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Self-assessment and development planning.

Meeting the challenges and gaining the benefits



Learning+Skills Council

'Our self-assessment process starts at the grass roots level and works up the chain... It is the staff doing the job who need to have ownership of their standards and drive those standards up.'

(TQ Training Management Services)

'If the people in the Service do not have ownership of the development plan then it is unlikely to happen.'

(London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham Adult Education Service)

'By working to the Common Inspection Framework, preparing the self-assessment report has become more relevant to staff, and data has been collected in an appropriate format to inform analysis of performance.'

(Women's Technology and Education Centre)

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Preface

Over the summer of 2002, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) national office asked the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) to undertake research into providers' self-assessment and development planning practices.

Providers from across the sector were selected on the basis of strong retention and/or achievement rates for learners. Twenty-four providers responded to a postal questionnaire and/or telephone interview and some sent recent examples of their self-assessment reports and development plans.

This report highlights the way providers are benefiting from self-assessment and dealing with the challenges it presents. It gives an insight into some of the practices they are adopting.

The material gathered during the research gives a useful insight into some good practices in self-assessment and development planning. Providers may find this report helpful as a source of ideas on how to improve their approach to self-assessment and development planning.

The report is not designed to comment on the changes that may be needed as a consequence of *Success for All*. The timing of the research has meant that it was not possible to include any work on the way that self-assessment has been linked to three-year development plans. More work will be required in this area and guidance will be produced in the near future.

Summary

Benefits and Challenges

Providers recognised that self-assessment and development planning contributed to the retention and achievement of learners and to the continuous improvement of provision. The requirements introduced in April 2001 were found to be helpful in ensuring that issues identified during self-assessment were acted upon and that these actions brought about real improvements for learners. Although the causal relationship is indirect and mediated by other elements, the focus on learners in self-assessment and development planning was thought to generate real improvements in teaching and learning which, in turn affected the retention of learners, their standards of achievement and the overall quality of provision.

Mechanisms for obtaining feedback from learners appear to be well established and are being used to generate evidence for self-assessment.

The geographically dispersed nature of the provision offered by adult education services and national work based learning providers adds to the challenge of ensuring that self-assessments are rigorous. Providers drew attention to procedures for moderating judgements they make about the various aspects of their provision to maintain the rigour of their self-assessment processes and outcomes.

Providers offered a wide range of examples, illustrating different approaches to integrating self-assessment and development planning with other continuous quality improvement and planning processes.

In the case of adult education services, responsibility for setting and monitoring targets in development plans was shared by practitioners and senior managers, but in colleges it was more often a management responsibility. Some respondent work based learning providers were more likely to give practitioners responsibility for target setting, whilst others regarded it as mainly a management responsibility.

The benefits of self-assessment and development planning identified by respondent providers were wide ranging.

They included:

- improving learners' satisfaction;
- improving retention and achievement rates;
- using hard evidence to make more informed judgements about the quality of provision;
- connecting disparate aspects of provision with delivery centres more effectively; and
- involving all staff in developing more effective provision for the future.

Respondent providers generally perceived the benefits of self-assessment and development planning to be greater than the not inconsiderable costs.

Introduction

Self-assessment and development planning contribute to the continuous improvement of provision in post-compulsory learning. Like other instruments for continuously improving the quality of provision, they should form an integral part of providers' management processes and quality assurance arrangements. Their distinctive focus on the quality of learners' experiences and the standards learners achieve, however, distinguishes them from other aspects of providers' strategies for achieving excellence.

Primary responsibility for continuous improvement rests with the provider, which must ensure that effective systems for planning, implementation and evaluation are in place. Under arrangements introduced in April 2001, local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) play an important role in helping providers to conduct rigorous self-assessments and produce effective development plans. All providers funded by the LSC are required to carry out an annual self-assessment which meets published LSC requirements. Providers must assess and grade all aspects of their provision, making judgements against the quality statements in the Common Inspection Framework and identifying strengths and weaknesses, and the self-assessment must be accepted by their local LSC. Providers are also required to agree a development plan with their local LSC which clearly identifies areas for improvement arising from the self-assessment report, including setting realistic targets for learners' retention, achievement and progression and demonstrating how they plan to meet these targets.

Rigorous self-assessment and development planning enable providers to identify strengths and weaknesses in their provision, to plan actions to improve the quality of provision, to raise standards and to increase their overall effectiveness. Self-assessment and development planning processes should be comprehensive, thorough and consultative.

