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Framework for Excellence: Strategies to Increase the Accessibility of Gathering Learners' Views

November 2008

Of interest to everyone in the learning and
skills sector

Strategies to Increase the Accessibility of the Gathering of Learner Views Within the Framework for Excellence

Contents

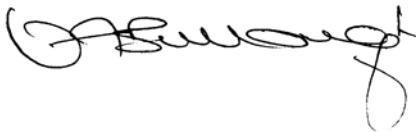
Foreword

Executive Summary	1
Section 1: Introduction and Methodology	6
Section 2: Background Literature Search	8
Section 3: Examples of Effective Practice from Provider Visits	16
3.1 Introduction	16
3.2 Overall Approaches to Gathering Learner Views	16
3.3 Specific Arrangements to Gather the Views of Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities	18
Section 4: Summary of Issues and Actions for the Learner Views Survey in Version 1	23

Foreword

The LSC welcomes the findings of this research, which outlines strategies to increase the accessibility of gathering Learner Views within the Framework for Excellence. The LSC is implementing many of the report's recommendations in 2008/09.

This is the first stage in the LSC's journey of ensuring accessibility to the survey for all learners. We are working with the Association of National Specialist Colleges (Natspec) to carry out further work on improving accessibility through assisted support and assistive technology.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'V. Bullough', written in a cursive style.

Verity Bullough

National Director of Funding, Planning and Performance
and

Senior Responsible Officer, Framework for Excellence

Executive Summary

- This research was commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and undertaken by RCU Limited.
- The aim of the research was to provide evidence to inform development of the Responsiveness to Learners key performance area (KPA) within the Framework for Excellence (the Framework) and in particular the Learner Views Performance Indicator (PI)¹.
- The LSC is gathering evidence for the Learner Views PI in 2008/09 through a survey of learners undertaking priority provision, including learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. During the Framework for Excellence Pilot (2007/08), the LSC took a number of steps to increase the accessibility of the Learner Views survey, but it recognised that further development was required to make the process fully accessible.
- Further steps to increase accessibility have been made in the design of the Learner Views survey for Version 1 of the Framework for Excellence (2008/09) although more development work is planned. The LSC has commissioned two pieces of research to inform that development, of which this is the first. This document reports on the outcomes and actions arising from an investigation of current practice in the sector relating to gathering the views of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Natspec is carrying out the second piece of research, which has already investigated the role of learner support in terms of assistive technologies and protocols and guidance. By spring 2009, the research into non-language survey methods, to ensure that the Learner Views survey is accessible, will also be complete.
- This piece of research was informed by a short literature scan to investigate discussion of relevant issues in a range of relevant materials, including Ofsted publications, a range of linked Government department websites and the websites of relevant statutory and voluntary bodies.
- Prior to the introduction of the Framework for Excellence, the LSC commissioned and published a national survey of the approaches that providers used to gather and use of learners' views in LSC-funded provision.
- This previous survey helped to inform the current research project, which was also informed by research visits to 15 providers with high concentrations of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Typically, the providers used a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence of learners' views. Most also used representative structures and

¹ For more details of the Framework for Excellence and the Responsiveness to Learners KPA please refer to <http://ffe.lsc.gov.uk>.

providers noted that learners with learning difficulties and disabilities appeared to value representative structures more highly than other learners.

- Providers that had been involved in the Framework for Excellence Pilot gave direct feedback on their experiences. Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were felt to have placed particular value on the fact that they were being given the opportunity to contribute to a national survey. However, providers drew attention to a number of aspects of the Pilot approach that had reduced accessibility. In particular, the language used in the Pilot questionnaire was felt to be too inaccessible because it demanded a high reading age. Attempts to use Braille and audio versions of the questionnaire had encountered some problems, for example the Braille questionnaire provided was printed in two-sided Braille which was harder to read than one-sided Braille.
- Some of the providers had well-developed systems to ensure the participation of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in representative structures. There were also effective arrangements in place in many of the providers to ensure that learners could contribute their views to learner surveys even where they had restricted cognitive or communication levels. Some of the most effective approaches revolved around embedding the survey concepts in the curriculum and advance preparation for major surveys.
- There are likely to be particular problems in obtaining effective feedback from learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in community-based provision. This is because the infrastructure to support the learner, such as having a spare room to allow the learner to give private feedback, is generally not available.
- The group of providers visited as part of this research were using a wide range of adaptive technology and software programmes to gather learners' views. Natspec has commented on the use of adaptive technology in relation to the online Learner Views survey.
- The design of the Learner Views survey for Version 1 of the Framework for Excellence has already been heavily influenced by feedback from learners and providers in the Pilot. The LSC acknowledges that more development will be necessary in the preparation for Version 2 and providers will still have the option not to include particular learners in their Learner Views survey in Version 1, where they judge that inclusion would be insensitive or inappropriate. This option is not expected to be necessary in Version 2 due to the development work that is underway.
- Emerging findings from the research were being fed into the development work for the Version 1 Learner Views survey throughout the research period. As a result, many of the development needs identified in the report have either been

