

# The Learner Achievement Tracker

A report on the responses to consultation

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Between December 2008 and March 2009 Ofsted consulted on whether there should be continued use of the Learner Achievement Tracker value-added measure to assess the progress of students in school sixth forms and colleges. This report details the results of the consultation and recommends the next steps for Ofsted to take.

**Age group:** Post-16

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## Introduction

Between December 2008 and March 2009 Ofsted consulted on whether there should be continued and consistent use of the Learner Achievement Tracker value-added (LAT VA) measure to assess the progress of learners in school sixth forms and colleges. This report details the results of the consultation.

The measure has been included as part of the assessment of college performance for the last two years but is a relatively new addition to the school sixth-form performance and assessment (PANDA) report. The LAT VA is currently included on a pilot basis.

## Background to consultation

Inspections of both school sixth forms and colleges make use of extensive data on learners' success. For school sixth forms, a lot of the data are contained in the PANDA document. The data allow inspectors to formulate hypotheses and establish inspection trails. The datasets are constantly under review and since June 2008 have included LAT VA information that helps inspectors to identify the progress of learners on graded level 3 qualifications.

Although the original sixth-form PANDA included data on the attainment of learners, for some time it did not include a progress measure common to all settings. During inspection, analysis and judgement tended to rest on discussions with the institutions and to make reference to commercially produced value-added systems where available. Although widely used, these were not always readily available, were not universal, and inspectors had no guaranteed access to them.

The LAT VA measure is produced by the Learning and Skills Council and, with advice from Ofsted, has been refined over a period of time. It has been subject to rigorous scrutiny, both in terms of the validity of the statistical data it includes and other aspects such as presentation, consistency between institutions and courses, accuracy over time and applicability. It is the only universal measure of progress currently available for both school sixth forms and colleges. Unlike some of the commercial schemes, the LAT VA measure uses data obtained from the awarding bodies directly rather than from the institutions themselves. This ensures the integrity and accuracy of the data.

Ofsted recognises the need for consistency in inspection judgements between school sixth forms and colleges. Because the LAT VA measure sources data from awarding bodies, outputs can be produced for all providers offering graded level 3 provision. Statisticians in Ofsted have concluded that LAT VA outputs have a high level of correlation with commercial value-added schemes so that there is a consistency in the messages about students' progress. As part of the preparation for including the LAT VA measure in the school sixth-form PANDA in March 2008, Ofsted inspectors were provided with training in its use and interpretation. Since this period no concerns have been expressed by schools about its use on inspections. College

inspectors have been provided with training in the LAT VA over a number of years. In addition, a number of senior college managers have been instrumental in its development and refinement over recent years.

## The consultation methodology

Ofsted launched the consultation for 13 weeks between 8 December 2008 and 9 March 2009. This was slightly extended, to take account of some late responses by some organisations with an interest and expertise in the area.

The consultation took the form of an online questionnaire, with a hard copy sent out on request. Around 30 key stakeholders were specifically invited to respond via letter or email. The online questionnaire was available in two formats, one requiring a longer, more detailed response and a short, one question (agree or disagree) version. The full analysis of respondents is available in Annex 2. The short questionnaire included only one question that was identical to the first question in the long consultation. As a result there were 80 replies to question one but only 63 for questions 2–5.

The consultation was made publicly available to all interested groups and individuals on the Ofsted website.

## Response rates

The consultation generated 80 responses. These included 55 completed against the detailed questionnaire, 17 online shorter versions, which included only the first question of the longer version, and eight hard copy replies. Although relatively small numbers, this was a higher response rate than expected given the specialist and rather technical nature of the measure, and the fact that the college sector had previously been advised about piloting its use on inspection.

Thirty-eight responses were from general further education colleges and 17 were from sixth-form colleges. There were 18 replies from schools with sixth forms. The remainder were from professional organisations (two responses), or were completed anonymously (five responses).

