**Listening and responding to learner voice in Vocational Education and Training[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Barry Golding, Lawrie Angus, Annette Foley[[2]](#footnote-2), and Peter Lavender[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Abstract**

Involving learner voice and learner input in the promotion of students’ own learning has the potential to empower learners and transform their learning experience. A greater emphasis on genuine engagement of students could also potentially transform vocational education and training and adult community education systems, and, in turn, workplaces and communities. This presentation offers initial findings from research conducted in a range of vocational education and adult community education organisations in the UK and Australia which has provided critical insights into the benefits of taking learner voice seriously in the further education setting. The presentation will focus on the evidence from England and conclude that there is some way to go before we can say that learners’ voice is a full part of educational planning.

**Key words:**

learner voice; learner involvement; citizenship; disadvantage; vocational education and training (VET); further education (FE)

**Background**

This research was commissioned by Australia’s National Vocational Education Equity Advisory Committee from the University of Ballarat and completed in March 2012. The evidence that supports these findings is drawn from interviews and consultations in Australia, England and Europe; a critical analysis of the current obligations, processes and mechanisms under Australian provider legislation; a critical review of some Australian and international literature; some insights and examples of new ways of teaching and learning; the impact of learner voice. This paper focuses on the initial general findings, using the evidence from UK interviews.

The research explored key principles and effective models of gathering and acting on learner[[4]](#footnote-4) voice and learner feedback in vocational education and training (VET). The research included particular consideration of the role of learner voice for disadvantaged learners. The analysis and recommendations are based on field and documentary research in Australia as well as in the UK, Ireland and Norway. Interviews were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders associated with VET provision and delivery including stakeholders with experience of other adult education sectors. Although the research design did not include the involvement of VET students as an interviewee category, we heard insights about learner voice from several student representatives. We also interviewed members of industry and employer groups.

**Some starting definitions**

We believe that the concept of ‘learner voice’ is problematic. While this notion has been utilised in literature on school education for a long time (eg Fielding, 2004), its use in vocational education and training appears quite recent and follows the extensive use of this term (as ‘learner involvement’) in the UK under the Labour government.

It implies much more than just getting learners to speak (McLeod, 2011 p.181). In education, the idea of ‘learner voice’ has consistently been associated with notions of educational reform in the interests of students. It is associated with student empowerment and agency, usually in recognition of the asymmetrical power relationship between learners and the representatives of the educational institution. The idea of ‘giving’ voice to learners is particularly associated with the notion that learners have not generally had any ability to influence the environments in which they are attempting to learn. Learner voice advocates regard students as important participants in the educational process who should have a say in what and how they learn, and also in shaping the kind of institution in which they do the learning. The onus is then on teachers and institutional staff, including managers, to recognize and respect the diversity of student backgrounds and cultures, and the great variety of knowledge that students bring with them to educational contexts. This is the kind of perspective on learner voice, present in many interviews, that informs this report.

We acknowledge, however, that as the term’ learner voice’ becomes increasingly commonly used in education policy discourse, there is a danger that its meaning can become weakened and even trivialized or tokenistic (Angus, 2006). This happens when the voices of learners are channeled only into ‘safe’ outlets through forms of managed student participation. This may give the impression that the perspectives and views of students are important when, in reality, the multiple voices of diverse students with different backgrounds and different needs, strengths and weaknesses in engaging with learning, are reduced to the voice of an ‘official’ student who is admitted as a ‘representative student’ on an important committee. And sometimes the level of diversity is reduced to averages on survey responses and called ‘learner feedback’ or ‘student perception’.

Unless the voices are part of dialogical process that has possibilities (at least in principle) of re-shaping the way vocational education and training is ‘done’ by the provider[[5]](#footnote-5), and therefore of leading to genuine transformation, then the full potential of learner voice will not be realised. The point is that ‘learner voice’ does not refer just to opportunities to express opinions. At its core is having sufficient power to influence change. In our view, the aim should be that learner voice would become the major mechanism of learning and teaching, and of organizing learning and teaching in inclusive ways around the needs of students.

There are very thin forms of learner voice, such as students providing input into a broad consultative process that goes into the mix of a number of other inputs, the significance of which is never clear. There are also strong forms of learner voice, such as the direct involvement of students in negotiating with their teacher to shape the curriculum that is provided within a particular classroom. Learner voice can be seen in different forms as a continuum, from empowering learners at one end, to informing learners at the other. Such a continuum can be likened to the ‘expansive – restrictive’ continuum used by Unwin and Fuller as a way of exploring learning in the workplace in Rainbird et al (2004 p.126).

Both learner voice and learner feedback do have some similarities, however, and for students in vocational education and training, both are influenced by:

1. what is defined as the *purposes* of vocational education and training, including the width or narrowness of these definitions
2. the extent to which the *learner* is recognized as an active participant in the teaching and learning process
3. the *context* in which learning takes place, including the national, cultural, geographic, policy, regulatory and institutional environments
4. the *capability* of diverse learners to actively respond when consulted and to access feedback
5. the *rationales* or purposes for valuing and seeking learner voice and feedback
6. *who* seeks learner voice and provides the feedback
7. the *mechanisms* used to seek learner voice and to provide learner feedback
8. *presuppositions* about how students are located within a VET context (eg as clients, employees, customers, citizens, community members, students, learners).