implemented or are being tested. The following actions have been taken, or were about to be taken when the research took place, to increase the accessibility of the Version 1 Learner Views survey:

- considerable simplification of the language used in the survey and the applications of readability testing to the revised wording;
- removal of the dual response rate option used in the Pilot and standardisation at of a five-point response scale;
- establishment of an online methodology as the assumed method of completion, but with paper-based alternatives for learners for whom online completion would be impossible;
- extensive testing of the technical links to the online survey with a range of providers and the accessibility of the language that it contains;
- the avoidance of Java script in the design of the online survey to prevent interference with standard screen readers;
- the avoidance of pop-ups (such as pull-down menus and links to additional information screens in the design of the survey for the same reason;
- testing of the ability to complete the online survey without the use of a mouse;
- built-in options to change the background colour and enlarge the font size in the on-screen version;
- an explanation in provider guidance of the levels of support providers can reasonably offer to learners (plus inclusion of a record of such support in the online survey);
- encouragement for providers with learners whose views would be best gathered over time to implement this approach (and an opportunity to record this fact on the questionnaire); and
- further proposed testing early in the autumn term of the compatibility of the proposed online questionnaire with standard adaptive technology, including screen-reader software.

Section 1: Introduction and Methodology

1.1 This research was undertaken by RCU Limited and was commissioned by the LSC to support the development of the Learner Views performance indicator (PI) within the Framework for Excellence.² Providers in scope for the Framework for Excellence receive a score for the Learner Views PI based on a survey of learners in priority provision. For the Framework for Excellence Pilot (2007/08) and Version 1 (2008/09) this includes all 16-18 year-old learners, learners on work-based learning provision, adults on Skills for Life provision, adults on provision that can contribute to a full Level 2 or full Level 3, and any learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities not included under the previous categories.

1.2 During the Pilot, providers were asked to take all reasonable and practical steps to make the survey accessible to all in-scope learners. The LSC took a number of steps during the Pilot to assist providers in making the survey accessible, including:

- the choice of paper-based and online survey completion;
- provision of a version of the questionnaire with simplified response options;
- use of type size 14 in the design of paper-based surveys and the availability of enlarged paper versions on request (A3);
- printing of the paper questionnaires on pastel-shaded paper to assist learners with dyslexia;
- provision, on request, of Braille and audio versions of the survey;
- facilities within the online survey to increase font size, alter background colours and operate with standard screen-reader technology; and
- guidance to providers that reasonable steps could be taken to assist learners in the completion of the survey, provided these facilitated rather than influenced responses.

1.3 However, the LSC recognised from the outset that the approach to gathering Learner Views in the Pilot was not fully accessible, and therefore it advised providers to make case-by-case judgements on the inclusion of learners for whom the survey was potentially inaccessible and/or inappropriate. During the Pilot review processes, providers gave very useful feedback of the circumstances in which it had proved necessary to exclude learners. The Pilot approach was a temporary accommodation, designed to protect individual learners, but the LSC remains committed to giving all learners the right to communicate their views effectively in later versions of the Framework.

1.4 In preparation for Version 1 of the Framework (2008/09) the LSC commissioned two pieces of research. The first, which forms the basis of this report, examined evidence of current practice in the FE system in respect of gathering the views of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and is intended to influence the design of the Learner Views survey in Version 1. Natspec is leading on the second, which is examining the role that assistive technology can

² For more explanation of structural elements of the Framework for Excellence see <http://ffe.lsc.gov.uk>.

play in increasing accessibility. This project will report in autumn 2008 and will help influence the design of the Learner Views PI in Version 2 (2009/10).