The providers' staff should be committed to, and involved in, carrying out a self-assessment for each aspect of provision, including support services. Learners and external partners should

also be involved in the process. The issues raised by the self-assessment should be addressed by development planning to rectify weaknesses, build on strengths and implement other improvements. Actions specified in the development plans which providers agree with their local LSC should be resourced, carried out and monitored as part of providers' overall planning and quality assurance processes.

Self-assessment and development planning have been informed by publications offering general guidance (DfEE 2001) and (LSC 2001), guidance for work based learning providers (DfES 2001) and adult and community learning providers (Kenway and Reisenberger, 2001) and (Gardener, Merrifield and Ravenhall 2002). The guidance for work based learning providers (DfES 2001) offers a useful set of criteria for effective self-assessment which may have a broader application. According to this guidance, effective self-assessment:

- is a continuous process which connects with providers' on-going planning and quality assurance processes and draws on the data generated by these processes;
- focuses on learners, includes them as members of self-assessment teams and considers feedback from their learning experiences;
- involves all staff in reviewing their own performance and considering feedback from employers, sub-contractors and other stakeholders;
- generates rigorous, objective and evidence-based judgements which are consistent with inspection outcomes; and
- produces comprehensive and evaluative reports which provide a firm foundation for development plans that identify areas for improvement and how those improvements shall be achieved.

This report gives examples of providers' practices in these respects.

The research findings are based on the providers' responses, in questionnaires or telephone interviews, to the topics listed in the interview schedule (Appendix 2).

Research findings

The contribution of self-assessment and development planning to the retention and achievement of learners and to continuous improvement of the quality of provision

Respondents generally felt that self-assessment and development planning contributed to the raising of retention and achievement rates and to the continuous improvement of provision, albeit indirectly. The requirements introduced in April 2001 were found to be helpful in ensuring that issues identified during self-assessment were acted upon, creating real improvements for the benefit of learners. City of Bath College and Tower Hamlets College, for example, both value the structured opportunity afforded by self-assessment and development planning for reviewing the academic year, capturing evidence of what worked and what needs to be improved, and prioritising actions for the coming year. The Common Inspection Framework's focus on the learner was thought to concentrate actions on retention and achievement.

'Self-assessment and development planning contribute to learner retention and achievement by focusing on an annual basis on weaknesses in these areas, identifying the precise causes and ensuring that actions leading towards improvements are put in place. There is a focus on improvements in classroom practice and staff/student relationships, which research shows are at the heart of retention and are obviously of paramount importance to achievement'.

Sir John Deane's College

'Self-assessment contributes to learner retention and achievement by identifying strengths and therefore aiding dissemination of good practice within the college, and by identifying weaknesses on which staff can bring about improvements. The latter probably has a greater impact than the former. The self-assessment should enable staff to identify reasons for poor retention and achievement but also areas for improvement in teaching and learning methods'.

Alton College

'At TQ Training Management Services, self-assessment includes the thorough analysis of retention and achievement rates. From this analysis 'the management team can determine the reasons for the existing levels of achievement and plan action to improve those levels, setting realistic targets and devising innovative ways of reaching those targets'.

'The process of self-assessment and development planning contributes to learner retention and achievement by encouraging providers to rigorously focus on all aspects of their training and development provision for learners'.

James Beattie PLC

Respondents also agreed that the requirements for self-assessment and development planning introduced in April 2001 contribute to the continuous improvement of provision, by providing a structured approach to prioritising actions to bring about improvements based on rigorously identified strengths and weaknesses.

The Women's Technology and Education Centre, for example, commented that monitoring progress towards achieving targets for improvement has become more straightforward, and areas in which improvements need to be made are more easily identified under the new requirements. At Tower Hamlets College, development plans 'force teams to think of strategies, outcomes and measurable targets' and 'produce more rigorous self-assessments, through the emphasis on making judgements which... must be based on valid and quantifiable evidence.' These views were echoed by work based learning providers, as the following example illustrates.

'The new format of self-assessment and the subsequent development plans have encouraged us to review more objectively our targets and actions for improvement. We are now better equipped to formulate and achieve a development plan with measurable actions for improvement. This is supported in each case by a clear statement of the criteria for success and evaluation'.

James Beattie PLC

Dearne Valley College agreed, commenting that the 'increased emphasis in self-assessment on the "impact" of actions has... made a positive contribution and moved colleges on from being somewhat complacent because they had a set of procedures and policies in place'.