Our research on VET in Australia and parts of Europe (Ireland, UK and Norway) was intriguing from the start, given that:

* learner voice and feedback have been important throughout the history of Adult and Community Education and Vocational Education and Training, but have not necessarily been named or theorised as such;
* the notion of learner voice has become more important during the past few years particularly in England and Scandinavia, but perhaps the voice of learners has become more difficult to hear, and to respond to, as many national governments have move towards client and customer models of provision which tend to disempower students as co-participants in learning;
* there appeared to be some fundamental differences in the way learner voice is being theorised, developed and promoted in different national contexts;
* the advantages of implementing policies and practices that enable the voices of learners to be heard, valued and acted upon may not be the same as those anticipated by governments and providers.

**What is learner voice and what are its associated presuppositions?**

In the discussion that follows we critically examine what we identify and regard as six simplistic and questionable propositions about learner voice and disadvantaged groups, that we suggest are widely accepted in vocational education and training (VET) discourse. While each of the six presuppositions examined below are questionable, our research also leads us to challenge the common, *a priori* assumptions that each learner:

* *has* a voice
* has the *means* *of expressing* voice
* *is* being *asked to speak*, *listened to* and *responded to* during the learning process*.*

**Some questionable presuppositions about learner voice and feedback**

*First questionable presupposition: That learner voice and feedback are simple*

‘Learner voice’ and ‘learner feedback’ appear to be simple concepts. In this discussion, we suggest they are not. In its simplest form *learner voice* is usually taken to mean the opinion or ‘voice’ of learners that describes their experiences of learning. *Learner feedback* is an opinion provided by a student in response about the learning, typically as a consequence of a request from an education or training provider. Beneath these simple statements lie a number of complex and interrelated questions about processes for listening; authenticity and source of voice; ability of learners to express their views, and so on.

*Second questionable presupposition: That learner voice is mainly about barriers to participation and completion*

One of the inherent problems with relying on existing research into education and training that purports to hear learner voice through participant surveys and interviews, as Gorard (2010, p.355) noted, is that the research evidence about barriers ‘is almost entirely based on the self-reports of existing participants’. If learner voice studies are restricted only to those learners who come to education *despite* the hypothesised barriers, or only to those who manage to *complete* programs, there is a risk of not hearing about non-participation and non-completion. Importantly, the research into non-participation (Selwyn at al., 2006) shows that non-participants usually cite reasons other than those identified by existing participants for not continuing with their programmes. In its simplest form, people who participate and complete a course in post compulsory education and training, in spite of the barriers they face, presumably see learning as relevant to their needs and capacities. Unsurprisingly, those who ‘failed’ at school tend not to see learning in the same way.

*Third questionable presupposition: That VET is about ‘institutional delivery’*

Much discourse in VET, including simple notions of learner voice and feedback, is based on a unidirectional ‘delivery’ model of instruction that presupposes that the industry competencies and skills that are meant to be taught in particular programs are in fact transferred to the learners as intended. Aside from the fact that this assumption of faithful transfer of a standard product runs counter to most contemporary, constructivist views of learning and teaching that now prevail in all other education sectors, it is also challenged in recent learner voice research. Research conducted in Ireland by Bailey (2011, p.275) indicates that collaboration is essential in learning environments which value learner voice, particularly when the learners are members of ‘harder to reach groups’ (p.275).

*Fourth questionable presupposition: That learner voice is about surveying clients with vocational intentions and outcomes*

The overwhelming emphasis in VET is on surveys of current clients as the main method of institutional evaluation, and enforcement of regulatory and compliance mechanisms. The assumption seems to be that the intended purpose and outcomes for the learner are primarily about paid work. We have deliberately broadened our study to enable ourselves to hear about other possible learner voice and feedback mechanisms and outcomes of VET, and particularly to investigate what we now hypothesise to be a gaping hole in learner feedback. Learners are already subjected to many surveys, but few people appear to be listening or hearing the survey results. The results are used as benchmark data in England. Our research indicates that very little of value is being fed back to individual institutions, and less again to students (ANU,2012).

*Fifth questionable presupposition: That learner voice is the best means of redressing disadvantage*

There have been rhetorical attempts in the life of national governments (eg Gillard, 2008) to acknowledge and address issues of known inequity in education. Looking across all education sectors, the ‘higher’ the form of education and qualification level, the less equity there is and the more likely it is that there is entrenched intergenerational cycles of educational disadvantage for what are universally described as ‘disadvantaged groups’. In this context, the Australian Prime Minister (Gillard, 2008) pointed out that: ‘Traditional priorities and modes of service delivery won’t do. …. In equity terms we have been heading in exactly the wrong direction … Old ways haven’t necessarily worked, so we want new ideas.’

Underpinning our report and its recommendations is a conviction that we may need to move away from deficit models of disadvantage toward models that have the potential to engage and include *all* learners (Black and Yasukawa (2011). Deficit approaches reinforce the idea that people, rather than structural inequalities in society, are held responsible for their own failures. A form of ‘blaming the victim’. By drawing on the existing skills and practice of people, an approach ‘concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, [which] foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context’ (Lea and Street, 2006, p.369).

