

‘SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION FOR ALL’ WIDENING ADULT PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

MAIN MESSAGES FROM THE CONSULTATION

INTRODUCTION

1 This report summarises the responses received during consultation on ‘Successful Participation for All’, the proposed National Strategy for Widening Adult Participation. It does not attempt to provide an exhaustive guide to the consultation exercise, but to highlight the main points raised and give a flavour of stakeholders’ reactions to the proposals set out in the consultation Strategy.

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

2 The consultation period covered 12 weeks, from the launch of the Strategy on 12 February 2003 to the deadline for responses on 9 May 2003. During that period 10,000 Strategy documents were issued to a wide range of stakeholders affected by, or having an interest in, widening adult participation.

3 Written responses were invited via the questionnaire contained in the document. This asked eight questions relating to motivating learners, identifying barriers to participation and on a range of proposed actions.

4 In addition to the written responses, four consultation events were held during April 2003. Two of these were held for local LSC staff, their views being sought on how they can best develop and implement the finally agreed Strategy.

5 The two other events were ‘expert advice ‘ seminars involving invited audiences of key stakeholders. These provided an opportunity for the LSC to listen to and understand their views on the Strategy and its plans for implementation.

WRITTEN RESPONSES

6 Just over 200 written responses were received. Many of these were very detailed and comprehensive. Pleasingly, responses were received from the full range of stakeholders listed in the document. The Annex to this report gives a breakdown of the organisations that responded to the consultation.

SUPPORT FOR THE STRATEGY

7 There was strong support for the National Strategy. The scope and general thrust of the document were welcomed by the great majority of respondents as were many of the proposed actions. The basis of the assumptions made, the key questions surrounding them and the implicit possible solutions were generally thought to be the right ones.

“The Strategy is a complex document underlying the complexity of the challenge facing educationalists as we seek to widen access across the education system.”

Higher Education Institution

“It places a proper emphasis on the key issues that we all need to address to ensure successful participation and learning for adults.”

FE College

“We welcome this consultation document as a significant statement of intent by the LSC – the most important contribution to this issue since the Helena Kennedy report of 1997.”

Local Authority

8 Some respondents though were unsure how the laudable aims of the document could be met in the context of recent perceptions that there is to be no LSC funded growth in adult education (basic skills excepted). A recurring comment concerned possible tensions between the economic skills and social cohesion agendas.

9 Responses included a lot of feedback about people’s concerns and how they thought the Strategy might be improved. These contained though, a range of contradictory and conflicting views – highlighting just how challenging it is to produce a Strategy that is acceptable to all.

CONSULTATION ISSUE 1: MOTIVATING LEARNERS

10 We asked stakeholders to comment on the extent to which the Strategy identifies the key motivating factors for widening adult participation.

11 Many respondents felt that the identified life contexts do provide the motivation to stimulate learning and providers need to offer provision with these in mind. But as well as the quoted motivators, respondents pointed out that we also need to consider intrinsic motivators such as developing self esteem, confidence and improved employability. Other motivators include significant change of status (e.g. getting separated or divorced), health issues/concerns, pursuing hobbies and joining like-minded groups of individual as well as social interaction, combating isolation, and enjoyment and fun.

12 Some respondents also stressed that achievement has a significant impact on motivation. Learners, particularly those engaging at entry level need to acquire some form of tangible achievement rapidly, illustrating the need for careful planning to ensure realistic learning aims.

13 Others stressed that the number of learners in a class (learner/tutor ratio) is a motivating factor and one that has significant funding issues associated with it. Related comment included the need to ensure a non-threatening, comfortable, friendly and supportive learning environment.

14 Several respondents thought the significant potential contribution made by employers to motivating adults who are in work should be emphasised very strongly. If there is no incentive given to employees to further their skills and learning development, then adult participation in learning will be stunted.

15 Respondents also pointed out several omissions from this section. The full range of adult experiences had not quite been explored e.g. the motivation of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. The Strategy as currently defined does not place value on the potential role of older learners. It misses out the critical role that broadcast media can have in encouraging learning and no mention is made of the significant contribution that public libraries have in providing entry points to learning in non-educational settings.

16 On the wider front, a number of respondents pointed out that until some people can stop worrying about their most basic needs e.g. safe streets, improved housing, learning will never be a priority. This illustrates the importance of working with other agencies.

17 Finally, a recurring theme mentioned by many through several sections of the Strategy was the criticality of the Tomlinson model on Inclusive Learning. Putting the learner first is the key.

“People are attracted by learning which is characterised to be of interest and which they perceive they can do”.