'The question I would ask would be the degree to which the requirements are enhancing continuous improvement and how much impact other factors are having. The other factors would include: a genuine desire within colleges to do their best by their learners (ownership), effective leadership, and the fact that as a sector we have become more confident, experienced and skilled in self-assessment and improvement planning'.

Dearne Valley College

Involving, and focusing, on learners in self-assessment and development planning

Many providers offered examples of quality assurance processes generating effective feedback from learners which contributes to the self-assessment. Different parts of the sector tended to approach the involvement of learners in different ways.

Local Authority Adult Education Services

With a large proportion of learners attending part-time non-accredited courses, attempts to involve learners directly in self-assessment is a challenge for adult education services. Cornwall County Council Adult Education Service uses the outcomes of student satisfaction surveys and classroom observations (in which observers talk to students) to gather data on learners' experiences of teaching and learning. Classroom observation outcomes also provided a key way of involving learners at two other adult education services.

At Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Adult Education Service, lesson observation is a central part of self-assessment for both short and long accredited and non-accredited courses. By focusing on effective learning in class, tutors are clear that learning is at the centre of self-assessment. This emphasis on the learner has been made part and parcel of training and development for tutors, the majority of whom are part time. Students also complete feedback sheets for every course offered by the service. Feedback from students is considered to be the critical element in self-assessment.

At London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham Adult Education Service, the assessment of teaching and learning is based on evidence from a well-established class observation scheme linked to staff appraisal. Individual learning plans (ILPs) are used across the service, focusing on what each learner wants to get out of their course. ILPs are evaluated by the learners to see if they have achieved their goals, and they are used by tutors to evaluate the courses they deliver and by curriculum leaders in preparing the self-assessment report. Responses to the annual learner satisfaction survey also feed into the self-assessment process, and into an annual report to senior and middle managers.

Further Education Colleges

Learners are rarely directly involved in college self-assessment processes, but respondent colleges reported a wide range of methods for ensuring that self-assessment focuses on learning. The responses to regular surveys of learners' satisfaction are a major source of information for the self-assessment conducted by colleges. At Sir John Deane's College, for example, learner assessments of college

provision are reviewed by section heads and heads of department to ensure that the issues raised by learners are addressed in each department's development plan. A wide range of other mechanisms for collecting and reporting learners' views on the quality of learning were reported, as the following examples illustrate.

At Dearne Valley College, learners are not directly involved in the process of self-assessment or development planning, but their views, obtained through feedback at programme and college levels, are considered carefully. At programme level, information comes from their responses to questionnaires and discussions in group tutorials and from learner representatives contributing to team meetings. At college level, information comes from learners' responses to the LSDA learner survey, the learner consultative committee, the learner complaints and suggestions procedures, and the work of the two learner governors. Informal feedback from learners also provides useful insights that contribute to the self-assessment report and development plan.

At Tower Hamlets College, the self-assessment report and development plan focuses on course team improvements directly related to learning within course teams. Quality assurance procedures are linked to retention and achievement and their efficacy is rated through such measures. Self-assessment reports include evidence provided through learner questionnaires, focus groups, input from learner representatives' contributions to course reviews and evaluation, and learner site councils.

Examples were offered of learner views contributing to the assessment of cross-college services. At Alton College, all learners are asked for their opinions on courses and on cross-college services such as childcare provision, library services and advice and guidance services. Most students contribute their views, and some also participate in focus groups and discussion sessions on particular issues, involving staff and governors.

Work based learning providers

Learners' responses to questionnaires also feature as the main way of involving learners in self-assessment in the case of work based learning providers. ETW, Access Training and Assa Training, for example, all reported that their self-assessments were informed by learner satisfaction surveys. At PDM Training the responses to questionnaires are collated, analysed and distributed to assessors, internal verifiers and managers involved in self-assessment. Care Learning Centre also makes extensive use of learner satisfaction surveys.

At Care Learning Centre, an LSC designed questionnaire is distributed to learners each quarter. Responses are compared with those obtained from an employer satisfaction questionnaire and information from both feed into the self-assessment process. The information is used to help identify early leavers and to improve the quality of provision generally. The centre is now developing its own learner questionnaire based on the Common Inspection Framework (CIF).

Other work based learning providers reported other methods for collecting the views of learners for the purposes of self-assessment. At First College, self-assessment draws on quarterly learner consultative forums, learner questionnaires and verbal feedback covering equal opportunities and health and safety in addition to course content and delivery. At James Beattie PLC, an in-company work based learning provider, quarterly foundation modern apprenticeship (FMA) programme review team meetings are attended by learner representatives in addition to assessors and internal verifiers in each store: 'This open and regular review process ensures we are able to maintain a pro-active approach to the development of our FMA programmes'. The following provider includes the outcomes of visits to learners in their work places in their self-assessment report.