1.5 The current research centred on visits to 15 LSC-funded providers to examine the approaches taken to include learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in learner feedback systems. It also built on feedback from Pilot providers and an earlier report³ which was commissioned by the LSC to inform the design of the Pilot survey. This report had identified a number of examples of good practice in gathering the views of a wide range of learners, including those with severe and complex learning difficulties. However, the report emphasised that effective practice in working with such learners involved a continuous and highly personalised process of dialogue, which could not easily be adapted to the needs of a standardised performance framework.⁴

1.6 The provider visits took place in July 2008 and were conducted by a team of specialist consultants from RCU, Treloar College and Skill: the National Association for Students with Disabilities). The project was also advised by input from a consultative panel that included the Royal National College for the Blind and Hinwick Hall College of Further Education. The project was also informed by guidance on assistive technology from TechDis⁵ and this organisation is also contributing to the Natspec-led project in preparation for Version 2.

1.7 The research visits included discussion of the provider's overall approach to gathering learner views and the specific arrangements made to include learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In many cases, researchers communicated directly with learners and listened to their views on the provision of feedback. The visits culminated in a review of the proposed approaches to the Version 1 Learner Views survey and a discussion of providers' recommendations to increase accessibility. RCU would like to express its gratitude to the participating providers for the time that they gave up to planning and supporting the visits and for the thoroughness of the programmes that they devised. The providers were:

- Action for Employment (Sheffield)
- Brockenhurst College
- Canterbury College
- Choices for All
- City and Islington College
- City College Manchester
- City Lit
- City of Bristol College
- Liverpool Community College
- New College Nottingham
- Preston College
- Rathbone (Manchester)
- Sheffield College
- South Downs College
- Telford College

³ [National Survey of Post-16 Learning Providers: Gathering and Using Learner Views in LSC-funded Provision.](#)

⁴ For example, one provider used a video-diary approach to record daily learning activities of learners with severe learning difficulties. At the end of the week the diaries were replayed to the learner, and teaching staff and learner support staff observed their reactions. The approach appeared highly effective and was sensitive to the individual communication skills of the learner, but the outcomes could not reasonably be distilled into the quantitative approaches required to inform a standard performance measure.

⁵ TechDis is an advisory service funded by JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee).

The providers were selected in a two-stage process: an initial long-list was drawn up of providers with high volumes of learners recorded on the ILR as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities; and the final choice of the fifteen visits was based on the specific combinations of learning difficulty and/or disability within their body of learners, and the need to ensure a wide spread of geographical location and type of provider.

Section 2: Background Literature Search

2.1 In preparation for the visits, the researchers conducted a short literature scan to investigate discussion of issues surrounding the gathering of views from learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. As well as general internet searches on key terms, the desk research investigated the websites of Ofsted, the Healthcare Commission, the Social Care Institute of Excellence, the Commission for Healthcare Inspection, the Disability Rights Commission, the Department of Health, the Learning Disability Advisory Group and Service Users Advisory Group and Skill (the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities).

2.2 A general theme emerging from the desk research was the requirement for public bodies to have an inclusive strategy for ensuring learner involvement, for example in response to the Disability Equality Scheme, and the need to ensure that clients with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are genuinely involved in the process of shaping the services that affect them. A distinction is often drawn between consultation and involvement. Consultation is considered passive, non-committal, and to be conducted on terms governed by the researcher, and as a result is felt not to meet the needs of today's public sector service users. In contrast, involvement is seen to be a more active and participative term, which implies enabling the clients to determine how the response process takes place and incorporates clear information on the findings and subsequent actions.

2.3 As a starting point for the literature search, the researchers examined Ofsted inspection reports for providers with significant concentrations of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, many of which were also included in the sample of providers visited. Very few references were found to specific issues of involvement, provision of views and feedback for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. This reflects the primary focus of Ofsted reports in the recent inspection cycle on teaching and learning, although this could be expected to change as the themes highlighted in Every Child Matters⁶ become more firmly embedded in the inspection process. Inspection reports often made references to a provider's overall approach to social inclusion or to learner support and guidance, but there were few references to the gathering and use of learners' feedback, nor to the specific issues relating to learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

⁶ This is the Government's over-arching strategy for young people up to the age of 19, details of which can be found at <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk>.