Specialist College

“It is about finding your way into the community workplace, gaining trust, offering something that is wanted and delivery at a place and time suitable to the potential learners”.

FE College

“We are unsure if any of the motivating factors is more significant than others. Different factors will operate in different ways for different people”.

Trade Union

CONSULTATION ISSUE 2: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

18 We asked stakeholders to comment on the extent to which the Strategy identifies the key barriers to widening adult participation.

19 Most respondents identified positively with the attitudinal, practical and structural barriers stated in the document and passed comment on the ones they thought most important. Some missing barriers were quoted, in particular rural isolation, lack of transport, lack of study facilities at home and lack of support from a partner or spouse.

20 Other missing barriers involved aspects of Equality and Diversity e.g. an absence of gender balance in classes, a lack of role models for ethnic minority

participants. This reinforces the need to ensure our Widening Participation and Equality and Diversity Strategies are linked and complementary.

21 Over-burdening bureaucracy can be a barrier emphasising the need for a balance between accountability and interference.

22 In commenting on the quoted barriers, many respondents stressed the recurring issue of information, which is available not being user friendly and the lack of access to consistently available and affordable Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG).

23 But in relation to this section, the majority of respondents cited financial constraints as the most significant barrier to widening participation. Many quoted real difficulties for potential learners when negotiating the benefit regulations and it was striking just how many respondents made reference to the major difficulties experienced by those having to find and pay for childcare. This latter barrier was felt by several to be so critical that a wider Government plan is needed to improve matters.

“Key barriers fully explored. Access in particular in terms of location and care commitments is noticeable in this region.”

FE College

“A key area, which has to be rectified, is the relationship between the benefits and educational systems. They do not sit well together and clear, accurate advice has to be available to people”.

Specialist College

CONSULTATION ISSUE 3: PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

24 We asked stakeholders to consider whether the actions proposed were appropriate and adequate and to suggest any further areas for action.

25 The majority of respondents supported the emphasis on a partnership approach to widening participation. But caveats were expressed. The Strategy must recognise the long lead-in time required to establish effective partnerships and that partnership working requires time and support. The proposed actions were generally felt to be vague and superficial and contained too much jargon.

26 A large number of respondents felt there was not sufficient emphasis on the key role of employers. Without employers fully involved, the Strategy is less likely to be successful. But they will need persuasive arguments to engage in partnership working. Some Business Link and Employer Support organisations suggested that given limited resources, focusing these on increasing the skills of those in employment would seem to be the most effective and efficient method of widening participation.

27 An equally large number of respondents felt there was not sufficient focus on, and importance attached to, the community and voluntary sectors. Some felt the impression could be gained on reading the Strategy that only the ‘powerful

players' (HEIs, FE, LAs) are worth bothering with as change agents. Conversely several colleges pointed out that little recognition is given of the work performed by colleges within community settings.

28 Many (not just the partnerships themselves) pointed out that Local Learning Partnerships are key, influential players committed to widening participation.

29 Large numbers of respondents stressed the necessity for multi-agency partnerships to occur so resources and expertise can be drawn together. It is critically important also that better connections are made between Government Departments so that education and learning initiatives from one Department are not undermined by the actions of another.

30 The HEIs expressed strong support for the proposal to identify 'complementary plans and approaches' between LSC and HEFCE to include a broad provision of HE'.

31 Finally, there were several respondents who pointed out that faith communities are not explicitly included in the list of partners and also acknowledged as significant adult and community learning providers.

"For the majority of adults, particularly in terms of full (or very near full) employment, it is the workplace that provides the context for learning and the main source of social interaction."

Employer Association

"Collaboration is not fully exploited, and there are significant barriers which work against widening adult participation: the plethora of local 'partnerships' with overlapping remits relating to learning, the focus of P4P on 18-30 year olds only, the inconsistency and inaccessibility of data for planning purposes at the local level."

Higher Education Institution

"Provision is currently not mapped or co-ordinated by any one planning organisation and the Strategic Area Review process provides an opportunity for partnerships to be properly planned."

FE College

CONSULTATION ISSUE 4: APPROPRIATE PROVISION

32 We asked stakeholders to consider whether the actions proposed were appropriate and adequate and to suggest any further areas for action.

33 There was strong support for the proposals suggested. The proposal to conduct a consultation on the application of credits was universally supported, it being viewed as a crucial ingredient for widening participation with the time being right for action on this.

34 Greater flexibility in the learning offered through modularisation and unitised provision needs to occur with many respondents demanding the development of a more flexible National Qualification Framework (NQF), which articulates learning outside the NQF with qualifications within the NQF.