At TQ Training Management Services, learners are directly involved in quality procedures. Information for self-assessment comes from learners' responses to questionnaires, sampling visits to learners conducted by the quality coordinator in the workplace, and interviews with each learner conducted by members of the quality team. Staff carrying out self-assessment take the views of learners into account, drawing on the information provided by these quality assurance processes.

Involving others in self-assessment and development planning

In general, it can be said that respondent colleges tend to work more with other colleges, for benchmarking or the sharing of practice, than adult education services and work based learning providers, where employers and a wider range of other partners are often involved in self-assessment. The following examples illustrate the range of partners that two adult education services involve in their self-assessment.

Local centres of the Cornwall County Council Adult Education Service ask community groups for their views when undertaking centre self-assessments, and these eventually feed into the county-wide self-assessment report. Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Adult Education Service asks partners (for example Social Services Day Centres and nurseries for Child Care students) to contribute to their self-assessment process by completing course evaluation forms. It also asks elected members of the Council to comment on the self-assessment report.

Sir John Deane's College collaborates with Winstanley College on the verification of self-assessment reports. They benchmark aspects of their provision with other colleges and share ideas on good practice within the Cheshire consortium of colleges. Tower Hamlets College benchmarks its performance with other local providers and engages in borough-wide reviews of the quality of post-compulsory learning. It also has strong links with a wide range of voluntary groups and local resident groups. Some of the benefits of providers collaborating over improving provision are illustrated by the following example.

At Alton College the views of parents and employers are sought during self-assessment, and the self-assessment report is validated by another college. The college involves a wide range of other partners in reviewing the quality of its provision. They are part of a consortium that uses inspectors to train teaching staff to undertake reviews of curriculum areas: 'This provides an external assessment of our work and also enables some of our staff to glean good practice when they undertake reviews in partner colleges. The review training also provides an important quality assurance focus for staff to the benefit of departments'.

Work based learning providers placed greater emphasis on involving employers in self-assessment than adult education services and colleges. Access Training and TQ Training Management Services, for example, both drew attention to this feature of their self-assessment process, while PDM Training collects comparable evidence through learner and employer satisfaction surveys. ETW holds quarterly monitoring meetings with their Job Centre Plus quality adviser to ensure their development plan is being acted upon. Only the following work based learning provider offered examples of involving other partnership groups.

The Women's Technology and Education Centre works with a range of partners to ensure that the needs of learners and employers are met. Partners include local special interest groups (e.g. Refugee Action, Action for the Blind), local employers (e.g. Liverpool City Council, Royal Liverpool University Hospital), and peer organisations (e.g. Liverpool Community College, The Greenbank Project).

Making rigorous and moderated judgements

When addressing their methods of making judgements rigorous, respondent providers tended to refer to the arrangement they had made for judgements to be moderated by staff from across the various parts of their provision.

Local Authority Adult Education Services

Adult education services reported different approaches to moderation aimed at ensuring coverage of dispersed delivery units and curriculum areas. At Cornwall County Council Adult Education Service, for example, a central moderation meeting is held involving all local centre managers. In contrast, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham Adult Education Service used a team of external consultants to moderate judgements made by curriculum leaders. In the following example, curriculum leaders moderate self-assessment reports produced by local delivery units within the adult education service, and staff share practices with colleagues in similar services across the region.

At Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Adult Education Service, self-assessment reports are produced by full and part-time tutors and development workers who work in the different geographical areas covered by the service, and these are moderated by curriculum lead tutors. All adult learning staff attend staff development training which is allocated in termly dedicated staff development weeks and paid for within their full or part-time contracts. In addition, managers share self-assessment and quality assurance practices with similar colleagues in the South Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Group.

In contrast, the following example illustrates how local delivery units and curriculum leaders work together checking each other's judgements, to produce area-level self-assessment reports which are then aggregated into service-level self-assessment reports by senior managers.

At Birmingham City Council Adult Education Service, area teams, including programme and curriculum managers and senior adult education officers, discuss and draft self-assessment reports for their areas. The final report is written by the acting head of adult education, the head of curriculum development, the head of basic skills and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), the adult education management support officer and the quality project officer.