*Sixth questionable presupposition: That learner voices are authentic and equally valued and heard*

The research brief, and therefore our research design, ironically required us to ignore the voices of most learners and to concentrate on the voices of those responsible for learner voice mechanisms. We heard from diverse people at state and territory level in VET (and to a lesser extent ACE) with managerial, policy, coordination, provider, sectoral, research and advocacy roles, particularly in capital cities. While we heard some important insights from some learners, teachers and providers, a subsequent research project with a focus on learner voice narratives is highly recommended. Such research should also identify and listen to people not yet learning; groups of learners that are not currently being heard clearly; groups of those who have dropped out of the system before completion; and those in diverse VET providers and contexts.

It was relatively easy in this research project to hear the voices of some stakeholders who are ‘responsible’ for, or knowledgeable about, disadvantaged groups, particularly for groups with strong support and advocacy networks. These include Indigenous people, people with disability (Cotton, 2009) and migrants, or their advocates. An important question that we attempted to pursue in this research is, ‘Whose voices and which learners (i.e. with which disabilities, backgrounds or languages) are heard least?’ It is possible that some learners’ voices are filtered and mediated by their advocates. It is extremely difficult to tap into the voices of some learners, who tend to withdraw (or deliberately resist) ‘mainstream’ VET learning. Without actually speaking to a large and purposefully selected sample of learners in each disadvantaged group, it is very hard to summarise the voices of disadvantaged learners who have limited advocacy networks. This is the case, for instance, for adults in rural and remote contexts with both low limited formal literacies and socio-economic status.

**An overview of some literature**

Throughout this research we have found a very wide range of literature that might inform learner voice generally and experience in VET and ACE for disadvantaged learners in particular. We have chosen in this report to cite the research where relevant rather than isolating it in a comprehensive literature review.

As a way into the extensive literature, we identify at least three different starting points with its own body of literature that are particularly pertinent to our research and this report. The first is about the purposes of learner voice and how learners are conceptualised. The second is about the equity principles that underpin learner voice. The third is about how learner voice can be implemented in practice. We follow this overview with some specific examples of learner voice in practice, in England in particular.

**Learner voice literature: Three key starting points**

*Conceptualising learners: the purposes of learner voice*

As we stressed at the outset in defining learner voice, it is important to be clear about how the different ways in which learners are construed and constructed in discourse about VET. One body of literature on learner voice focuses on alternative ways of conceptualising learners. Potter, for example (2011, p.175), sees four different ways of conceptualising learners, each of which have different implications for learner voice.

1. Learners are used simply as a *data source*, assessed against normative targets.
2. Learner are *active respondents* to questions with teachers able to listen and analyse the responses that they give in particular settings when they have the freedom to discuss aspects of their learning.
3. Learners are *co-researchers* with increased involvement in the learning decisions made by teachers.
4. Learners are themselves *researchers.*

These ways of looking at learner voice are also allied with the purposes of learner voice as described by researchers, staff and institutions. Purposes range widely and in terms of the intended beneficiary: to improve the quality of the FET or FE offer and to evaluate that offer; to enhance the citizenship of learners; to engage learners in co-production.

*Learner voice principles*

Learner voice is examined in a second body of literature as a set of principles emerging from struggles for equity and equality. For example Sellar and Gale (2011), researching in a higher education context, identify a relatively recent merging of ‘voice’ with ‘identity’ and ‘representation’. They see the concept of voice that emerged in the latter half of the 20th Century as being tied up with claims for political recognition of difference and identity politics, alongside struggles for equality (McLeod, 2011). They cite Bragg (2007, p.344) who puts the argument for student voice as ‘part of a larger emancipatory project, hoping it would be transformative not just of individuals, but of the oppressive hierarchies within educational institutions and even within society.’

Sellar and Gale (2011, p.116) advocate a conception of student equity that focuses on *capacities* - in relation to mobility, aspiration and voice – rather than on barriers to *access’.* They argue (p.116):

… that strengthening capacities to cultivate networks (mobility), shape futures (aspirations) and narrate experiences (voice) increases people’s ability to access, benefit from and transform economic goods and social institutions.

Sellar and Gale (pp.127-129) also identify five Learner Voice principles.

1. Voice requires resources – practical and symbolic – if it is to be valued and recognized by others.
2. Voice involves an ongoing exchange and narratives with others.
3. Voice speaks for our embodied histories.
4. Our lives are not just composed of one narrative.
5. Voice is denied when social relations are organized in ways that privilege some voices over others.

*How learner voice activities might be developed, levels of engagement in learner voice and reasons to promote it.*

There is a third body of literature that explores how learner voice activities might be developed, including consideration of different levels of engagement in learner voice and reasons to promote it. Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006, pp.i-ii), for example, in a comprehensive handbook about *Learner Voice*, identify a number of questions (and sub-questions) under four key headings to help people in ‘schools or colleges’ in the UK to think about how learner voice activities might be developed. These headings and main questions are paraphrased below:

1. Before engaging in learner voice activities:

* + Is anything already happening … to promote learner voice?
  + If not what might be done?
  + Are learners being listened to?

2. Removing the barriers:

* + Who is being heard?
  + Does the institutional culture and ethos support the development of learner voice?

3. Involving learners:

* + Are there clear ways in which learners are involved in decision-making processes?
  + What tools or methods, if any, are being used to listening to learners’ voices?