35 A caveat to developing a comprehensive curriculum offer around other provision and NQF came from some voluntary and community groups who pointed out that they work in a broad range of contexts (health, environment, regeneration). Learning may be an outcome but it may not be the primary purpose of the activity. It can be dangerous therefore to assume that a comprehensive curriculum model can always be applied.

36 It is important not to lose sight of the value of non-accredited learning as a starting point for new learners. 'Other provision' is seen as vital to enhance less formal, non-accredited first rung learning opportunities.

37 Many respondents wanted to stress that one first rung experience for many learners is not enough. Progression provision needs to take into account that first rung may need to be supplemented by second, third etc rung before accredited progression can be achieved.

38 There was clear acceptance and support for ensuring open and distance learning, e learning and blended learning are fully embraced across all learning sectors. Innovative approaches to learning can break down barriers. Several respondents pointed out that e-learning in itself is not a panacea, there needs to be effective individual support.

39 Many respondents mentioned ALI and OFSTED and their needing to take account of the issues associated with widening participation. Inspections and LSC provider reviews should be sympathetic towards the difficulties colleges and other providers must address through their widening participation strategies.

40 A significant majority of respondents feel that well conducted Bite Size campaigns really can widen adult participation.

41 On the proposals to develop a national marketing and communication strategy to promote education and training across the full range of providers, several respondents thought the two strand approach suggested where an inclusive approach is supported by targeted campaigns at specific groups and markets is much needed.

"Adults are not generally reluctant learners but they are often reluctant examinees. It is assessment/tests/exams that they fear and it is 'other provision' that offers the 'safe' approach."

FE College

"It is important to realise that people do not follow neat ladders of progression; people move around the climbing frame of provision before they find a route."

Learning Partnership

“It may be worth considering whether the terminology of a ‘curriculum’, while it may work for young people during a formative period of their lives, is perhaps too all-embracing a concept to work for adults.”

National Agency – Awarding Body

CONSULTATION ISSUE 5: TARGETS AND RESEARCH

42 We asked stakeholders to consider whether the actions proposed were appropriate and adequate and to suggest any further areas for action.

43 Several respondents felt it was encouraging that research is being discussed in the Strategy alongside target setting.

44 But many respondents felt that much research on widening participation (particularly at national level) has already been conducted and this needs to be, as proposed in the document, synthesised and analysed before any more commissioning occurs. There is, even then, a danger of ‘paralysis by analysis’.

45 Many respondents also felt that research should be locally directed and owned. Also funding action research projects would be a positive move allowing providers to take some risks in the quest for better identifying good practice in widening participation.

46 On target setting, there was virtually an equal split between respondents who wanted the LSC to set a national target for widening adult participation and those who were opposed to one. Supporters of national targets argued they are important levers in assessing the impact and effectiveness of the Strategy. Opponents argued that the setting of targets are divisive and can lead to a race to achieve quantity at the expense of the quality of the learner’s experience.

47 But a majority of respondents welcomed proposals for the setting of targets at local level. These bottom-up built targets, locally directed and owned, can take account of the great variance in LSC areas as to which groups should be targeted.

48 A few respondents pointed out that a missing element in the Strategy in this section is the recognition that there should be some co-ordination of targets at a local level between the LSC and other bodies e.g. Local Strategic Partnerships. This would present an opportunity for a more coherent, joined-up approach to skills, social cohesion and neighbourhood renewal in a particular locality.

“The findings of many research projects seem by now to constitute common sense knowledge.devolve a portion of the funding allocated to such types of research to the immediate implementation/application of the recommendations coming out of the findings”.

FE College

“More emphasis should be placed on commissioning new research, particularly in the area of the needs of different minority ethnic groups, disabled students and those affected by long term poverty.”

National Agency – Continuing Education

CONSULTATION ISSUE 6: EQUALITY AND ACCESS

49 We asked stakeholders to consider whether the actions proposed were appropriate and adequate and to suggest any further areas for action.

50 Several respondents pointed out that Equality and Access is the theme that runs across all aspects of the Strategy. Allied to this was a strong insistence that the LSC’s Widening Adult Participation Strategy, Equality and Diversity Strategy and Quality and Improvement Strategy need to all be mutually supportive and complementary.

51 There was very strong support for the emphasis on, and importance of IAG and the intention to develop an integrated national IAG service. Indeed many respondents felt that IAG was not given enough weight in the document and the IAG theme, both in terms of the programme and of IAG in general terms, needs to be more explicit throughout the Strategy. Although its current application is sporadic, effective IAG is a fundamental component of widening adult participation.

52 The proposal to develop a quality improvement and development strand for providers to develop good practice in widening adult participation was welcomed and supported by all those who made reference to it in their response.