The responses to the primary question about whether the inclusion of a common measure of progress should be used to support judgements about the achievement of students were:

Strongly agree	35
Agree	29
Neither agree nor disagree	4
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	2
No response indicated	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>

## Key findings

- Sixty-four of the 80 respondents agreed that a common measure of progress for schools and colleges should be used to support judgements about the achievement of students and retained as part of the sixth-form PANDA and college performance information. Of these, 52 respondents also agreed that it was appropriate to use measures of progress alongside pass and success rates as part of an inspection process.
- There was general agreement that when making judgements about progress, A levels should be seen as more significant than AS levels because some students on the latter qualification did not 'cash in' their results at the end of the academic year. Of the 63 responses, 34 agreed or strongly agreed that A levels should be considered more important than AS levels when judging progress, while 15 disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- Despite general agreement, 14 respondents expressed concerns about the style of presentation in the LAT VA, which they thought made analysis of the key messages more complex and time consuming. The lateness of the publication of data was also a concern, making it more difficult to conduct school or college analysis of achievement in a timely manner when compared to the commercial packages available. The later availability of the LAT VA measure is a consequence of using data from awarding bodies rather than institutions supplying non-validated data themselves, as is the case with alternatives such as the Advanced Level Performance System or Advanced Level Information System.
- Five respondents expressed the need for additional training to be made available for school and college staff and inspectors, given the technical nature of the LAT VA measure.
- Three respondents, while accepting the principle of the LAT VA measure, expressed the view that it had the potential to be misleading in some contexts, particularly where students entered the sixth form with extremes of high or low attainment in their GCSEs. These respondents, together with three others, made the point that sensitive interpretation of the data would be critical for inspection purposes.
- The National Learner Panel and National Union of Students welcomed the principle of the LAT VA in recognising and rewarding institutions that work with a diverse population of learners. They also added, however, that the LAT VA should not be used in isolation to measure whether a provider is 'adding value' but in conjunction with other, broader progress measures, such as achievement in lessons and the quality of students' work.

## Detailed findings

1. Sixty-four out of 80 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the inclusion of a common measure of progress, such as LAT VA, as part of the sixth-form PANDA or college performance information, should be continued and that it

forms a useful source of data for school and college analysis and evaluation and also for inspection. The precise breakdown for respondents in all formats is:

Strongly agree	35
Agree	29
Neither agree nor disagree	4
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	2
No response indicated	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>

2. Only five respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal, while a further four remained neutral. This group, representing different sectors, offered no reservations about the content, statistical reliability or consistency with other progress measures. Indeed, five made the point that the LAT VA, used alongside other progress measures, would strengthen the current system by ensuring that the inspection of school sixth forms and colleges would be conducted on a more level playing field than was the case previously.
3. Other comments included a view that the LAT VA measure had limited value because its scope is confined to graded level 3 qualifications. As a consequence, for example, it was less relevant in large, general further education colleges that offer much broader provision than graded level 3 courses because of the smaller proportion of learners included in coverage of the LAT VA measure. The use of the LAT VA alongside the post-16 contextualised value-added measure published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) was welcomed by five respondents, since the latter includes all level 3 qualifications, not just those that are graded.
4. Despite the positive overall response, those who did not agree with the production and inclusion of the LAT VA tended to offer some detailed objections that rested on the unsuitability of the LAT VA in some very specific contexts. One example came from three respondents in high-attaining selective schools. They felt that because their students entered the sixth form with very high levels of prior attainment, it was more difficult for them to demonstrate high levels of valued added. This was because their students would be predicted to achieve high grades at A level.
5. There were two main criticisms of the LAT VA in the text responses, even where agreement in principle was strong. Of those respondents in favour of the LAT VA, six suggested that the data could be presented in a more accessible way to facilitate analysis and evaluation by individual schools and colleges.
6. The other critical comment related to the production and availability of the data. The view was that November is too late in the academic year for schools or colleges to use the data in their annual review of the previous academic year.