4. Taking learner voice forward in your institution:

* Which area(s) and issue(s) might be good for developing and embedding learner voice?

Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006, p.11) conclude that learner voice can occur on a number of levels that are summarised in a somewhat simplified form in Table 1. We return later in our report to frame some of our findings around this useful ‘ladder of participation’.

*Table 1 Learner Voice Ladder of participation*

(after Rudd, Colligan & Naik, 2006, p.11)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Types of participation** | **Types of involvement** | **Levels of engagement** |
| Manipulation | Learners directed and not informed; Learners ‘Rubberstamp’ staff decisions | Non-participation |
| Decoration | Learners indirectly involved in decisions, not aware of rights or involvement options |
| Informing | Learners merely informed of actions & changes, but views not actively sought |
| Consultation | Learners fully informed, encouraged to express opinions, but with little or no impact | Tokenism |
| Placation | Learners consulted & informed & listened to, but no guarantee changes made are wanted |
| Partnership | Learners consulted & informed. Outcomes result of negotiations between staff & learners |
| Delegated power | Staff inform agendas for action, but learners responsible for initiatives & programs that result | Learner empowerment |
| Learner control | Learners initiate agendas, responsible for management of issues & change. Power delegated to learners; active in designing education. |

Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006, p.ii) also identify ten reasons to promote learner voice (in schools and colleges in the UK), paraphrased and enumerated below.

1. A number of national and international conventions state learners should have their views listened to and accounted for in relation to services that affect them.
2. Research shows that embedding learner voice has a range of benefits.
3. Despite the vast changes that have recently occurred within the education system, learners are still seldom heard or consulted.
4. The Government is pursuing personalised education.
5. Learner voice needs to be viewed as a push towards a change in cultural attitude
6. Despite a range of tools for promoting learner voice, examples of good practice remain relatively rare.
7. Learner voice must not be tokenistic or an add-on exercise.
8. Learners and young people are increasingly being consulted about and expected to take responsibility for other aspects of their lives.
9. Digital technologies represent a powerful, new mechanism to support learner participation.
10. There is the potential for new technologies to change the way they consume, create, communicate and share information.

# It is worth noting that this table was produced in 2006 and public policy may have moved on since then.

Learner voice, particularly in the UK, has been recognized and applied in several ways through practical initiatives, both directly and indirectly. These include learner voice awards, citizenship initiatives, learning and skills policies, resources for learner voice development, learner surveys and advice and guidance for teachers (LSIS, 2012), as briefly reviewed below.

1. *Learner Voice Awards*

For three years the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS, 2012) has been running England-wide learner voice awards for institutions in the FE (Further Education) sector, in **a joint partnership between LSIS and the National Union of Students, though funded by LSIS. LSIS is a sector-owned voluntary organisation which until recently was a government agency reporting to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).** These awards celebrate innovation, effort and action through individual and organisational achievement and success. The categories include:

### Learner Practitioner of the year

### Leading Learner of the year

### Student Governor of the year

### Principal or Senior Leader of the year

### Outstanding Contribution to the Leadership of Learners.

These initiatives provide examples of how learner voice has been used to celebrate and improve learning.

*2 Citizenship initiatives*

Closely related to learner voice is the concept of citizenship. The Citizenship initiatives program, which started under the New Labour Government in 1994 in the UK, ended under the Coalition Government in 2011. A web site contains resources, relevant news and information, and details of support for post-16 citizenship (LSIS, 2012). The Post-16 Citizenship Support Programme ended in August 2011. Particularly relevant to the current study is the citizenship training pack *Listening to Learners?* (LSIS, 2009).

*3 Learning and skills policies*

The Learner Involvement Strategy was developed as a major policy in the previous UK New Labour Government but only applied as a national strategy in England (the other three countries, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, manage their own education policies and are committed to learner involvement in different ways and to different degrees) (LSIS, 2012). More recently the UK Coalition Government hasset out the ways in which education and training providers will have more responsibility for their own destiny (BIS, 2011c).

*4 Resources for ‘learner voice’ development*

Many of the resources to implement the learner voice strategies described can be found on the LSIS Excellence Gateway (LSIS, 2012, although the site is only accessible once registration has been achieved. Perhaps the most significant recent publication in relation to disadvantaged learners has described the work done by LSIS on learner voice in relation to adults with profound and complex learning difficulties (LSIS, 2011). An example of a summary report for 2009/10 can be seen at BIS (2011d).

The largest organisation for learners in the UK is the National Union of Students (NUS) with many further education providers having a student union branch, though not all. The NUS (2012) recognises that it is largely a ‘young’ organisation but contrary to public belief, is about more than higher education and has a dedicated FE team and a FE vice-president elected each year (NUS, 2012).

The oldest intermediary body in England and Wales with learners at the heart of its purpose is the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE, 2012a). NIACE managed the only regional learner panel in Humberside (NIACE, 2012b). The National Learner Panel was wound up at the end of the previous New Labour Government.

*5 Learner Surveys*

A number of government reports cover results from the England learner satisfaction surveys (BIS, 2011a). It is worth noting that all learners in the publicly funded FE system are asked key questions about their experience of teaching and learning. In 2011 a survey of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was carried out (BIS, 2011b), partly to inform government strategy in relation to this group of learners in further education.

