

Skills for Life Improvement Programme – having a major impact

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Providers doing a worksheet at a dyslexia training group in Leicester

85% assessed the Programme to have substantially improved their teaching and learning, either in Skills for Life or in vocational learning or both and 93% reported major improvement in their management and quality improvement processes

Not long ago when achievement rates for apprenticeships shot up, a number of government-funded organisations claimed credit, although to be fair, many also praised the providers and apprentices themselves. Measuring the impact of a policy or programme is fraught with challenges. If research findings are positive, it is not always easy to pinpoint the cause. If findings are inconclusive or negative however, policy makers and their agents are faced with an uncomfortable problem.

Measure the impact on learners

It was therefore with some trepidation that the consortium of national organisations managing the Skills for Life Improvement Programme set out to measure its impact. The Improvement Programme supports the professionalisation of the Skills for Life workforce, helps managers in learning providers to develop a whole organisation approach and embed Skills for Life throughout their provision, and develops

the skills and knowledge of teaching and support staff. Its ultimate purpose is to improve the experiences and achievements of learners; it was the impact on learners that the consortium wanted to measure.

The CfBT led consortium's research expertise was not in question: NRDC at the Institute of Education is the leading national Skills for Life researcher; NIACE and LSN regularly carry out research and the Universities of Wolverhampton and LLU+ at London South Bank University are well versed in the rigours of academic research. CfBT Education Trust is a major education researcher spending over £1m on research last year.

Among these experts, fears were expressed that it might be too early to attempt to measure impact. Some improvements take a long time. Logistical challenges were formidable: what precisely was to be measured, and how should it be done? Resources, as always, were tight.

Survey for evidence of improvement

Providers are in charge of their own improvement, and their managers and teaching staff are best able to make judgements about improvements. So in July and August we conducted a survey among the 660 providers participated in the Programme. They included prisons, voluntary organisations, adult and community education providers and institutes, and independent learning providers newly contracted by the Learning and Skills Council, as well as further education colleges, both generalist and specialist. Nearly all the colleges focused on improving their off-campus provision, especially Train to Gain, other work-based learning and Entry to Employment. We invited them all to tell us on a 4-point scale, whether the Skills for Life Improvement Programme had made a contribution to quality improvement in a range of aspects of teaching and learning which affect learners. We asked them to say whether they had evidence of this improvement, and to give us any other comments they wished. These are the questions we asked:

The response was huge. 72% of providers responded, covering a representative sample of every region and of every part of the diverse sector.

93% reported major improvement

The Improvement Programme had a greater impact than many had anticipated: 85% assessed the Programme to have substantially improved their teaching and learning, either in Skills for Life or in vocational learning or both and 93% reported major improvement in their management and quality improvement processes. Nearly 90% of providers cited evidence, for example their self-assessment report, to support their response.

Although half the providers reported that it was too early to assess the impact of the Programme on learners' achievement, retention, attendance or progression, the vast majority of the others noted the positive impact on these learner outcomes.

Praise for consultancy support

Researchers were also heartened to read the comments that nearly all providers added. They praised the consultancy support

in particular, but also strongly welcomed the professional development training which is tailored to their needs, and takes place predominately on providers' premises.

The 2008-09 Improvement Programme is now under way, and has introduced some changes, as well as built on its strengths. It continues to support teacher education institutes, especially in numeracy and in parts of the country where there is greatest need. All direct provider support is now holistic, rather than divided into different strands, and supports a whole organisation approach to embedding Skills for Life. Consultancy support is much more tailored, so that providers with more need get more support. Train to Gain and offender learning providers take priority.

We will continue to monitor impact, and conduct a follow-up survey next summer, comparing and collating results with what we have learnt so far.

For further details of the Impact Evaluation or of the 2008-09 Improvement Programme, visit www.sflip.org.uk

	Question	Graded Response				
		1	2	3	4	too early to assess
	Has the Skills for Life Improvement Programme made a contribution to quality improvement in:	strong			assess none	assess
1	Management systems					
2	Quality Improvement processes					
3	Literacy or communication or functional English or speaking and listening					
4	Numeracy or functional maths or application of number					
5	English for speakers of other languages					
6	Vocational learning					
7	Assessment of learners' needs					
8	Learners' satisfaction					
9	Retention					
10	Achievement					
11	Progression					
12	Attendance					