

Learner Involvement with Inspection

A sub-group of the National Learner Panel met with Ofsted representatives as part of the Proportionate Inspection of Further Education Colleges consultation process and to consider a discussion paper on Increasing the Learner Voice in Inspection on 20th February 2007. A summary of the sub-group's response is outlined below.

Proportionate inspection of further education colleges: response to consultation document

As learners, we broadly welcome the Ofsted inspection process as we feel that it has the interests of learners at heart. An Ofsted inspection allows an independent evaluator to take account not only of the more obvious indicators of successful provision (e.g. the grades that learners are achieving), but also to assess other key areas of provision such as pastoral care and learner facilities.

We understand that the recommendations in the document are made in the context of significant budget cuts and that the suggestions for inspection reform are therefore aimed at making best use of the reduced budget available – rather than necessarily what would be desirable in an 'ideal world'. With this in mind, we are in broad agreement with most of the suggestions, but there are several caveats that we would like to add from a learner perspective.

- In the light of budget cuts, we agree with the proposal to move to short inspections of outstanding colleges and with the suggestion that these should not be subject to further monitoring visits, providing high performance is maintained. However, shorter inspections mean fewer opportunities to surface some of the broader issues that may be affecting learners in any given institution. **In order to mitigate this risk, we recommend that this move is accompanied by a requirement for providers to include a learner satisfaction survey as a compulsory element of the inspection process.**

However, we are aware that satisfaction surveys can only be effective indicators of success if the right questions are asked in the first place. Therefore, **in the long term we would like to see providers aligning the questions within their learner surveys with impartial, third party frameworks such as the National Student Satisfaction Survey.** This would have the benefit of enabling Ofsted (and of course the provider) to measure learner satisfaction in that particular institution against national benchmarks. (Qu 1 & 2)

- It seems reasonable to us that the light touch inspections for good colleges should continue. However, we are opposed to colleges having too much notice of an Ofsted inspection. **Colleges should be required to show Ofsted what the learner really experiences day in,**

day out – not after weeks have been spent updating paperwork and painting corridors. (Qu 3)

- We are broadly in favour of a more intensive approach to the reinspection of inadequate colleges and the suggestion that follow-up visits should be scheduled within 12 - 15 months. However, we are very aware that it takes time to implement new strategies – and ironically there could be a negative impact on the learner in the short term if a provider is too busy concentrating on bureaucracy to deal with the real business in hand. **The new reduced timeframes need to be sensitive to the potential impact upon learners in the short-term – whilst also aiming to accelerate the long term improvement process.** (Qu 5)
- We can see that desk monitoring is a cost-effective way of providing some sort of Quality Assurance on an annual basis. **However, as with the proposed shorter inspection process, we would like to see learner satisfaction surveys become a compulsory element of this monitoring process.** (Q6)
- **We would be happy to see the inspection cycle shortened from four to three years, if finances permit this,** as we see this as being in the interests of ensuring quality of provision for the learner. (Q7)
- Finally, we cautiously welcome Ofsted intervening to assess and make judgements about poorly performing colleges, where invited by the LSC. **However, our understanding is that ‘poorly performing’ could be interpreted very differently across different subject areas.** We know that courses in skills such as construction frequently fall below the 50% success rate – and, under this recommendation, risk being reviewed and potentially cut from the curriculum of that provider. However, we think it is important that Ofsted/LSC look at each course and subject on its merits. Any such assessment should take account of *why* learners are leaving or ‘failing’ courses. If they are leaving to go to a job, or start an apprenticeship, where they can develop skills on the job, it shouldn’t be seen as a failure of the provider or course, just because the learner doesn’t complete the qualification. **If courses end up being cut because of an inability to distinguish between a *poor level of provision* (which is unacceptable) and the *particular issues that affect completion rates* on certain courses, then it will only be the learner that suffers.** (Q8)

Increasing learner voice in inspection: a discussion paper

Summary

We actively welcome the opportunity to increase the involvement of learners in the inspection.

i) How should learners be involved?

- Shortly prior to their arrival, Ofsted should actively encourage learners to contribute their input to the forthcoming inspection process. This opportunity should be clearly communicated throughout the organisation.
- The mechanisms for gathering this input should enable and encourage different types of learners to participate (whether ACL or WBL, full-time or part-time). For example, learners could participate by:
 - filling in anonymous online surveys
 - posting responses in dedicated boxes
 - voicing their views at a specific inspection-focused forum for learners.
- However, the risk with all of these mechanisms is that valuable inspection time could be given over to investigating individual grievances that are not representative of the learner body as a whole.
- This risk could be mitigated if Student Councils were charged with ‘screening’ the responses gathered through these mechanisms before they were passed through to Ofsted and indicating whether they are representative of the broader learner community opinion or not.

ii) What should Ofsted be asking learners?

- What changes could colleges make that would enhance your learning?
- Do you think your college is meeting your needs?
- Does your college have an elected representative body?
- Do you use the facilities? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Do you spend extra time on your study outside of your lessons?
- Has the provider acted on an issue that learners have raised?
- Are you on the right course? If not, will the provider support you if you want to change to another?
- Do you enjoy your course?

iii) What concerns do learners have about taking part in the inspection process?

- Learners might not necessarily give an honest answer about the quality of the teaching if we think there is any chance that the course or funding for it will be cut as a result – this is particularly the case for the adult learners amongst us who are paying for our course.
- It is essential that confidentiality is assured, or learners will not feel able to answer openly and honestly – whether we are answering in person, or by email.

iv) Should there be a learner on the inspection ‘team’?

- There are issues here around confidentiality, but it is an idea we feel merits more discussion. In principle, it might be a good idea in for learners to be able to provide some sort of commentary or context for inspectors as they go round.
- We are aware that some colleges are starting to use peer review processes (where learners from a different provider comment on the organisation from the learner perspective). Perhaps there is even scope to develop a pool of proficient, experienced peer reviewers that providers could draw upon for this purpose.