*6. Advice and guidance to teachers*

Two of the inspectorates in the UK offer guidance on their website in relation to learner voice. Estyn (2010), the inspectorate for Wales, provides supplementary guidance to teachers about listening to learners in a Welsh further education college. These include self-assessment manuals for adult and community learning and further education. Ofsted (2012), the inspectorate for England, offers several good practice examples of learner voice, such as an example of developing a good students’ union in a further education college. Advice and guidance about learner voice for teachers and providers has also been effective in several parts of Scandinavia (Vilhjálmsdóttir et al., 2011).

**Some emerging findings**

The data from the interviews in Europe are analysed under a number of thematic headings.

*How is information collected from students on attitudes to learning?*

There is variable practice among VET organisations in collecting data from students in the countries sampled. Most education providers in England commented that too much information has been collected in the past. They are now looking forward to reduced expectations of the amount of data required, in response to the Government’s intention to reduce bureaucracy and to give the sector greater freedom from central government control (BIS, 2011C). There is an immense amount of data on individual learners stored at college and national level that identifies learner characteristics and course information. However, information on attitudes to learning will be found only at course tutor level. Only where diagnostic assessment is routine do tutors keep this kind of data systematically, as in the case of learners with learning disabilities or those following literacy courses. In some instances education providers with adult learners were using the five-stage Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement process (RARPA) (LSIS, 2012a) that was designed as a systematic way of introducing rigour in non-accredited work, such that it justified funding from the public purse. Where the RARPA process is used, individuals record their own perceptions and teachers would have information on student attitudes to learning from Stage 2 onwards. Use of RARPA is expected of all non-accredited programmes as good practice.

*How is the information analysed, summarized and fed back to learners?*

Where students with learning disabilities are enrolled, the process of generating feedback is a joint one between tutor or learning support worker and student. In Scotland, for example, use of electronic communication mats has made the process both more tangible and more collective. Significant research work on ‘catching confidence’ and ‘formative assessment’ has also led to more systematic and widespread use in further education of joint recording of attitudes to learning and how this is influencing progress. Much attention is paid to advice and instruction from Ofsted (the national inspection organisation in England), and Estyn (the inspectorate for Wales). Other bodies, such as NALA (National; Adult Literacy Agency in Ireland), suggest good practice for adult literacy programmes that involve learners having their own clear voice in any assessment process.

*What regulatory frameworks are in place for collecting information about student experience of teaching and learning?*

Few regulatory frameworks are aimed at collecting information about student experience. However, in England there are several such mechanisms.

First, annual surveys are carried out on students’ perceptions in relation to their experiences in the further education sector. Second, an annual survey of student satisfaction is carried out for the Skills Funding Agency that is part of BIS. The survey is changing. The Learner Satisfaction Survey in 2011/12 (formerly known as Learner Views) will be part of the new Public Information Framework. It will make use of the existing Framework for Excellence (FfE) performance indicators (PIs), including the Learner Views survey. The FfE was designed as a way of assessing the effectiveness of individual institutions.

In line with Government policy, the new Public Information Framework is focused on ensuring that the public get good information about the courses and provision available to them through the Learner Satisfaction Survey (BIS, 2011e). It is expected that all publicly funded FE institutions are within scope (SFA, 2012). Almost all providers interviewed found the survey of help but only for benchmarking. Most said they would find it more useful to survey students themselves because directly relevant course level data can then be obtained, which is more useful than the national survey data that is necessarily general. None of the students interviewed were aware of any results from these surveys.

The new Learner Satisfaction Survey is an online survey and can be completed at any time, 24 hours a day during the survey window from any internet-linked device including laptops, BlackBerrys and i-phones. In exceptional circumstances institutions can apply to use paper surveys with some of the learners if it is felt that it would be impossible for them to complete the survey online.

In terms of course-level feedback, a pilot in 2010/11 involved learners being given the option to answer a small number of questions at Course Level. It is SfA’s intention that, subject to data reliability, course level responses will be published to provide useful information for prospective learners. Providers are asked to refer to a Course Level guidance note for more information on how to prepare learners for the Course Level questions of the survey.

#### However, a more immediate and less ‘research-based’ approach is in use in at least one England institution. Here learners complete a ‘trip advisor’-type assessment of their course whenever they wish. This is online, and, of course, public and any prospective student can see the comments clearly, course by course for every course put on by the institution. Daily monitoring by the college means that there is immediate feedback to the management of what students think of their teaching in their courses. There is growing use of such public information feedback.

Second, there are some research surveys. For example, in 2011 a survey of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was carried out, partly to inform Government strategy in relation to this group of learners in further education (BIS, 2011b). Most providers interviewed in that survey said they had received no feedback on difficulties experienced by their learners in relation to completing the national survey, involving staff where students had barriers of communication (deaf, blind etc).

