

# **National Learner Satisfaction Survey: Offenders Learning and Skills Service Pilot**

## **Summary Brief**

Research study  
conducted for the  
Learning and Skills  
Council

**January 2008**

Of interest to everyone involved in the  
further education system



## **Background and Introduction**

1. This paper summarises the key findings of a pilot study that uses different methodologies to survey learners in public prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs). The study was conducted by Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).
2. The overall aims of the study were to make recommendations to the LSC on the most appropriate methodology for extending the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS) to include learners in public prisons, as well as to gather information on these learners' perceptions of their learning. The NLSS is a large scale survey of over 43,000 learners engaged in LSC funded learning and covers Further Education (FE), Work-based Learning (WBL) and Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL).
3. This paper firstly discusses the methodologies that were piloted and subsequent recommendations. It will then summarise the key findings from the survey.

## **Methodology/Main Issues**

4. The pilot involved 18 public prisons and YOIs across three regions representing a range of prison types. Three different survey methods were tested among 786 learners:
  - Face-to-face interviews conducted by trained interviewers
  - Self-completion sessions administered by trained interviewers
  - Self-completion sessions administered by prison education staff.

### *5. Liaison with Public Prisons*

The 18 prisons and YOIs that took part in the pilot were helpful, co-operative and well-organised in their approach to the research. There was close liaison between dedicated members of the research team and prison education staff throughout the set-up and fieldwork phases (i.e. to gain security clearance for interviewers, to set up the interviews and organise the distribution and return of questionnaires) and this contributed significantly to the success of the pilot.

## 6. *Methodology*

The self-completion approach administered by trained interviewers offered the best value for money – it was significantly cheaper and less time consuming to organise compared with the face-to-face approach and, at the same time, overcame some of the problems encountered when prison education staff were responsible for administering the classroom sessions (e.g. issues relating to confidentiality and speed at which completed questionnaires were returned). However, the support of prison education staff during these sessions was important in ensuring learners felt comfortable with the survey, as well as in identifying to interviewers learners who may require help with completing the questionnaire.

7. The self-completion approach was, however, unsuitable for some groups of learners, most notably those with problems reading, writing or understanding English (these learners were more likely than average to be in YOIs). Such learners had greater difficulty filling in a self-completion questionnaire due to literacy problems and a lack of attention span. For these learners, a face-to-face approach was clearly more appropriate. Therefore, it is proposed that a national survey of learners in prisons and YOIs would comprise both self-completion and face-to-face approaches.

## 8. *Questionnaire length and content*

The questionnaire was designed to follow the main NLSS questionnaire as closely as possible. However, the findings from this pilot confirm that the questionnaire in its present format is too long and complex for these learners especially those who took part in the self-completion approach.

9. Some departure from the NLSS questionnaire will be essential in order to make the survey more engaging and relevant to learners in public prisons who are, on average, more likely to have poor literacy and numeracy skills (the qualification questions will need to be changed to reflect the types of courses available to learners in prisons and YOIs). We also recommend conducting some cognitive testing of a revised version of the questionnaire prior to a national roll-out.

## **Key Findings**

10. This section summarises learners' responses to the survey questionnaire. The findings are based on a sample of prisoners engaged in LSC funded learning in 18 prisons and YOIs, across three regions. As such, these findings should be treated as indicative rather than representative of all learners in prisons and YOIs in England.

#### *11. Learners' demographic profile*

Half of the learners who took part in the pilot were aged 25 or above (52%), with the remainder spread more or less equally between the 15-20 and 21-24 age groups (16% and 15%, respectively). The majority were male (77%) and described themselves as white (68%).

12. Just six per cent consider themselves to have a disability and one in ten (11%) said they had learning difficulties. And, for one in eight (12%) learners, English was not their first language.

13. The highest level of qualifications held by the majority of learners is at level 2 or below (32% at 'entry' or level 1 and 34% at level 2), with just over one in five (22%) holding higher level qualifications.

#### *14. Type of learning and training*

The most common type of learning/training undertaken by learners was life skills/preparatory (including adult literacy, adult numeracy, ESOL and ICT) – 43% said they were currently engaged in this course of study. The next most popular is basic skills training (15%), followed closely by OCR/BTEC Nationals (14%). Almost one in 10 (9%) were studying for NVQs and 6% for a GCSE/GCSE in vocational subjects. A wide range of other learning/training was also being undertaken, but none of this was being pursued by more than 3% of learners.

15. Most of this training activity was being undertaken at either 'entry level' (32%), level 1 or level 2 (32% and 28%, respectively). Just one in eight (12%) were studying at level 3 or above.

16. The large majority of learners were spending more than 10 hours each week in classrooms or workshops (73%). Learners in YOIs tended to spend the most time in formal study – exactly half spent more than 20 hours each week in a classroom/workshop, compared with just over a third (37%) overall.

#### *17. Satisfaction with learning experience*

The majority of learners in this pilot study were satisfied with their overall learning experience (81% including 55% who were extremely or very satisfied) and felt that their course or training was meeting their needs. Just five percent of learners were dissatisfied.

18. Satisfaction with the quality of teaching was also high (85% satisfied), with learners rating teachers, tutors and trainers consistently highly across a range of different indicators. Most also agreed they were treated fairly and with respect by teaching staff.

#### 19. *Pre-entry advice & guidance*

The most common reasons cited for choosing a course or training were to gain a qualification, advance skills and knowledge and help with finding a job on release (all these reasons were cited by more than half of learners).

20. Learners were generally positive about the advice and guidance they received prior to starting their course or training. Most felt well-informed particularly in terms of the content of the course and how it would be taught (almost three-quarters felt well-informed about both of these aspects). Areas where information was deemed to be less adequate relate to the amount of time learners would be expected to devote to their course and how the training would help them gain job-related skills.

#### 21. *Learner support*

While a quarter of responding learners said they had not experienced any specific difficulties during their course or training (25%), a third complained about other students making a noise and disrupting the class (32%), and a similar proportion cited other students arriving consistently late (29%). Nevertheless, most believed that issues were dealt with quite well by teachers.

22. Two in five learners (42%) also reported problems they personally faced during their learning/training. The problem most commonly selected was maintaining motivation (17%), followed by reading/writing and maths/numeracy skills (13% and 12%, respectively). However, just half (52%) of those who encountered any problems actually sought advice or help to resolve them. When help was received, however, it was generally found to be useful (73%).

#### 23. *Attitudes towards and perceived impact of learning*

Learners were more mixed in their assessment of their feelings towards education when thinking back to when they left school – 31% said they had negative feelings in this respect and 22% said they were indifferent. But a majority did now seem motivated to learn, mostly in order to improve their career

prospects. Learners who were positive about their school education experience also seemed to be more positive about learning generally.

24. In light of this generally positive overall picture, there was some good feedback on the whole about the perceived impact of learning. For example, around two-thirds agreed that they are now more confident (64%), and similar proportions felt more positive about learning as a result (64%) and had gained enthusiasm for their subject of study (67%). Four in five (80%) also believed that their course or training would help them get a job in the future.

### **Key Offender groups**

25. However, despite the majority of the sample reporting a very positive learning experience, the younger learners in young offender institutions were consistently less satisfied than other older learners (this group also tended to spend the most time in formal study). For example, they were much more likely than other groups to say that they had engaged in learning only because they had been made to, and reported the fewest benefits from the learning/training they have received. Other groups who were consistently less satisfied with various aspects of their learning experience include learners with a disability/learning difficulty, non-white learners and female learners.