2.4 In January 2007, Ofsted published a report entitled *National survey into the current provision and outcomes for 16-18 year old learners with learning difficulties and /or disabilities in colleges*. The findings of this report were derived from an investigation of 22 colleges and eight local LSC offices, and from an analysis of reports of 13 inspections. While this report does not deal specifically with the gathering of learners' views, it did draw attention to weaknesses in staff skills/expertise when carrying out baseline assessments and diagnostics, and it is reasonable to assume that there are overlaps between these skills and the skills necessary to elicit open and comprehensive learner feedback.

2.5 The report noted:

There was insufficient understanding of how to assess the progress of learners on programmes which were not accredited or how to evaluate their progress against the targets in their individual learning plans. There was too little recognition about what good progress was, leading to setting targets that were not always challenging for learners. Procedures for recognising and recording progress and achievement (RARPA) on non-accredited programmes were at the early stages of development in all the colleges visited.

2.6 In 2006 Ofsted published [Best practice in self-evaluation - A survey of schools, colleges and local authorities](#). This report looked at the factors that contribute to effective self-evaluation, based on visits to 12 schools, seven further education colleges and three local authorities where previous inspection reports identified strong practice in this area. The findings are intended to disseminate best practice and the report was strong in its endorsement of learner involvement in self-assessment, while containing few specifics on how this should be achieved. The report noted:

The success of self-evaluation in these institutions reflected to a considerable degree the high priority given to it by senior managers. Another significant contributor to success was the commitment and full involvement of people at all levels in the organisation. Self-evaluation was an integral part of the culture and not simply a paper exercise completed for bureaucratic purposes.

In all cases, the quality of self-evaluation was enhanced by increasingly sophisticated use of a widening range of performance indicators. An important element within these institutions was the emphasis they placed on seeking the views of those who received their services, particularly pupils and students.

However, the report did not specifically discuss the gathering of evidence for self-evaluation from learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

2.7 In addition to examining Ofsted publications, researchers investigated the websites of a range of public services that have a requirement to gather clients' or service-users' views as part of their improvement planning and/or for inspection. For example, there are strong links between the requirements on health sector

bodies and those applying to education and training providers. [Valuing People- a new strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st century](#) was published by the Department of Health in March 2001. This White Paper argued that “people with learning disabilities often have little choice or control over many aspects of their lives.”

2.8 *Valuing People – a new Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century* was influenced by a previous report from the Health Service Users Advisory Group entitled [Nothing about us, without us](#), which was viewed as a landmark in the process of enabling people with learning difficulties to play a direct part in formulating government policy. The Service Users Advisory Group conducted a series of visits to groups of people with learning disabilities to gather their views in a series of face-to-face interviews.

2.9 The Government’s current strategy for improving the lives of people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families is set out on the [Valuing People](#) website⁷, which provides guidance for individuals, their families and a wide range of public and voluntary sector professionals. One section reproduces the following set of values to guide consideration of inclusion issues:

Values of Inclusion

Taken from the Scottish Human Services website at www.shstrust.org.uk

“Everyone is born in

We are born among people, and only sent away later.

All means all

Everyone capable of breathing is entitled to be included. No one is too difficult, too old, too poor or too disabled to qualify.

Everyone needs to be present

If we have never been present, no one will know when we're missing.

Everyone needs to belong

We need to know there's a place for us, not just a space for us.

Everyone is ready

None of us has to pass a test or meet a set of criteria before we can be included.

Everyone can learn

As human beings we all grow and change and make mistakes: and we are all capable of learning.

Everyone needs support

Sometimes some of us need more support than others.

Everyone can communicate

Not using words doesn't mean we don't have anything to say.

Everyone can contribute

We need to recognise, encourage and value each person's contributions - including our own.

Together we are better

We are not dreaming of a world where everyone is like us - difference is our most important renewable resource.”

2.10 In the FE sector, the LSC commissioned a report from RCU in preparation for the Framework for Excellence entitled [National survey of post 16 learning providers: gathering and using learner views in Learning and Skills Council funded provision](#). This report, published in April 2007, drew attention to the fact that the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 placed a requirement on institutions to make reasonable arrangements to meet the needs of learners, including anticipating the needs of future learners where these varied from the needs of the current body of learners.

2.11 The report also noted a requirement for institutions to make key documents and materials accessible to all learners and argued that this should be viewed as including materials designed to gather learners' views.

