes of their complaints. Of those learners in FE who had made a complaint, only 37 per cent felt it had been dealt with satisfactorily and 40 per cent said that there had been no outcome to their complaint (48 per cent of GNVQ complainants).

72 Complaints should be welcomed in principle as valuable sources of opinion. Clearly, material concerns should be resolved speedily if possible and other issues kept open until concluded satisfactorily from the staff and learner's point of view wherever possible.

Key question

How can we improve the way we identify, support and retain learners who experience difficulties?

Areas for action

73 Five areas for action have been identified.

- Recognising likely types of difficulty in advance, with efficient procedures for responding to them.
- Ensuring effective systems are in place for identifying individual learners experiencing difficulties.
- Providing timely, effective advice and help for learners experiencing difficulties and encouraging them to take it up (including confidential college based or referral services, as needed).
- Making sure that complaints (formal and informal) are understood and managed satisfactorily. Procedures for complaints to be made known and monitored. Even informal complaints (arising from discussions with teachers or tutors) should have some type of formal response so the student knows the issue has been addressed and their complaint has led to action.
- Work with student groups and external representatives or bodies (parents or employers, health/welfare agencies, Local Authorities and the voluntary sector) to promote better understanding of the services available to students in need.

74 Suggestions have been made from college staff for ways to improve.

- It is important that colleges have good systems for identifying learners who require additional support. Failure to identify learners' support needs early enough in the year can lead to a poor experience of learning, unsatisfactory performance and the learner may fail to complete his/her course.

- Colleges should have effective initial assessment procedures in order that they can identify learners who are likely to need additional learning support. Initial assessment should cover basic skills, key skills and subject specific skills.
- Learners' needs for other forms of support, such as financial assistance, should also be identified at this stage.
- Colleges also need to make sure that learners are given pastoral support to help them with any personal difficulties and sustain their motivation.
- Learners may need help with time management and study skills, and may need guidance on how to work effectively on their own, and how to use their initiative. Support may come from teachers or other non-teaching staff, and through students being helped to support each other.
- Support services need to be promoted effectively to encourage as many learners as possible to make use of them.
- Support may also need to be provided flexibly, for example, on an outreach basis and outside normal college hours.

75 Once again, areas for improvement imply the value of planned staff development, notably for student advisory and welfare services and in enhancing tutorial support. Recognising at the start that some students enter colleges with greater dependency and support needs, and then making the arrangements necessary to see them through their programmes, is likely to improve their individual experiences of learning. This may require closer liaison between agencies, college support staff and tutors working with potential students at the entry point to college courses.

The Impact of Learning

Key findings

Just over three-quarters (76 per cent) of learners said that they enjoy learning and get a 'buzz' from it. Almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of learners who had a negative attitude to learning when they left school are now getting a 'buzz' from it. Further education is turning around many students' opinions about study.

Table 3: Change in percentage enjoying learning and getting a 'buzz' from it 2001/02 and 2002/03.

	2002/03 shows an increase in percentage enjoying learning and getting a 'buzz' from it
All FE	+6 percentage points
General FE colleges	+6 percentage points
Sixth form colleges	+14 percentage points
Specialist colleges	+2 percentage points

76 The proportion of learners who said they enjoy learning is significantly higher than it was last year, by 14 percentage points for learners in sixth form colleges and six percentage points for learners in general FE colleges.

"I really enjoy textiles. Just the way the teacher is with everyone. She doesn't talk to one individual person, she'll talk to everyone, and people all sit together and everyone helps each other, the teacher's always around helping us do our work. You don't get left alone by yourself."

77 Colleges can and do turn around their students' opinions about study. There is a 4 per cent increase on last year in learners who had a negative attitude to learning when they left school are now getting a 'buzz' from it. Furthermore, 86 per cent of those who had been turned off by their experiences of learning now agree that they enjoy their college experience and that it has given them greater confidence in their ability to learn.

78 The social side of college life shouldn't be undervalued in planning improvements to students' experiences. Well over a third of students in all types of college and 49 per cent of those in sixth form colleges said they enjoy learning mostly because of the social aspects.

79 Almost two-thirds of learners said that they would be very likely to undertake another formal course in the next three years. Learners at sixth form colleges are those most likely to say they intend to go on to further learning (72 per cent).