54 The suggestion in this section of the Strategy that in order to stimulate growth and widen participation we might wish to target any proposed development programmes on those providers with previous successful experience and capacity, was picked up by several respondents. 50% of those who did supported the suggestion, 50% did not; unsurprisingly supporters tended to be from larger organisations with proven experience in engaging disadvantaged learners.

“The promotion of Equality and Diversity should be implicit within all widening participation activity.”

Specialist College

CONSULTATION ISSUE 7: FUNDING

55 We asked stakeholders to consider whether the actions proposed were appropriate and adequate and to suggest any further areas for action.

56 Virtually all respondents expressed views on funding issues either in philosophical policy terms, or commenting on the Strategy proposals, or both. Several respondents stated that funding is probably the most single important driver of policy and practice by providers - often resulting in perverse and unintended consequences. Several thought the current and proposed funding models might be adequate but they are fundamentally inappropriate.

57 A number of respondents were concerned that the Strategy proposals will not encourage accessible funding for voluntary and community providers who cannot contract directly. Others pointed out there is a difference between the disadvantaged and disengaged and funding models ought to reflect this.

58 Procedures for claiming funding, several respondents felt, need to be appropriate for all learners. Building on comments made under the 'Appropriate Provision' section, some respondents felt that the LSC should allow, and fund, progression routes across the same or lower NVQ levels for adults wishing to obtain breadth in their learning, rather than hierarchical progression. Support funding for provision outside of the NQF was also felt to be essential.

59 A large number of respondents felt that the use of postcodes as a proxy for educational disadvantage is unfair. It is too broad brush and crude a measure of deprivation. Prior educational attainment is better, if not as tidy.

60 Many respondents picked up on the paragraph in this section concerning the group of learners who are not in receipt of benefits but are on limited incomes not being as well supported as other groups, suggesting something be done about this.

61 Several respondents made reference to Individual Learning Accounts suggesting that the financial support provided through them can widen participation and urging the LSC and others to investigate whether some successor scheme could be developed.

62 Other respondents repeated what had been stated in the 'Barriers to Learning' section concerning the cost of childcare being consistently underestimated.

63 Finally, many respondents pleaded for continuity of funding. Starting and stopping provision and expending energy on identifying new funding is the main reason for the 'fragility' of much voluntary provision.

"Funding proposals should recognise the very real costs associated with building the infrastructure for inclusive learning and co-ordinating partnership working."

Local Learning and Skills Council

“Support funding is only available following successful engagement (and retention) of students. Resourcing the costs of initial engagement and take-up needs to be considered.”

Community Based Provider

CONSULTATION ISSUE 8: PRIORITIES/OTHER COMMENTS

64 We asked stakeholders to consider whether any of the proposed actions had a higher priority than others and for any other comments.

65 Helena Kennedy said it and the majority of respondents agreed – ‘Funding’ is the most important lever for change. It links to all the other actions.

66 ‘Appropriate Provision’ and ‘Partnership Approach’ were considered the next two priorities and vital to widening participation. But several respondents thought ‘Motivating Learners’ is key. Many widening participation approaches have failed through the use of the deficit model amongst learners who already lack confidence in themselves.

67 But a significant number of respondents stressed that the Strategy is a coherent whole and prioritising one set of actions without accompanying action in the other areas will not lead to the progress required.

68 Further areas for action, or other important issues were finally highlighted by many respondents. In this consultation summary, only those actions, or issues, each eliciting more than five responses are listed.

69 More attention should be given to the dissemination of good practice at local or sector level.

70 We must ensure providers are not penalised for trying new innovative widening participation initiatives which ‘fail’.

71 The Strategy addresses comprehensively the demand side of widening participation but more work needs to be done to improve the supply side - the capacity to grow the delivery sectors.

72 A real welcome was expressed for the Strategy’s recognition that successful widening participation often requires small groups of learners, flexible approaches and innovative methods.

73 Establishing appropriate strategic employment sector partnerships is an important action for the LSC.

74 A re-statement that quality Information, Advice and Guidance is one of the most vital ingredients of a successful widening adult participation Strategy.

75 The final Strategy needs to show greater awareness of other Government policies e.g. health issues, skills development, community cohesion, neighbourhood renewal.

76 There is a dichotomy between widening participation in relation to skills acquisition/employment focussed learning compared to community focussed/social inclusion aspects.

77 Widening adult participation takes time – respondents would hope to see agreed activities funded and supported over a long period.

“Difficult to say which is most important. Possibly the issue of funding is paramount, followed by partnership and the need to put competition amongst providers aside, so that learners really do become central.”