2.12 A number of organisations have produced specific guidance to education providers on the implications of disability discrimination legislation, including [Skill: the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities](#). In its response to the 2004 LSC publication [New Measures of Success: Priorities for Development](#) Skill identified two key issues relating to the effective gathering of evidence on the views of learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. These related to a need to ensure that learners in receipt of additional support were given the opportunity to comment on these aspects separately to the assessment of their learning programmes, and to the importance of providing help for some learners with learning difficulties to ensure that they were able to understand, and respond effectively to, core feedback questions. Skill noted that this support should be given by someone who was not directly involved in teaching the programme.

2.13 An earlier publication (2003) by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA)⁸ entitled [Count me in FE](#) had discussed a wide range of learners' perspectives on inclusive learning. It called on providers to devise strategies to enable all learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to "review their academic and social experiences in situations where they can state their views independently of staff who work with them." The report also stressed the particular importance of effective feedback to vulnerable learners who have raised concerns.

2.14 The guidance surrounding the LSC's [National Learner Satisfaction Survey](#) (NLSS), illustrates the need to strike a balance between the support some learners need to communicate their views effectively and the risk that these views might be influenced by the communication arrangements. The NLSS Interviewing Method Guidance states:

The interviewer asks for respondents and does not accept interviews by proxy with third parties. This ensures first-hand access to learners, and direct responses to survey questions. The only situations where a third party may be involved are where a face-to-face interview is needed and a carer is present for support. This is included in the sample design for the NLSS, as we wished to incorporate learners with disabilities and learning difficulties and we offer face to face interviews if respondents or carers believe this is required.

⁸ Later subsumed into the Quality Improvement Agency and subsequently into the Learning and Skills Improvement Service.

2.15 The LSDA helped implement some of the recommendations of *Count me in FE* in a project called the *Framework for the Involvement of Disabled People*, which ran from May 2005 to March 2006. The Framework presented examples of a range of approaches and listed 'other strategies', which included the use of questionnaires. The project was managed by the LSDA in partnership with NIACE and Skill, and was funded by the LSC. It was one of five projects in the *Disability Equality Duty Support Programme* which operated in each of the nine LSC regions and aimed to support FE Colleges, adult learning providers and others to promote continued and meaningful involvement of disabled people in their services and policies.

2.16 The further education and training system includes learners with a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities, many of which require specific consideration when seeking learners' views. Some of the most useful sources of information for providers regarding the design of inclusive approaches are the websites of agencies specialising in supporting people with particular learning difficulties and/or disabilities. For example, the Royal National Institute for the Blind ([RNIB](http://www.rnib.org.uk)) website⁹ contains [See it Right](#) guidelines and also offers RNIB clear print guidelines, which considers the needs of people with impaired vision. These guidelines include the following considerations:

- type size (between 12 and 14 point recommended);
- contrast (black text on a white background provides best contrast);
- typeface (avoiding highly stylised typefaces);
- type style (blocks of capitals, underlined or italicised text are harder to read);
- leading (the space between lines of type should be 1.5 to 2 times the space between words on a line);
- type weight (people with sight problems often prefer bold or semi-bold weights to normal ones);
- numbers (choose a typeface in which the numbers are clear);
- word spacing and alignment (do not condense or stretch lines of type);
- columns (make sure the margin between columns clearly separates them);
- reversing type (make sure the background colour is dark);
- setting text (avoid fitting text around images);
- form design (allow extra space as partially sighted people tend to have handwriting that is larger than average);
- navigational aids (ensure recurring features are always in the same place); and
- printing (avoid glossy or thin paper).

⁹ www.rnib.org.uk.

2.17 Similar information can be found on the websites of other specialist organisations, for example the [Royal National Institute for Deaf People](http://www.rnid.org.uk) (RNID) website¹⁰ contains guidance on communicating with deaf people, which includes the following advice:

- use plain English and sign language when reasonable;
- offer communication support, including sign-language interpreters, electronic note-takers and lipspeakers;
- understand how to book and use communication support;
- offer different methods of contact, such as telephone, textphone, RNID Typetalk, fax, email, text message (SMS), face-to-face appointments and a postal address;
- undergo training in communicating with deaf people; and
- ask specifically about each individual's needs rather than making assumptions. For example many deaf people prefer to communicate face-to-face or to participate in open meetings or focus groups because of the visual way of communicating.