Further Education Colleges

The general model adopted by colleges is for delivery departments to compile separate self-assessment reports and development plans which feed into the college-level self-assessment report and development plan. At Wygggeston and Queen Elizabeth I Sixth Form College, for example, subject departments make assessments of their own performance which are compared with available benchmarks. Several colleges have established collaborative benchmarking arrangements with other colleges, in addition to using national benchmarks and, in some cases, international quality management standards, as the following examples illustrate.

At Dearne Valley College, all programmes and all teams assess themselves on an annual basis and draw up development/improvement plans which include peer review and the sharing of good practice. These reports and plans feed into curriculum-area and whole-college self-assessment reports and development plans, which are validated by the academic board prior to approval by governors. The current year's self-assessment is based on the principles of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Results, Approaches, Deploy, Assess and Review (RADAR) model, to try to provide greater structure and depth to self-assessments. The provider has also developed a structured approach under which programme teams analyse their student data. This has helped to make individual tutors feel responsible for the data and to consider targets, patterns, blips and trends.

At Alton College, staff in curriculum departments undertake annual course reviews, analysing students' achievements and identifying particular strengths and weaknesses. These reviews inform the departmental self-assessments led by each head of department. Self-assessment judgements are also informed by course reviews, students' opinions, comments from external verifiers and awarding bodies, and achievement data. Teams providing cross-college services undertake a similar exercise, in which judgements are formed on the basis of information derived from service-level agreement monitoring reports.

Other colleges drew attention to individual and team review and development processes which contribute to the depth and rigour of their self-assessment and development planning systems. At Sir John Deane's College, for example, all staff assess the performance of their teams

against the quality statements agreed annually with the vice principal for personnel and quality during a day set aside for departmental self-assessment and subsequently in team review meetings with the principal and section heads. All members of staff contribute to the development plan for their teams. At Tower Hamlets College, training and development is offered to heads of programme to support them in making effective critical judgements, and external consultants are used to validate their judgements.

Work based learning providers

Work based learning providers adopted a variety of approaches to ensuring the rigour of their self-assessment judgements. Some larger work based learning providers with dispersed centres used occupational sector specialists to moderate self-assessment reports produced by geographically dispersed delivery units. Other providers generated self-assessment reports for occupational sectors offered by sites at several locations, with practitioners from one site moderating judgements made by staff at other sites. The following examples illustrate these practices.

'Each individual delivery unit conducts its own assessment and analysis which is then fed up the management chain and validated by the quality department... Finally it is compiled across the whole organisation by the senior management team and signed off by the managing director. Equally, action plans for remedial action are initiated by the grass roots and approved and added to with an organisational overview.'

TQ Training Management Services

At PDM Training, an annual workshop involving all staff and local LSCs contract managers is held with staff from different sites who run broadly similar programmes. Equal opportunities, quality matters and leadership and management are considered amongst other topics. Internal company audits are undertaken by a centrally-based team that also incorporates associate members drawn from internal verifiers from other sites in order to try to make judgements objective. Reports are made to the relevant contract managers. The reports are then discussed at monthly contract managers' meetings with the directors of quality and operations, where it is decided what parts of the audit findings should be included in the self-assessment report.

'Responsibility for the assessment of separate occupational provision was given to individual members of the management team, who worked with the occupational teams to agree strengths, weaknesses and other areas for improvement. Leadership and management aspects were addressed by all members of the management team, giving due consideration to the views of learners, employers, sub-contractors and staff. A draft report was presented to all members of staff for comment/approval'.

Access Training

Some work based learning providers develop their corporate self-assessment reports and development plans in much the same way as colleges, by drawing together self-assessment reports and development plans produced by training departments for different occupational sectors. At ETW, for example, each occupational sector has a nominated representative for self-assessment who produces a self-assessment report for their sector that contributes to the self-assessment report for the whole organisation pulled together by senior managers. First College holds full staff days focusing on self-assessment and progress being made on actions in the development plan. In the following example the self-assessment process involves managers responsible for working with staff from the different occupational sectors.