Third, the Public Information Framework, which is as strong as the SfA student satisfaction expectation, is the one required for inspection. Again, this is the case in Wales and England. In Wales the inspectorate set out their expectations very clearly:

The purpose of the guidance is to help inspectors to communicate effectively with learners in order to gain their views as part of the inspection process. In addition, the guidance may help providers to gather the views of learners as part of the process of their self-evaluation. Learner voice is a key source of evidence of achievement, attitudes and wellbeing. By listening to learners, inspectors will give learners the opportunity to show their knowledge and understanding of their work, how they are doing and what they need to do to improve. It will also give them an opportunity as to whether they feel supported, and to what extent the provider contributes to their wellbeing. The learners that are to be interviewed should be selected carefully... (Estyn, 2010)

Estyn suggest that, as in England, every institution write and publish a self-assessment report in which the views of learners form a key part. Estyn go on to suggest that any provider using public money ought to take account of appropriate methods of communication with learners (especially where there may be barriers) and that inspectors (and providers) need to listen well and ask a variety of questions. Examples are given in the guidance. Respondents in interview all mentioned the inspectorate’s expectations as being a strong motivator for action within their institutions – far more so than SfA surveys. Ofsted in England have recently given notice that they will be listening even closer to what learners say about their experiences.

At this stage it is worth noting that a national committee on learner voice has been established in the UK to monitor the programme between the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the National Union of Students. It is expected that this monitoring will contribute ideas for a development programme for the near future. It is also worth noting that the Government has given notice of its intention to research further the wider benefits of learning, which had begun under the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre at the University of London (WBLRC, 2012).

*What account is taken of the diversity of experience of students who may be disadvantaged in the learning context?*

Most providers were well aware of the barriers some students face and made particular efforts to encourage these learners to persist in their courses. For example one provider talked of employing BSL (British Sign Language) signers to ‘hear’ from deaf students. Another mentioned their expectation that course tutors with particular skills in communicating with adults with profound and complex learning difficulties would assist students. In response to this question one provider, with over 2,000 students for whom English is not their first language, said they used native speakers and ESOL support tutors to identify learners’ views. Almost all respondents said they took great account of differences. Students confirmed this view. In Norway, learners are asked their views as part of their information, advice and guidance process, which in turn takes account of any barriers they might be up against.

*What is understood by learner voice and learner feedback?*

One respondent summed up the generally heard response: “Well, not student questionnaires, that’s for sure.” He went on to explain that in his provision (entirely learners with challenging behaviour or profound and complex learning difficulties) learner voice was an essential part of the curriculum and all its processes. Access to this voice was best made through conversation and not forms. He concluded his comments with a description of empowering course reviews led by learners using information technology to speak for them. This willingness to use technology to enable learners to express their views was a common theme where students were faced with significant barriers. The concept of learner voice as a continuum can be seen in Table 2.

*What aspects of learner voice and feedback are most effective?*

In Ireland learners in literacy schemes said that they found their voice was heard and effectively listened to through:

* forming a national committee to speak for learners
* having training in public speaking
* addressing the European Parliament about literacy matters
* establishing a person ‘by the door’ for nervous students on enrolment
* the participative way their tutors involved them in everything.

In Wales and England the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) uses a course representative system, and this was the case in several further education colleges – the largest with over 450 representatives[[6]](#footnote-6) - brought together at department and faculty level through facilitated discussion groups. Some learners commented on their role as giving them new citizenship skills (public speaking; listening to others etc) and some providers made strong points about the inadequacy of having learners on Boards and Trusts if there was not a system of learner meetings feeding in to this role.

The practice of inviting ‘trip-advisor’–type feedback on courses and involving learners interviewing and selecting new staff are not yet widespread but are common enough to imply an emerging trend. Two providers made the point that having a learner engagement strategy was fundamental to their quality improvement as an institution. Another pointed out that it was fundamental to the curriculum planning and basic pedagogy that learners be involved as co-producers of the curriculum.

Common to many providers in England was the view that learner voice information was used as feedback on teacher performance and for ensuring student satisfaction. A key mechanism, echoed in at least three interviews, was the ‘you said: we did’ process. This involved posters listing students’ comments (sometimes in every classroom, corridor and intranet) contained in feedback through course representatives, learner liaison committees or learners/governors committees (ie ‘you [student] said’), followed by what the college was doing in response (ie ‘we [managers] did’). Some institutions said they were moving to more frequent (fortnightly) reporting of student responses in this way because of its impact.

*What aspects of learner voice are not effective?*

One national development officer made the point that learner engagement was so developed that she had great concern for the voice of staff. Other interviewees confirmed this view: for example, learners were involved in interviewing for new staff; in observing and judging the quality of teachers’ teaching; and in every strategic decision. There was some concern among VET providers about the cost of supporting learner voice initiatives. Several providers felt that having learners on their governing bodies had no real benefit for learner or college and needed re-thinking. The national committee on learner voice in England suggested that work needs to be done to improve the expectations of all governors in relation to student governors. Of concern repeatedly was the absence of learner voice development in work-based learning.

*What mechanisms are used to hear and give feedback to learners who leave before they finish their courses?*

Only one provider interviewed said they did this well. It is usually expected that course tutors will follow up students who leave, usually through email. It was suggested by one institution that swift telephone follow-up on absenteeism in part-time programmes makes a big difference to retention. It was agreed by most providers that they could do better in this area. One provider found that telephone calls to students at home asking them if they were all right (“We missed you today and were worried about you”) brought the vast majority of students back to college with limited absenteeism as a result. Retention rates increased to over 90 per cent from 85 per cent in one year.