The RNID also gives a very useful reminder that the means of communicating the results of dialogue and the proposed actions must be just as accessible as the methods used to gather information.

¹⁰ <http://www.rnid.org.uk>.

Section 3: Examples of Effective Practice from the Provider Visits

Introduction

3.1 Research visits were undertaken in July 2008 to 15 further education and training providers, covering a wide range of provision. The visits resulted in agreed written summaries of the approaches taken by each organisation to include learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in their quality improvement and learner involvement strategies. These summaries were supplied back to providers, who validated the documents and retained them to assist self-assessment processes. However, it was agreed with providers in advance of the visits that no provider would be individually identified in this report.

Overall Approaches to Gathering Learner Views

3.2 Providers typically used questionnaire-based methods of gathering quantitative data, based around key stages in the learning process, such as initial perceptions, on-course satisfaction and exit views. These methods were supplemented by qualitative methods, including tutorial discussions, training review interviews, focus groups and training diaries. Most of the providers had made arrangements to ensure that qualitative evidence was gathered by individuals that the learners would perceive as neutral, for example administrative staff or learner representatives.

3.3 Several of the providers had well-established learner representative structures feeding into formal learner forums or councils. Some learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were said to place particular value on representative structures, possibly due to the inclusion of advocacy within their learning programmes. Other providers had struggled to ensure that representatives with learning difficulties and/or disabilities could participate fully in formal meetings. Some providers included advocate support to help learning representatives who had learning difficulties and/or disabilities. One college had introduced a "Principals' Question Time" in which directly elected learner representatives spent an hour at regular intervals asking the Principal questions directly. Where focus groups were used these were sometimes seen as an opportunity to identify key issues, but on other occasions they were used to clarify the reasons behind the satisfaction levels revealed in earlier quantitative phases.

3.4 Paper questionnaires were the most common form of gathering quantitative evidence, although the group of providers included a number that used internal online survey software.¹¹ The response scales used in these surveys varied. For example, where learners were dispersed on in-company training, postal and telephone interview methods were also used. Depending on the client group, satisfaction research extended to parents/carers (younger learners or adults with carer support) and employers. Providers that used online surveys generally had

¹¹ For example, some providers embedded questionnaires within their virtual learning environments and completion of these was triggered automatically when the relevant point in the learning process was reached. In a similar approach, several providers used pop-up prompts on their intranets to remind learners that a survey was under way. These were triggered by the learners' log-in details and cancelled once they had followed the link to the survey completion area of the intranet.

back-up paper arrangements for learners for whom online completion was impractical.

3.5 Almost all of the providers visited had adopted some variation of the “*you said; we did*” approach to briefing learners on the outcomes of surveys. This was extended in some cases to question and answer pages on the provider’s intranet (to which learners could add comments). Two of the providers were investing in electronic voting software to give immediate feedback to learners in group discussions. The approach was felt to have particular application to the structuring of discussions with learners with learning difficulties. One provider used an *Opinion Wall*, on which learners could write comments or questions about their learning. This area was also used to provide feedback on learners’ surveys and staff could invite learners to comment on results or provide explanations of responses. The *Opinion Wall* was at wheelchair height to allow full access to all learners and regular snapshots of its content were taken.

3.6 Most providers drew a clear distinction between the evidence required at an institutional level to contribute to self-assessment (broad satisfaction indicators) and more qualitative evidence that fed back directly to programme-level quality-assurance procedures. Several of the providers used national benchmarks (either from the NLSS or commercial services) to provide context for their interpretation of quantitative results. There was clear awareness in some of these providers of factors that might reduce the validity of such comparisons, for example awareness that their own input samples had been skewed.

Specific Arrangements to Gather the Views of Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

3.7 Some of the providers had been involved in the Framework for Excellence Pilot and were able to give direct feedback on learners’ attitudes to the national survey. Some providers noted that they had had an especially positive reaction from learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to their inclusion in a national survey of learners. Many learners had taken their responses very seriously and were aware of, and valued, arrangements to ensure the confidentiality of their responses.

3.8 Providers who had been involved in the Framework for Excellence Pilot commented on the level of language required to complete the survey and stated that this had led to a higher level of learner support in the completion process than they would have wished. The LSC has revised and simplified the language of the questionnaire for Version 1 and it is currently undertaking extensive cognitive testing. The accessibility of the Pilot questionnaire was an issue for a range of learners, including those studying at entry level, second language English speakers and Entry to Employment learners.