Figure 6: Likelihood of undertaking further learning in the next three years.

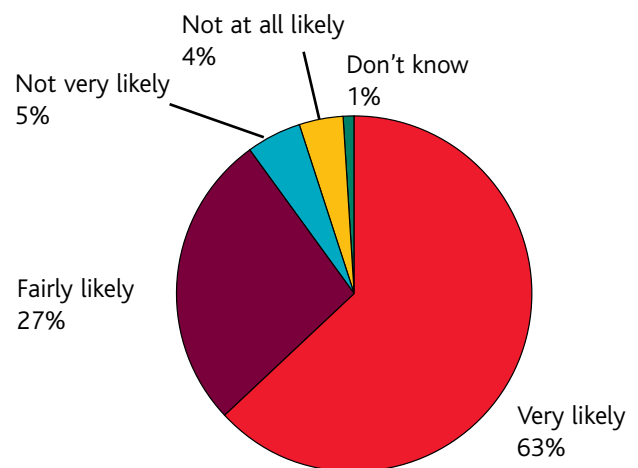


Table 4: Benefits of learning.

80 per cent of learners	<p>I have a greater enthusiasm for the subject. It has given me skills I can use for work. I feel more confident in my ability to learn.</p>
60-79 per cent of learners	<p>I feel more positive about learning than I did when I started. I am more creative and prepared to try new things. I am now better at learning on my own.</p>
Other benefits 20-59 per cent of learners	<p>I feel more confident socially. I am better at managing my time and responsibilities. It enables me to cope better with daily life. It has benefited my health and sense of well-being. I now take a more active part in the community.</p>

80 Learners found it easy to identify many benefits from their experiences of learning.

81 Overall:

- younger learners (aged 16 to 18) are more likely to cite all the benefits of learning
- learners from social classes D and E are more likely to cite benefits of learning
- learners in 'higher' social classes are more likely to consider undertaking further learning in the future
- men are more likely to say study has given them the confidence in their ability to learn
- white learners are less likely to acknowledge some of the benefits of learning but are more likely to consider undertaking further learning in the future
- across ethnic groups, white and black African learners are most inclined to say they are very likely to undertake further learning
- learners on GCE AS/A Level and GNVQ courses (mostly younger learners) are more likely to cite the benefits of learning and are more likely to consider more learning in the future.

Key question

How do we make all learners positive about learning and want to do more?

Areas for action

82 Providers have suggested that the following actions could be taken to try to further improve learners' attitudes towards learning.

- It is important to understand and share the reasons for the improved position of the sixth form colleges over the two years of the survey.
- Responding positively and effectively to learner feedback in the individual college context is a means of improving perceptions in future.
- Focusing on building individual confidence as well as an improved social experience of learning and college life will also increase satisfaction.
- Making sure that the views of particular groups are taken into account will also improve perceptions; addressing the needs of different age groups and ethnic groups will be part of this.

83 Importantly, promoting the benefits of learning to those members of the community not currently participating could include key messages about personal confidence and well being.

Buildings and Facilities

84 This section covers learner satisfaction with the facilities at their college, which they were asked to rate on a scale 1 to 10.