*What is done to identify potential learners who, for whatever reason, do not enrol?*

This question led to the most discussion in all interviews in the UK, Ireland and Norway. Three key points emerged. First, that robust information, advice and guidance (IAG) was key to learner participation (Norwegian experience suggests that this is critical). Second, that learners’ positive stories attract other learners to courses. This is well proven through Adult Learners’ Week activity in the UK and Australia, and confirmed through interviews where many respondents pointed to the marketing potential of learners’ views and experiences. Third, that direct approaches to potential learners through groups, clubs, friends and relatives is both more immediate and more successful than blanket marketing. For example, providers commented that some of the most effective outreach work was done in partnership with the voluntary sector and other bodies close to ‘the front line’ when it came to attracting those who need to enrol but, for reasons of diffidence, cannot actually do so. In Ireland the NALA students’ committee reported the positive impact of learners being stationed at enrolment points to catch those (like themselves) who found the process intimidating.

*How does the role of the interviewee affect perceptions of learner voice?*

Findings in Europe and Australia were similar here. For example:

* in the countries sampled, national development officers and policy makers focus on learner voice as a critical means of improving quality and ensuring that courses provided met students’ needs;
* teachers, tutors and inspectors saw a direct link between learner voice and the preparation for active citizenship later on;
* principals and chief executives mentioned the importance of going beyond regulatory frameworks and the important place of learner voice in improving quality and enhancing a provider’s competitive edge;
* the growing confidence of learner voice when supported by student union activities (such as leadership training, equality training or model constitutions).

*How is learner voice affected by location?*

There is a big discrepancy in views about learner voice between different kinds of providers. In institutions where learners are largely or entirely part-time, course representative systems were less popular. The largest providers have developed system-wide approaches to obtaining learner feedback and see the next stage of learner voice development as being in relation to co-production or co-ownership of the learning and teaching process (such as through interviewing and judging quality of teaching).

All respondent further education (but not work-based training) providers in England and Wales had learners on their Trust or College Boards, with varying degrees of effectiveness. There was no difference between the experiences of providers in relation to programmes deemed to be largely vocational and those deemed not. Where there was no inspectorate or history of inspection the learner voice developments were much more focused on consulting adults (Jude, 2003), enhancing learner democracy (Horne, Lekhi, & Blaug, 2006) and promoting wellbeing than in improving quality or challenging poor teaching.

Given the above it is possible to see a modified form of the earlier table, incorporating views from providers and where these might lie on an expansive – restrictive continuum:

*Table 5 Colligan and Naik (2006) with quotations from interviewees in UK*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Types of participation** | **Types of involvement** | **Levels of engagement** | **Typical responses (from interviews)** | **Restrictive – Expansive Continuum** |
| Manipulation | Learners directed and not informed; Learners ‘Rubberstamp’ staff decisions | Non -participation | ‘Learners aren’t here long enough to consult them so we don’t tend to, unless asked’ | **Restrictive ->** |
| Decoration | Learners indirectly involved in decisions, not aware of rights or involvement options | ‘We had to have learners on the Governing Body but they never say anything’ |
| Informing | Learners merely informed of actions & changes, but views not actively sought | ‘We ensure that learners know what is happening through our tutor groups’ |
| Consultation | Learners fully informed, encouraged to express opinions, but with little or no impact | Tokenism | ‘We consult our learners in view of planning so all our courses we put on pretty much are planned with the learner in mind’ |
| Placation | Learners consulted & informed & listened to, but no guarantee changes made are wanted | ‘Learners attend a termly meeting’ |
| Partnership | Learners consulted & informed. Outcomes result of negotiations between staff & learners | ‘We have a “you said, we did” policy here which is discussed termly at the student parliament’ |
| Delegated power | Staff inform agendas for action, but learners responsible for initiatives & programs that result | Learner empowerment | ‘The student liaison committee advises the governors and executive each term’ |
| Learner control | Learners initiate agendas, responsible for management of issues & change. Power delegated to learners; active in designing education. | ‘Learners have a strong influence on the kinds of courses we offer. They are involved at every level: interviewing directors; membership of the Board; judging the quality of teaching. We wouldn’t make any major strategic decision without their involvement’ | **Expansive** |

Most adult and further education providers in the UK have systems for identifying learners’ views. As summarised by one college, these can seem overwhelming:

We also have the class representatives association and the student executive committee. These are autonomous groups that have been at the college for many years. One of them produces a magazine … There are also student representatives on the governing body and on the committees of governors … and a new community learning students’ forum… We have course evaluations, student evaluations, tutor evaluations, when we observe lessons by the observation team … We also have the students’ survey… over five per cent of the whole student body… We also have a formal tutorial practice… and learner disability forum. [College Curriculum Manager]

In contrast, our study found that one area was significantly weaker than others in the sector. Learner voice among work-based learning providers is a particular challenge. It is suggested that some work-based trainers only see their learners once every two weeks because they are out on placement.