3.9 Most providers used some form of symbolic language to increase the accessibility of paper and online questionnaires, although there was considerable variation in the methods used. Providers felt that no standard approach to this could be adopted, because the key issue was integration with approaches used in

teaching and learning processes, but they argued strongly that an option for some symbol support on questionnaires would increase accessibility.

3.10 Some of the providers involved in the Pilot had made use of the Braille and audio versions of the Learner Views questionnaire. Providers appreciated that such arrangements had been put in place but that there had been technical problems in both cases. The Braille version was double-sided (requiring a high-level of Braille skills) and used terminology that would not be understood by learners with intermediate level Braille skills.

3.11 The questionnaire had also been produced verbatim, which meant that it did not take into account the response mechanisms required by blind learners.

3.12 The audio version was felt to be too fast and could only be used effectively when loaded onto audio-technology that allowed the learners to proceed at their own pace. Some providers had used internal resources to support signed discussions around the survey.

3.13 Some providers operating representative structures had developed sophisticated methods to ensure that all learners remained engaged in the process. As well as providing advocacy support for representatives with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, one provider had introduced video-conferencing links so that learners could watch their views being represented at council meetings. For learners with severe learning difficulties, the relevant department had also developed a shadow version of the learner forum at which learner views could be advocated (with high levels of support) in a format that was supportive and gave adequate time for supported contributions. The same provider also gave support to all learner representatives to ensure that minutes and action points were shared with other learners, including posting the results on the intranet in an accessible format.

3.14 Several of the providers had simplified the language of their questionnaires (paper and online) for learners in entry-level provision, although there was some concern that this altered the context of the responses, which as a result could not be compared to those of other learners. Where learners had cognitive levels that would make sequential completion of a questionnaire impossible, providers tended to use a tutorial approach, where each issue introduced a group discussion culminating in the (confidential) recording of each learner's views. Learners in these groups often required a significant level of support to enable them to record their views and providers generally felt that this fact should be recorded alongside their answers.

3.15 Given adequate notice, providers felt the issues covered by the Learner Views survey could be built into group discussions in the run-up to the survey period. For learners whose satisfaction levels were relatively volatile, or whose cognitive skills ruled out reflective responses, providers felt that teaching and learner support staff could gather views under the Framework for Excellence themes over a period of time leading up to the survey, and then submit summative judgements during the survey to represent learners' opinions.

3.16 One provider with a large number of learners with profound and complex learning difficulties (and non-verbal communication methods) used a questionnaire sent out to parents/carers, who were best-placed to interpret the learners' communications and to introduce the concepts at an appropriate time. This had been particularly successful with learners with disorders on the autistic spectrum, for whom routine and ritual were important. For these learners, there are specific issues of response scales on standard questionnaires that appear to force them into boxes. This group of learners responds better to more open response options.

3.17 Providers noted particular problems in obtaining objective learner feedback in some community-based learning provision (for example in care establishments or community centres). The providers felt that clients of such provision were often very grateful that it existed and tended to give very high satisfaction levels as a result, even if there were aspects of the learning programmes that they would wish to improve. A common theme in much provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is self-advocacy, and the fact that individuals have a right to suggest improvements and can expect positive responses if they do. Several providers pointed out the irony that falling satisfaction levels within such groups could be viewed as a sign of real progress.

3.18 Several of the providers had taken considerable care to ensure that learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were able to contribute their views to (or supported by) an independent third party. However, this was not always possible, as some learners communicated in a form that was only accessible to people who worked with them on a daily basis. Providers also emphasised the complexity of arrangements to ensure independent feedback. Prior to learner surveys, relevant staff would meet several times with individual learners to gain their confidence and build an understanding of their preferred communication methods. Often, there was also a need to recheck learners' responses over a period of time in case these had been affected by temporary factors (for example, a recent upset, food intake, medical factors or prior physical activity). Such factors could present a significant source of distortion for any one-off snapshot survey.

3.19 Several providers noted that learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities had more opportunities to communicate their views than other learners. This was partly because their curriculum included a large number of reflective elements, but also the presence of learner support (and learner support reviews) and advocacy support gave channels of communication that were not often mirrored for other learners. The high levels of satisfaction recorded on many programmes for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are sometimes taken as an indication of a tendency not to criticise provision, but it may also be a sign that these learners have more opportunities to raise and address minor issues.