7. Five replies suggested that the LAT VA was not needed as a further progress measure. This was because a range of value-added products already existed, including the new post-16 Contextualised Value Added measure, recently devised by the DCSF, as well as other commercial schemes. The view was that the LAT VA might duplicate information that was already available in other formats.
8. Three of the replies indicated that although the LAT VA was helpful and appropriate as an indicator of students' progress it would generate a need for additional training in how to interpret it. This, together with some expressed reservations that the data were complex and open to potential misinterpretation, strongly suggests a need to make such training more widely available. Three respondents also made reference to this in relation to the specific training of inspectors.

## **The way forward and recommendations**

9. Given the extent of support in principle for such a measure, the following four recommendations are being made:
  - Sixth-form PANDA and college performance reports should continue to include the LAT VA measure, which will complete its pilot phase at the end of the 2008/09 academic year. As in the pilots, the measure should be used on inspections to suggest hypotheses and inspection trails. It should also be used in conjunction with any other value-added measures available.
  - Ofsted should discuss with the Learning and Skills Council improvements to the presentation of the LAT VA data in order to make the outputs more easily understood by a wider audience. The timeliness of the release of LAT VA data should also be discussed, with the aim of making them available earlier in the academic year if possible.
  - Further training in the interpretation of the LAT VA should be made available to all inspectors involved with sixth forms, including additional inspectors sourced from regional inspection service providers. This training should encompass the views expressed by those responding to the consultation, for example, the additional weighting that should be given to progress at A level compared to AS level.
  - Guidance to all inspectors should continue to emphasise that judgements about learners' progress will not rely solely on data; judgements will take into account their achievement in lessons and the standard of their work, as well as their views about the progress they are making in their studies.



## Annex 1: The analysis of particular question responses

### Question 1

**Do you agree that a common measure of progress for schools and colleges should be used to support judgements about the achievement of students in graded advanced (level 3) qualifications?**

Strongly agree	35
Agree	29
Neutral	4
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	2
No response	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>

Although 64 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, in six replies there were several qualifying remarks attached to the agreement. These included the comment that it was less appropriate in the context of high-attaining settings and, although a common measure was desirable, the LAT VA was not as good a product as some of the commercial schemes, which, for example, offered comprehensive telephone support. Those who held this view tended to express satisfaction with the commercially available and familiar packages already in use.

### Question 2

**Do you agree with using measures of progress (final grade compared to grades on entry), as well as pass and success rates, in reaching judgements about achievement and standards?**

Strongly agree	29
Agree	23
Neutral	1
Disagree	1
Strongly disagree	2
No response	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>

Fifty-two respondents were very supportive of using measures such as LAT VA to make judgements about progress alongside standards. Few additional comments were made in response to this question, but one made the point that retention rates are an important consideration to be used alongside value-added measures that focus on linking pass rates to prior attainment.

### Question 3

**Do you agree that the A level should be seen as more important than the AS level in judging progress? Please give your reasons for your response.**

Strongly agree	19
Agree	15
Neutral	6
Disagree	8
Strongly disagree	7
No response	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>

Thirty-four responses were positive and three were also linked to the practical issue that some candidates do not 'cash in' their AS results at the end of the academic year, making overall judgements about progress less reliable. The seven who strongly disagreed offered some compelling reasons as to why they opposed the greater emphasis on A levels. The main reason articulated was that AS levels should be treated as significant in themselves and progress measures should include students who do not go on to complete an A level. This could include students who take additional AS levels for various reasons, including in their A level year. Respondents felt that institutions that had inclusive policies and encouraged participation by students who may have 'failed' at a previous institution potentially could be penalised in this regard unless AS and A level data were given similar weighting. Further education college responses were especially concerned about this.

### Question 4

**Do you agree that the presentation of LAT VA summary data in the sixth-form PANDA and college value-added update is clear, helpful and easily understood? If you disagree, how could the presentation be improved?**

Strongly agree	2
Agree	23
Neutral	12
Disagree	14
Strongly disagree	6
No response	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>

This question generated the most negative set of results. Fewer than half agreed or strongly agreed with the presentation and most were either neutral or disagreed that the current format was useful. Those who disagreed were uneasy about the complicated presentation which meant that the data could possibly be misinterpreted. The currently available commercial packages were judged easier to use and there were some practical problems with the LAT VA, such as the difficulty

of printing complex data. The main concern was that an over-complicated methodology might make interpretation more difficult.