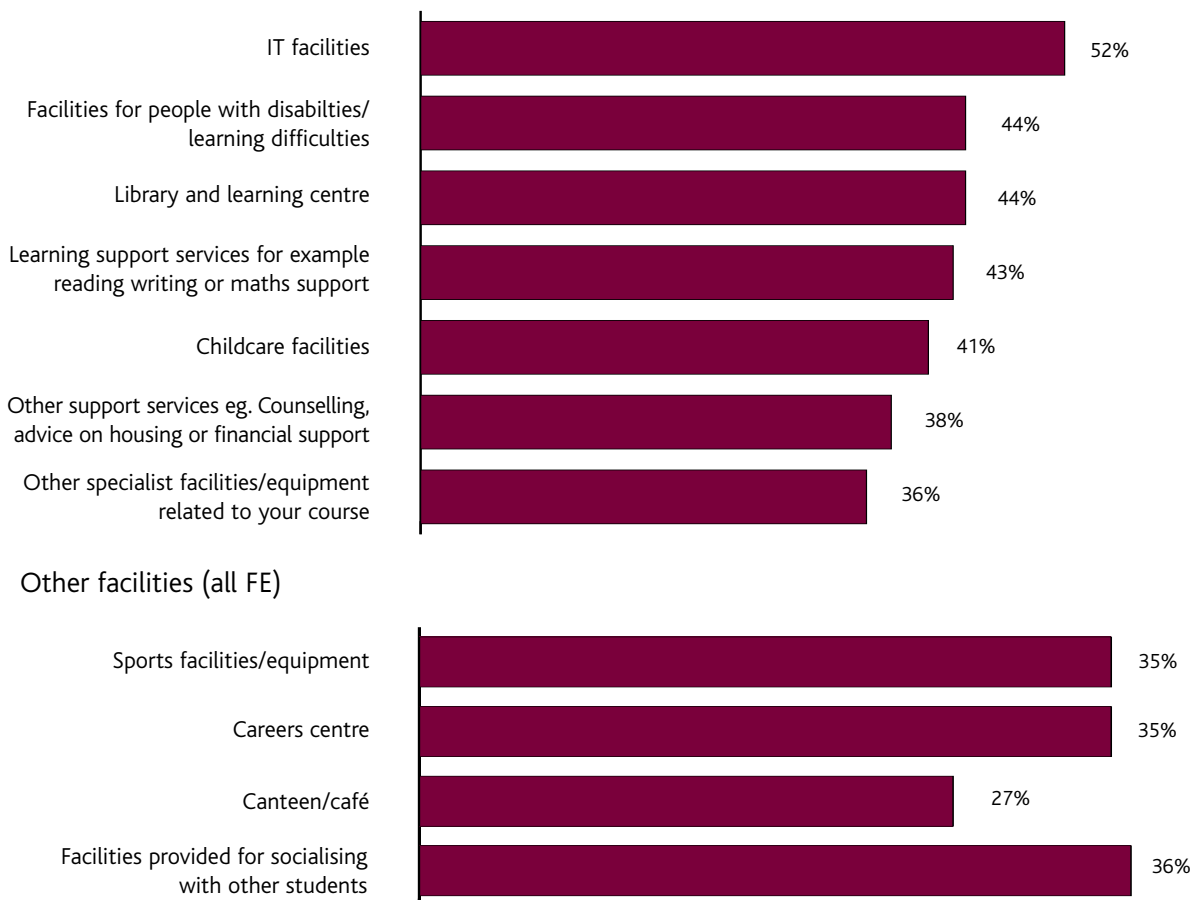
Key findings

Facilities are rated the same or higher than last year. Further education learners are most satisfied with IT facilities and equipment.

85 Facilities receiving the lowest scores were the canteen, café and facilities for socialising, with less than 30 per cent of learners giving them high scores. Learners at sixth form colleges gave higher scores to the library and learning centre than other areas than learners in other settings.

86 In 2002/03, facilities were rated much the same as, or slightly higher than, they were in 2001/02.

Figure 7: Proportions of learners who awarded top scores (9/10 or 10) for learning and other facilities, by provider type.



Base: All FE (19,947)

Key question

How can we improve facilities and services to reflect learners' needs?

Areas for action

87 There are a number of ways in which services could be improved.

- The canteen and facilities for socialising with other students have a strong impact on satisfaction but have lower ratings from learners.
- The small proportion giving high ratings to specialist facilities for courses also is a cause for concern.
- Colleges will want to establish priorities for improvement in their own local context, informed by the national learner survey. Some facilities may be offered in conjunction with other providers; for example, recreational ones.

Conclusions

88 This year's survey is the first time we have used focus groups to explore the story behind the figures. For the first time we have had the opportunity to discuss with teachers and learners ways of building on colleges' impressive successes.

89 The excellent news is that our survey finds that over 90 per cent of learners are satisfied with their whole learning experience. We have therefore turned our attention to how we can increase the proportion who are very or extremely satisfied by improving the experience for those who are only fairly satisfied. Our focus groups have identified aspects of pre-entry advice, teaching quality, support services and complaint procedures which are crucial to this process, and explored the potential for further improvements.

90 The proportion of learners getting a 'buzz' from learning has increased significantly since last year, as has the proportion of learners who are extremely satisfied with the quality of teaching they receive. The survey identifies important factors that motivate or demotivate students, and recommends methods of embedding good practice to continue the positive general trend. Colleges provide for over 3 million learners of all age groups and of very diverse backgrounds, many having had adverse experiences of formal learning before. The turnaround of negative attitudes to positive attitudes to learning created by students' experience in college is particularly impressive.

