

FE Public Information – Learner Satisfaction survey Updated November 2011 v1.2

Implementing the course-level questions

The purpose of this guide is to give you some useful advice and to give examples of successful approaches other providers have adopted.

The Basics

The survey combines nine provider-level rating questions with a set of three course-level questions that are completed for each Learning Aim a learner is taking.

To complete the course-level elements learners will need:

- (1) Your provider reference number (UKPRN)
- (2) Either their Unique Learner Number (ULN) if this is available or their personal Learner Reference Number as entered on the Individualised Learner Record (ILR)
- (3) The unique reference for each Learning Aim from the Learning Aims Reference Application (LARA) , formerly the Learning Aims Database (LAD)

Learners need the first two anyway to allow them to take part in the Survey. Learning Aim Reference codes are stored on the management information systems of all providers as part of the ILR.

Bridgwater College – Effective Communications

Bridgwater College is situated in Somerset and offers a wide-ranging curriculum for under 19s, adults, Apprentices and employers.

The College's four Senior Tutors organised the Survey in 2010/11, using the College's tutorial system. All groups meet their tutors each week and communications were carefully managed to encourage all students to take part and to ensure consistent messages.

Before completing the Survey all students were briefed by their tutors on:

1. The purpose of the Survey.
2. Why it was important.
3. What questions to expect.
4. How to access the course-level questions.

The approach was viewed by the College as relatively time-intensive but it worked well and a high proportion of students completed course-level responses with accurate Learning Aims codes. The codes were available to tutors in their registers to support the students. Senior Tutors at the College indicated that the key to getting high and successful participation by students was thorough and clear briefing to tutors and, through them, students.

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Encouraging Learner Co-operation

Colleges, independent training providers and adult providers all told us it was vital to stress the importance of the Survey and its usefulness to future learners; while at the same time making it as easy as possible for learners to respond.

Harlow College – Clear Planning and Regular Monitoring

Harlow College in West Essex offers a wide-ranging curriculum including sixth form provision, vocational further education, Apprenticeships and higher education. The College treated the Survey as a large and important activity, with a clear communication plan to get the message out to staff and students.

Having decided to go for course-level responses, the College set a target of 70 per cent completion (well above the required minimum) to ensure robust benchmarking comparisons. Students accessed the Survey via the Qube (virtual learning environment) and followed clear links to:

(1) the Course Zone  and then (2) the Survey 

All tutors were given a short but clear survey checklist that stated:

1. When the Survey was to be completed.
2. Why it was important.
3. What information students needed (provider, student and Learning Aims numbers)?
4. What questions the students would be asked.
5. How students could access the course-level questions.

This was accompanied by a personalised list for each tutor, generated from the College information system, listing the student number and Learning Aims for each student.

The College was able to monitor which students had clicked on the Survey link on the Qube and this meant that reminder lists, endorsed by the Principal, could be sent out to tutors at regular intervals to ensure all students were given the opportunity to take part.

The College intends to repeat the approach in 2011/12 and will also increase their use of Student Representatives to help reinforce the message that providing feedback is a student's right as well as helping to provide useful information for future learners. Martin Laverick, Head of Division Performance Management, co-ordinates the Survey.

Careful planning is particularly important where learning takes place in the workplace, as this case study from HABIT shows.

Role of Assessors where Learners are in the Workplace

HABIT is a specialist company providing hair and beauty training solutions to companies throughout the UK. The company significantly increased its response rate in 2010/11 by increasing the time allocated to planning the Survey and monitoring completion rates. This was very time-consuming but did produce results.

Assessors visiting learners, all of whom are employed, gave them access to laptops with online connections during training and assessment visits. The assessors were provided with regular updates on who had completed the Survey and had access to the required Learning Aim codes within the learners' individual learning portfolios.

HABIT plans to use a similar approach this year, but will aim to combine survey completion with progress review discussions wherever possible.

Common Questions

Are Learning Aims the right unit?

We are talking to sector representatives about the best level of aggregation to use. It may sometimes make sense to use clusters of Aims or frameworks but even then we will need to use Aims as the building block.

Why does it have to be the LARA/LAD codes?

We know you may use internal course codes for your own surveys but these only apply to your organisation so would not work for benchmarking across all providers. All providers have to use consistent Aims codes on their ILR for funding returns so these are the obvious choice - although we recognise that the codes can be difficult for learners to transcribe.

Using Mail-merge in an Adult Education Context

Skills&Learning Bournemouth and Poole runs a wide range of provision for adults. The Service did not take up the option of a course-level Survey last year, but it used a personalised mail-merge letter to all learners to explain the purpose of the Survey and give them the provider and learner codes they needed. This could be adapted in future to include Learning Aim codes as well.

What if learners get the Learning Aim code wrong?

We check codes automatically as they are entered. A learner is given three goes to enter a valid code after which they are allowed to proceed but we gather other information to try to identify the Aim. For more details on this and how we will keep you informed of the number of valid course-level responses, please visit the '*Course Level*' page of the Provider Extranet <http://fepisurveys.ipsos-mori.com/learnerssurvey/courselevel>.

Will the benchmarks be based on robust data?

The more providers that administer the course-level option the bigger the benchmarking pool will be. We will not benchmark if the number of providers or learners for an Aim is too small.

Getting Buy-in from Adult Learners

Newcastle City Council's Adult and Community Learning Service run provision for adults across the City. Head of Service Caroline Miller explains that learners are sceptical about national surveys because they are used to internal surveys that are carefully tailored for their learning context and bring an almost immediate response from the Service.

In order to help persuade the learners to take part, the Service offers free coffee and biscuits in the room where surveys are completed and prints off personal slips with all the information learners require (provider reference, learner reference and, potentially, learning aim code). The Service is also considering running the Survey at the same time as its internal survey so that learners know they will get quick feedback from the overall exercise.

Will we need a bigger sample?

You will get most value from benchmarked course-level analysis if it is based on a substantial number of responses for each Aim. The overall survey calculator tells you the minimum number of responses needed to get a valid overall score but you would be advised to give a lot more learners the opportunity to complete the Survey if you want useful benchmarking data.

What would benchmarked data tell us?

There are some predictable variations in learner satisfaction across the country according to age, curriculum area and level of study. Course-level benchmarked data will tell you if patterns in your data are unusual. Providers also tell us that the difference between internal and external survey responses can be revealing.

Overview

We would like to encourage as many providers as possible to gather course-level responses from their learners this year. The Survey already requires you to give your learners details of your provider number and their learner number, either their Unique Learner Number (ULN) if this is available or their personal Learner Reference Number as entered on the ILR. For course-level responses you need to add the Learning Aims codes to this. The providers mentioned in this document who did this last year found that it did add to the administration of the Survey but was manageable. Most learners only have a small number of Aims and many smaller providers only offer a few different Aims.

If your learners do fill in the course-level responses you will get the responses back benchmarked against all the other respondents nationally who were taking each Learning Aim. Providers tell us this will be new and very useful evidence for quality improvement.

Planning Effectively: City College Norwich

City College Norwich is a large general further education college, providing a wide range of further and higher education, including delivering courses for seven separate National Skills Academies. The College has a clear strategy to encourage participation in the Survey, which it feels makes the Survey easy to implement. It took up the offer of course-level responses because of the potential value for future learners and internal quality improvement.

Groups of learners are given a clear briefing that explains both the significance of the Survey and practical arrangements for its completion. The College's MIS system is used to generate a mail-merged list of course codes for each learner and help is on hand to explain what learners are required to do. The approach works well for both full-time and part-time learners, although where the learning happens in the workplace implementation can be more challenging.

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