### Question 5

**Do you agree that the value-added data in the sixth-form PANDA and college valued-added update, and other value-added measures where available, should support the analysis of achievement for quality improvement in your own institution? If you disagree, please state your reasons.**

Strongly agree	28
Agree	17
Neutral	4
Disagree	2
Strongly disagree	4
No response	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>

The respondents agreed in principle with the notion that this would support self-evaluation or self-assessment but three expressed reservations that the data might not be available early enough in the academic year to allow this to take place in a timely manner.

### Question 6

**Do you have any additional comments about the use of the LAT VA measure in the sixth-form PANDA and college value-added update, including how it can be further developed?**

Comments were added by 51 respondents. These included six replies that were critical about the timing of the release of LAT VA data. These commonly said that to be useful for school and college evaluation, an earlier release would be necessary. The late issue limited its usefulness as an evaluative tool for providers, whatever the benefits to inspectors.

Interestingly, five respondents, having strongly agreed with the principle of a common value-added measure, were critical of the technical calculation behind the LAT VA and therefore expressed reservations. They argued that the LAT VA, although desirable as a principle, had some limitations in certain contexts. The contexts mentioned were: high-attaining school sixth forms; and inclusive general further education colleges, where some students had previously left or 'failed' elsewhere and where a broad course offer was available beyond graded level 3 qualifications.

### Question 7: Short questionnaire option

**Do you agree that it is important for schools with sixth forms and colleges to be judged on how well they contribute to students' progress by comparing students' GCSE or equivalent grades with those received at the end of their advanced courses?**

Seventeen replies were received for this question.

The responses were:

Strongly agree	6
Agree	8
Neutral	1
Disagree	1
Strongly disagree	0
No response	1

## Annex 2

### Learner Achievement Tracker consultation 2009: respondent analysis

Total number of respondents – 80

Please note – not all replies add to 80 as some boxes were left blank.

I found the consultation information clear and easy to understand	Total
Agree	57
Disagree	4
Neither agree nor disagree	10
(blank)	9
Grand total	71

I had enough information about the consultation topic	Total
Agree	60
Disagree	4
Neither agree nor disagree	7
(blank)	9
Grand total	71

I would take part in a future Ofsted consultation	Total
Agree	56
Disagree	1
Don't know	3
Neither agree nor disagree	9
(blank)	11
Grand total	69

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?	Total
N/A	19
No	54
Yes	4
(blank)	3
Grand total	77

Gender	Total
Female	19
Male	44
Transgender	3
(blank)	14
Grand total	66

Age of respondents	Total
25–34	3
35–44	23
45–54	26
55–64	10
65+	1
Under 14 (blank)	1
Grand total	64

Ethnic origin (a) How would you describe your national group?	Total
British or Mixed British	26
English	31
Irish	1
Scottish	2
Welsh	2
(blank)	18
Grand total	62

(b) How would you describe your ethnic group?	Total
Asian – Pakistani	1
Black – any other Black background	1
Chinese – any Chinese background	2
White – any White background	59
(blank)	17
Grand total	63

Sexual orientation	Total
Bisexual	1
Gay	1
Heterosexual	52
(blank)	26
Grand total	54

Religion/belief	Total
Buddhist	1
Christian	32
Hindu	1
Jewish	3
None	15
Other	2
(blank)	26
Grand total	54

I represent:	Total
a general further education college	25
a local authority	1
a school with a sixth-form consortium	4
a school with a sixth form that is not part of a consortium	12
a sixth-form college	16
a tertiary college	4
another type of organisation (please specify in the box below)	4
(blank)	14
Grand total	66

Are you responding on behalf of an organisation?	Total
No	12
Yes – please complete Section 1	61
(blank)	7
Grand total	73