

# Research and Development

## Key Findings



Yorkshire and the Humber Learner Panel members and NIACE project staff

### **Support to Yorkshire and the Humber Learner Panel**

#### **Introduction:**

The Yorkshire and the Humber Learner Panel ran for three years between May 2007 and May 2010. It was funded by the Yorkshire and the Humber Learning and Skills Council and facilitated through the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).

## Background and Approach:

The remit of the Panel reflected the role of regional LSCs as implementers of policy, and was to provide, “an independent voice to give direct feedback and advice on current and emergent policies and regional plans, to enable better decision making and implementation by the Regional Learning and Skills Council.”

Learner Panels are one way of securing access to the Learner Voice, which has the aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning, the planning of provision and the improvement of support services. The value of learner voice has been summarised by Jawad, Chair of Yorkshire and the Humber panel as follows:

“The learner voice is important. We are the users. We are the ones who have to deal with decisions from the top – so we can tell them what is and isn’t working or what is unlikely to work. I believe if you don’t like the system, don’t moan about it - get in there and change it. That’s what we do.”

Among other issues the regional panel gave feedback to the LSC on:

- Apprenticeships
- IAG
- Employers’ Views of Young People
- Equality and Diversity
- Learning through digital technology
- Implementation of the Machinery of Government Changes

In addition, the Panel worked with the Yorkshire and Humber Open College Network to develop accreditation for Learner Voice. The accreditation is now available as Open College Network units.

## Key Findings:

### 1. Influence and impact

Membership of the Panel had a profound effect on the development of active Panel members.

Impact in the context of Learner Voice is a function of three elements: the clear articulation of the learner view, the ability to listen to that view, and the power or commitment of policy makers and funders to respond to what they have heard. Panel members identified feedback to their views as critical to keeping them engaged, to making them feel they were not wasting their time

and to feeling they were having some influence. They felt their advice should be listened and responded to, even if it is not always possible to act upon their recommendations.

The Panel identified having an Action Plan as critical to a feeling of success and momentum.

## **2. Remit / role**

Formalising the role and remit helped the Panel to work more effectively and was essential in managing people's expectations.

## **3. Recruitment and Membership**

Learners sat on the Panel not as representatives of other learners but as individuals speaking from their own experience. Because the Panel was set up to reflect a range of learner views, recruitment to ensure a wide range of perspectives was important.

## **4. Training and Support**

A successful Learner Panel requires a serious commitment of time, effort and funding resources. Learner Panel members are likely to need both structured and informal training and support, particularly in the initial stages, to develop the confidence and skills to understand and fulfil their role. It was also recognised that skilled facilitation is essential to support inclusive participation.

## **5. Communication**

It is critical to a feeling of achievement that the views of the Panel in response to issues are clearly documented and disseminated, and fed back to funders and policy makers or implementers. In this way individual members recognise that their voice has been recorded and can be heard more effectively or widely.

## **6. Recognition**

Certificates were issued to members in recognition of their input and attendance. Certificates identified individual learner contributions to the Panel. Members felt they could use the evidence in job or education applications or to contribute to their CVs.

The Panel has contributed to the development of a new form of OCN accreditation for developing the representative voice. Panel members aim to gain accreditation through attending a residential training course in autumn 2010.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations:**

The Yorkshire and the Humber Panel has shown that a wide spectrum of learners, including those who lack confidence in written skills, can effectively contribute their individual voices and comment on their experiences with a view to implementation of policy.

A range of approaches to gathering learners' views is important. The mechanism of a Learner Panel enables face to face interaction between learners to discuss and debate issues within a supportive environment. The potential richness of debate and inclusivity cannot, for some types of learner, be as effectively replicated within some other forums such as an online environment. There are advantages and disadvantages of different approaches, so for example, online forums have the potential to reach a far wider audience.

Forums which involve learners in deliberations about the implementation of learning and skills policy are necessary to ensure both proper democratic accountability and that learning provision meets people's needs. In Yorkshire and the Humber, Panel members have provided a learner perspective in relation to policy implementation at a regional level. Their contribution complements the views of the National Learner Panel and local learning forums and provider governing bodies. Taken together the sector, and in particular the LSC, sought to use these different interventions to create a coherent framework for Learner Voice.

The future of the regional tier of government is uncertain at this current time. What is clear is that Learner Voice is essential at whatever level decision making about learning occurs, whether that is at national, regional, sub-regional, local or community level. The Panel is one of a number of possible mechanisms for accessing the Learner Voice. What is important is to get the appropriate mechanism at the appropriate level with adequate resourcing to support the learners.

### **Output/Resources:**

Three reports have been submitted to the funders (the Regional LSC) evaluating the operation of the Panel.

Accreditation for Voice work, including learner voice, has been developed with Y&H OCN network. A training course has been piloted at Northern College and the units are now available for others to use.

### **Funder:**

Yorkshire and the Humber Learning and Skills Council

### **Timescale:**

Start: 2007

Finish 2010

### **Further details:**

[Jan.novitzky@niace.org.uk](mailto:Jan.novitzky@niace.org.uk)