This is a situation recognized by the national inspectorate in England:

* …the area where it hasn’t necessarily evolved as much is the workplace learning areas because it isn’t that kind of set up… apart from questionnaires and so on, if you try to get them to think and do things like forums and to get representatives involved they…have an issue about timing, about location, about numbers…I always find it easier to talk to people in workplace learning about what they are saying about involvement in improvement, not decision-making… [Ofsted national inspector]

There may be something in this view that the involvement of learners in decision-making is not part of the official agenda, whereas involvement in quality improvement might be. If trainees are seen as ‘employees’ rather than customers this might explain the difference between the extent of learner voice in workplace settings compared with college settings. In addition, the part-time nature of the work cannot be the problem, given that some of the most successful organizations developing learner voice strategies have almost all part-time enrolment. It is something to do with workplaces being ‘a different culture’, and that culture might be that of employment itself. In addition there is the problem of individualization:

Providers will tell you that part of the review process [in the workplace] with their assessor, their key contact person, is that on an individual basis they will be asking for feedback and that’s part of their feedback process. But then that becomes difficult if the learner is finding it difficult and feels that the assessor isn’t out that often etc… It is not a confidential system; it is a system that can be influenced by the fact that I am sitting next to my assessor and I am unlikely to say to my assessor that, “I don’t like this”. [Ofsted national inspector]

Nevertheless, some systems to promote learner voice in workplace learning have been developed. These include using a neutral person to collate views from different trainees in a central training centre. Electronic systems, ‘like suggestion feedback boxes…suggestion box’, are typically used. The judgement nationally is that things are improving but slowly, in England:

I see people in workplace learning settings involving their learners in evaluation of what they receive, which is the training ... those are starting to become more commonplace. [Ofsted national inspector]

**Conclusion**

All of the learner voice activity in the further education sector in England can be found on the continuum described in Table 2. The differences can best be summarised under four themes or purposes to learner voice:

* for information exchange and marketing
* to improve quality or because of external imperatives (usually inspection)
* to enhance citizenship learning or democracy
* to obtaining ownership of their education.

The commonest response was about *information giving:*

* Learner voice is basically a feedback system to enable students to properly give their opinion of certain college procedures and the way the college goes about its day to day routine really. In a nutshell. [Student Union president]
* …it is utilized on a daily basis for numerous things, consultation and social space for things like this [i.e. interviews by researchers] [Curriculum area manager]

Learner voice as a process for assisting in widening participation and enhancing the *marketing* of college programs was also evident:

* *…*it’s about a partnership between staff and students to get the most out of the institution. There are two main factors. Who are the college’s biggest marketers – our students. And who are our biggest consumers – our students ... so it is trying to get that complete and show it together. [Quality manager]
* …and doesn’t the college make good use of ex learners to talk to potential learners? I mean that happens in our area and you need to see for yourself that the best marketing people for the college are actually learners, so when [curriculum] areas go out to schools they take learners with them. When we have open days we make sure we have got learners about to actually be talking to prospective people. [Program area manager]

However*, quality improvement* was a close second to information and marketing:

* We want to be an outstanding college, we want to be a good college that responds to the learner needs so we try and create every opportunity for the learner to come to us. [Curriculum area manager]
* I see learner voice as a quality assurance process really. So my point of view it is about making sure that we have the right services and the best service. [Student services manager]

Part of the quality improvement theme included recognition of what external regulators, usually inspectors, might say.

Some respondents felt learner voice was about *democracy and democratization*, including preparing people for having a voice in their communities and enabling them to learn new democratic skills:

* It’s part of the democracy, being in a democracy is putting it into action… so it is actually part of teaching and learning as well because it is something about helping the student to learn something new to probably open up new doors for them… [T]he issue was the changes in ESOL fees and our learners took a lot of part in it… we organized meetings with the local MPs, so they came and talked to the three MPs and signed a petition. [Program area manager]
* We are always trying to make sure that our learners are on the same playing field as all the other learners so that they can operate in society in the same way that everybody else in the society can, and the learner voice is part of that. [Curriculum area manager]
* I wonder how many people who stood for the student union post this year were also reps last year. There would be quite a number wouldn’t there? I would say nearly every single one was a course rep last year. Yes it was 12 wasn’t it? Yes, 12. [Student services manager]

A fourth theme, the ownership of one’s own educational opportunities was a smaller but no less significant concern:

…learner voice is a way that learners have an ownership in their education, an ownership of the courses that are run in the college as a whole and having advice from the tutors is a way of having their voice helps them feel like they do belong here [Curriculum area manager]

It may well be that developing a model which enables providers, stakeholders and learners to describe their approaches and views against a restrictive – expansive continuum could enable providers to enhance what they are doing in terms of listening to the voice of learners. Without a common way of viewing the purposes of learner voice such development will be limited by the places and organisations in which learners find themselves. For learners who are disadvantaged this may add another layer of limitation. **References**

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1. Formerly titled, ‘Learner Voice in Vocational Education and Adult Community Education’ in the ‘Hear me Roar’ seminar stream. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *School of Education & Arts, University of Ballarat, Australia* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *National Institute of Adult Continuing Education* (*NIACE), England and Wales* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The word ‘learner’ is used here to mean ‘learner’, ‘trainee’ ‘student’, ‘apprentice’, ‘client’ or ‘participant’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The word ‘provider’ is used instead of ‘organisation’, ‘college’, ‘service’ or ‘institution’, to mean any kind of provider in the further and adult education system. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This institution had to invent ‘Super reps’ to take forward the views of other representatives, there being so many. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)