91 Learners and staff have provided us with some useful suggestions for how lesson time can be used more efficiently. For example, problems of disruptive and late students can be reduced by involving experienced staff in the planned management and control of disruptive groups or individuals. We should also recognise the contribution made by setting high expectations of learners that motivate them, and by the training of staff in dealing with disruptive behaviour.

92 An essential message is that good teaching is a key factor in determining students' satisfaction with their learning. Colleges have done well in providing effective teaching and management of learning for

many of the students in the survey. The task now is to improve the experience of learning for those students only fairly satisfied or dissatisfied with their programmes.

93 While the survey identifies an increase in learners experiencing difficulties, many of these factors are largely outside the control of colleges, for example, employment, health, family commitments or financial pressures. Colleges do, however, play an important role through advice and support services to help affected students to balance these problems with their studies, so that they can both stay on their course and succeed. Colleges may compare and contrast the national survey findings with their own learner surveys, perhaps utilising the findings here to develop prevention measures, as well as cure. The report suggests a number of approaches to the better identification of, and support for, learners experiencing difficulties.

94 Further good news is that over 9 out of 10 learners feel they have chosen the most suitable course. Moreover, the survey finds that the advice and information they receive before starting a course, along with ease in making an early change of course if needed, are crucial in determining students' overall satisfaction. To build on our successes, college staff have made a number of suggestions; for example, using local television programmes to help decide which courses to take and a 'course change day' early in the first term.

95 While there are continued improvements in retention, a minority of students still leave their courses early. Once again, some of the reasons for this are out of the colleges' control. However, our focus groups have suggested that the problem can be reduced further by better follow-up of early leavers and a managed 'open door' policy to encourage them back. Effective recording of learners' formative achievements can help keep students motivated.

96 The evidence from learners is of a college sector with much to be proud of. Colleges have increased the number of leavers in recent years, reaching out to previously excluded students. It is broadly representative of its local community and promotes

inclusion. Despite all their many challenges, colleges meet and exceed the expectations of most of their students. There is much still to be done but the many and varied students in colleges benefit from the skills, hard work, dedication and ingenuity of the community of staff who serve them well.

Enquiries and Key Publications

Highlights report and detailed findings 2002/03

97 The following documents covering the 2002/03 Learner Satisfaction Survey are also available:

National Learner Satisfaction Survey 2002/03: Highlights

National Learner Satisfaction Survey 2002/03: Technical Data

National Learner Satisfaction Survey Adult and Community Learning Providers Summary Report 2002/03

National Learner Satisfaction Survey Work-Based Learning Summary Report 2002/03

98 These are available at:
(www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Documents/SubjectListing/ImprovingQuality/QualityPerformanceandAchievement/LearnerSatisfaction/nationallearnersatisfactionssurveyful.l.htm).

Findings 2001/02

99 The *Learner Satisfaction Survey Findings 2001/02: Summary Report* and the *Learner Satisfaction Survey Findings 2001/02: Technical Report* are available at:
(www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Partners/Quality/default.htm).

Core methodology and questions

100 The LSC strongly encourages providers to adopt the core methodology and use it to benchmark their own institutions against the national picture. Guidance on the core methodology and the core questionnaire is available at:
(www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Partners/Quality/default.htm).

Feedback

101 We would welcome any comments you have on this report. Also, we are very interested in knowing more about how you are using the findings from the LSC's National Learner Satisfaction Survey to help strengthen your provision, and to help make sure a really high proportion of your learners are very or extremely satisfied with their experience.

102 If you would like further information on the National Learner Satisfaction Survey or want to leave comments or feedback please email
Learner.survey@lsc.gov.uk

Acknowledgments

Partner Organisation

NOP Research Group is the UK arm of NOP World, the ninth largest research agency in the world. In the UK, NOP employs around 600 staff and it is split into specialist divisions. The team working on the LSCs national learner satisfaction survey is in the division that specialises in social research and there are 20 researchers dedicated to this field. The team has relevant experience of both large-scale social research surveys and of carrying out customer satisfaction research.



Notes

Notes

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