3.20 The providers visited were using a number of technological and adaptive software approaches, some of which were at the early stages of introduction, including:

- Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), which is a training system encompassing a range of symbolic communications;
- Widgit Literacy Symbols (a simple and concise tool to support non-verbal communication with a vocabulary of around 20,000 terms);
- Makatron (symbolic communication language);
- Boardmaker (an education-specific alternative to the previous two systems);
- digital recorders to gather reactions and record group discussions for later reflective assessment;
- Supernova (magnification and screen-adaptation software linked to the Windows environment);
- JAWS (converting computer displays to speech – said by some providers to be declining in terms of its use);
- electronic voting buttons (for example, Quizdom);
- avatars and video-clips (used to read out questions with a human appearance, applicable to non-readers, learners with limited reading skills and learners whose first language is British Sign Language);
- Turning Point (software linked to PowerPoint to generate survey instruments and structure group discussions);
- Audacity (sound-recording software used to make laptops accessible);
- Rickter Scale (a self-assessment tool aimed primarily at young people, which allows opinions to be recorded by sliding a scale bar);
- Dragon (conversion software creating text out of speech); and
- Moodle (open-source virtual learning environment).

Information on the approaches found during these visits will be shared with Natspec, which will be making recommendations on assistive technology as part of the supported learning accessibility project.

4. Summary of Issues and Actions for the Learner Views Survey in Version 1

4.1 The design of the Learner Views survey for Version 1 of the Framework for Excellence has already been strongly influenced by the Pilot survey and the feedback from the providers who took part. The plans for Version 1 were also informed by emerging findings from the current research project, as summarised in this report.

4.2 The following steps have already been taken, or are in the process of being taken, to increase the accessibility of the Learner Views survey in Version 1, although the LSC acknowledges that more needs to be done and that providers will still need the option to exclude learners for whom it remains inappropriate:¹²

- considerable simplification of the language used in the survey and the applications of SMOG testing¹³ to the revised language (this currently has a rating of 6.3);
- removal of the dual response rate option and standardisation at a five-point response scale;
- establishment of an online methodology as the assumed method of completion, but with paper-based alternatives for learners for whom online completion would be impossible;
- extensive testing with a range of providers of the technical links to the online survey and the accessibility of the language it contains;
- the avoidance of Java script in the design of the online survey to prevent interference with standard screen-readers;
- the avoidance of pop-ups in the design of the survey for the same reason;
- testing of the ability to complete the online survey without the use of a mouse;
- built-in options to change the background colour and enlarge font size on the on-screen version;
- explanation in provider guidance of the levels of support providers can reasonably offer to learners¹⁴ (plus inclusion of a record of such support in the online survey);
- encouragement for providers with learners whose views would be best gathered over time to implement this approach (and an opportunity to record this fact on the questionnaire); and

¹² This option is not expected to be necessary in Version 2 (2009/10).

¹³ SMOG (simplified measure of gobbledygook) is a formula that gives a readability level for written material. For more information see <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/SMOG.html>.

¹⁴ Broadly speaking this correlates to the level of support that would be deemed acceptable by awarding bodies in examinations and coursework preparation. Providers would need to be confident that any intervention was facilitating the communication of a learner's views without influencing them.

- further proposed testing early in the autumn term of the compatibility of the proposed online questionnaire with standard adaptive technology, including screen-reader software.

4.3 Further work is required to ensure that the Learner Views survey is as accessible as possible, and this will continue in the planning processes for Version 2, informed by the Natspec project.

4.4 A number of issues raised by providers during the research visits have not yet been resolved but are being considered. For example, much of the delivery of provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities takes place in day centres and community venues that are without online access. The current round of technical testing is including options for survey completion using remote devices, such as Blackberry palm-top devices.

4.5 There is still a need for the LSC to consider whether alternative language versions of the Learner Views questionnaire could be made available online, including versions in British Sign Language and the main symbolic communication systems.

4.6 The LSC needs to consider ways in which to share good practice in gathering the views of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The survey visits revealed a high level of willingness to share successful strategies and some of the providers with high volumes of learners with particular support needs felt that they could act as regional demonstration points for approaches that might not be familiar to providers with less experience of working with such groups.

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