

Evaluating the Improvement Programme

■ Roger Turner, Principal Consultant, York Consulting LLP

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The Skills for Life Improvement Programme was established to support all types of providers on their self-improvement journey, with the ultimate goal of improving the experiences, achievements and progression of learners. The programme is so important nationally that QIA commissioned an independent evaluation. Since autumn 2006, York Consulting has been evaluating the programme, working closely with QIA, CfBT and the members of the consortium. Here we reflect on the findings of the evaluation of the first year of the Improvement Programme.

The key purpose of the evaluation was to understand whether the programme is achieving the aim of improving learners’ experiences, achievements and progression. We recognise that it will take some time for improvement activities through SfLIP to deliver these ultimate learner impacts in many of the participating providers. Through the evaluation, we have mapped out the steps to learner impacts and gathered evidence on the progress achieved.

Over the first year, until Aug 2007, around 1,200 providers received support, with over 6,500 teachers being trained, 1,486 of these on accelerated programmes to achieve professional qualifications. The achievement of these levels of participation was a critical first step in achieving the desired impact. It is significant that participants have also reported very high levels of satisfaction. Virtually all of the 110 providers we visited for the evaluation were overwhelmingly satisfied with the support they received. The Head of Skills for Life in one college commented:

‘The advisers were fantastic. I can’t fault them for what they have done and would like them to carry on’.

It has been encouraging to see that involvement in SfLIP has already led to changes in the way participants are delivering Skills for Life. Around a quarter of the providers we visited had either developed new strategies for Skills for Life provision, or had made improvements to their existing strategies. We saw increasing engagement of a wide range of staff in Skills for Life in almost a third of the providers we visited and around a quarter of organisations had adopted new teaching and learning approaches as a result of their involvement. These changes all have the potential to lead to benefits to individual learners over time.

Due to the short elapsed time, we did not expect to see significant evidence of the programme generating learner impacts. However, we were already able to see impacts on learners’ experiences and achievements in just over 10% of the providers we visited. These included increasing learner persistence, increased achievement of qualifications and learners gaining a wider range of skills and knowledge through the introduction of new learning programmes. Over time, we hope that impacts such as these will be more widely observable.

One of the most positive aspects of the evaluation has been the ability to feed the findings to QIA and the delivery consortium over the year, not just through formal reports. As a result, the design of the second year of SfLIP has been influenced, in particular in the way in which activities have been targeted and the expertise within the consortium is being capitalised upon to benefit the sector. As the evaluation continues, we will be exploring further its achievements and impacts, and working to ensure that it generates maximum benefit to Skills for Life learners.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those providers and their staff who contributed to the evaluation of the first year of SfLIP. We look forward to meeting more programme participants as we continue our evaluation activities.