LEA Adult Education Institution

“Winning hearts and minds will not be done only – or even mainly – by the LSC and providers, but by the enthusiasm new adult learners convey to their friends, families and contacts.”

Employer Support Agency

THE CONSULTATION EVENTS

a) Seminars for local LSCs

78 Representatives from around thirty local LSCs attended the two consultation seminars. Following discussions on the background to the Strategy and how widening adult participation fits with other aspects of the LSC agenda, participants provided views and comments on the following three questions:-

- How do we ensure effective collaboration with other stakeholders – providers, voluntary sector, employers, other government departments?
- What priority actions does local intelligence suggest will have the greatest impact?
- How can the National Strategy assist/enhance local initiatives?

79 A large number of helpful comments and views were made. The following are just some of the main points expressed and on which there was general consensus:

- Successful buy-into and implementation of the Strategy demands a real cultural change
- Must have an integrated approach with a variety of partners – integrated local partnerships at neighbourhood level
- There is a dichotomy, indeed a tension, between the community and skills agendas

- Need different Strategies and approaches in different areas. Final guidance and recommendations should be light touch and not prescriptive
- Strong support for a credit framework and the introduction of Unique Learner Numbers
- Vital to recognise, encourage and fund 'Other Provision'
- Future research needs to be at both national and local level – but don't keep researching the same learners and contexts time and time again
- Introduce mechanisms to engage new learners and prevent blocks from 'recycled learners'
- Need to be realistic as to what can be achieved with the current levels of funding.

b) 'Expert Advice' Seminars

80 The hundred delegates that attended the two consultation seminars represented a wide range of organisations and groupings including all types of providers, community and voluntary groups, local authorities, employer support agencies, strategic partnerships, government departments and national agencies. They considered the following three questions:

- Success – how can it be ensured and how can it be measured?
- Should the LSC focus on specific groups or learning contexts – if so, which?
- How can the LSC ensure collaboration with key stakeholders on implementation?

81 Again, many helpful comments were made which has informed the final Strategy. The following are just some of the concerns and views expressed:

- Need to dispel perceptions that the Strategy is 'bolt on'
- The Strategy needs a long term vision – needs to resist pressure to produce instant results that are counterproductive to the longer term vision
- Need an injection of realism – there are no unlimited funds for adult growth – need therefore to identify priorities
- Differential patterns of participation need to be understood and allowed. Need qualitative measures of success e.g. health, happiness, contentment as well as harder measures, e.g. attainment, retention

- Traditional definitions of progression are not suitable – it is unlikely to be linear or hierarchical – but it is still progression for the learner
- All learning must be valued and recognised – not just that which leads to a formal qualification
- Tension between the Centres of Vocational Excellence (COVE) Strategy – urging colleges and companies to specialise and widening participation (WP) Could we have WP COVES?
- The LSC must ensure providers produce a widening participation approach, targeting hard to reach learners – these learners agreed between the provider and the local LSC following identification through the Strategic Area Review (StAR) process
- Strong support for the further development of Equality and Diversity Impact measures (EDIMs)
- Active partnerships are key to being able to provide a variety of learning contexts. Do not assume the partnerships currently in place are suitable – the best ones act as a catalyst for multi-agency working to take place.

MJB/VG 19.06.03

ANNEX: SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION FOR ALL: WIDENING ADULT PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

Breakdown of Consultation Responses

<i>Stakeholder Category</i>	<i>Percentage of responses received</i>
Providers	56
<i>(FE Colleges</i>	<i>30%</i>
<i>LEA Adult Education</i>	
<i>Institutions</i>	<i>9%</i>
<i>Universities</i>	<i>5%</i>
<i>Voluntary Sector/</i>	
<i>Community Based</i>	<i>5%</i>
<i>Specialist College</i>	<i>4%</i>
<i>Private Sector</i>	<i>3%</i>
Individual Learners	3
Community Groups	4
Employers/Employer Support Agencies	2.5
Regional Development Agencies	1
LEAs/Local Authorities	7.5
Job Centre Plus	0.5
Connexions Partnerships	1
Learning Partnerships	5.5
Information, Advice and Guidance Partnerships	2.5
Trade Unions/Employer Associations	2
Local Learning and Skills Councils	4.5
National Organisations and Agencies	10
<i>(including NIACE, LSDA, Association of Colleges, Basic Skills Agency, NHSU, National Extension College, NOCN, QCA, Ufi/learndirect, Campaign for Learning, City and Guilds, Princes Trust, The Guidance Council, Foyer Federation, Pre-Schools Learning Alliance, Salvation Army, Ecumenical Agency, Council for Environmental Education, Open and Distance Learning Quality Council).</i>	