Integrating self-assessment and development planning with other processes for continuously improving the quality of provision

Respondents offered a wide range of examples illustrating different approaches to integrating self-assessment and development planning with other aspects of planning and quality assurance. At Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Adult Education Service, for example, 'quality' is a standard item on the agenda for weekly meetings of development workers, curriculum lead tutors and managers. The importance of involving all staff in continuous improvement and the self-assessment process is facilitated by this recent change in conditions of service, and is emphasised by the large number of part-time tutors at staff development sessions. City of Bath College, in contrast, has created standardised self-assessment processes and formats which have become well established and familiar to staff and learners. The self-assessment report is linked to all financial planning and to the college's strategic plan, which in turn is linked to the local LSCs area action plan. At TQ Training Management Services, the

development plan is in effect the organisation's operating plan, and is reviewed as such each month as an integral part of Investors in People, European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) and ISO9002. It also informs individual staff appraisals. The following examples illustrate the different approaches to making self-assessment and development planning an essential and integral part of quality assurance and planning for the continuous improvement of provision.

The London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham Adult Education Service has established a number of internal quality mechanisms, including internal performance indicators and class observations, within a planning cycle which involves self-assessment at the review and evaluation phase. Self-assessment is also built into the annual cycle of curriculum planning. While they have found the development plan a useful tool, they also feel there is a danger of having too many different targets and plans.

'The prime driver of self-assessment and development/improvement planning... needs to be an integral part of the way a college works and linked to appraisal, business planning and the overall college quality strategy. We have found that it is important that the quality strategies are internally driven and not being "done because we have to" for some outside driver'.

Dearne Valley College

At PDM Training, contract managers' performance against each action in the development plan is reported at monthly meetings attended by the director of programmes and the director of quality. Assessors' performance is measured against the performance indicators, and corrective or preventative action is taken as necessary, linking with the self-assessment report and development plan. The business development plan follows from the self-assessment report and links with staff development planning.

'As we are a business not a provider the processes for self-assessment and development planning or for any activity in the training framework has to fit within the requirements of the company business strategy. That is, when apprentice recruitment levels are set these are decided by the company business plan, budgets and requirements resulting from retirement, staff turnover etc. for the next three or four years'.

Alstom Power UK Ltd

Setting and monitoring targets

Local authority adult education services tended to split responsibility for target setting and monitoring between practitioners and senior managers. At London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham Adult Education Service, for example, targets are set and monitored by senior managers but proposed by curriculum leaders, because 'if the people in the Service do not have ownership of the development plan then it is unlikely to happen.' At Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Adult Education Service, managers set targets linked to local or national LSC priorities and the local authority community plan. Other targets are naturally derived from the process of self-assessment and are set and costed within the development plan.

Managers at colleges were reported to have greater responsibility than practitioners for setting and monitoring development plan targets. At Tower Hamlets College, for example, the heads of programmes set targets that are then monitored by managers during monthly programme-area 'health checks', with regular reports to the senior management team and the corporation. At Sir John Deane's College, progress towards targets is monitored at half-termly intervals at senior management 'control meetings' and at termly intervals by the corporation.

The process of setting and monitoring development plan targets is devolved to practitioners in some work based learning providers. At both ETW and First College, teams set their own targets and these are monitored against the development plan. At Royal Marines Commando Training Centre, development plan actions are monitored using a weekly 'action grid'. The following example illustrates the extent to which provider-level targets agreed for the development plan feed into team and individual performance targets, monitored through line-management arrangements.

At Access Training, development plan actions and targets are set for each occupational area, with actions linked to the business plan. Team actions are monitored through staff meetings, and individual staff targets are monitored through line management arrangements. People are involved and feel responsibility for targets and this helps improve planning.

Senior managers at other work based learning providers were more involved in setting and monitoring targets. At the Women's Technology and Education Centre, for example, the development plan is monitored on a bi-monthly basis by the senior management team and by the quality and audit committee. A similar degree of senior management involvement in target setting and monitoring is evident in the following example.

At TQ Training Management Services, the head of quality plays the key role in setting, costing and monitoring targets for the development plan once staff have drafted the self-assessment report. The development plan is considered to be a live plan with actions monitored on a monthly basis and adjustments made, as necessary, by the head of quality. The development plans are costed at the outset and agreed by the senior management team which includes the director of finance. Each cost is therefore evaluated at the outset and spending monitored carefully throughout the process'.

Evaluating the benefits of self-assessment and development planning

In most cases, respondent providers felt the benefits of self-assessment and development planning outweighed the costs. At Cornwall County Council Adult Education Service, for example, the self-assessment process contributes to bringing the dispersed delivery centres together, resulting in a higher degree of cohesion than in the past. At Care Learning Centre, self-assessment and development planning result in fast improvements, high levels of staff involvement and greater awareness of the direction in which the company is going. The benefits identified by providers were thus wide-ranging. They include:

- using hard evidence to make better informed judgements about the quality of provision;
- improving learners' satisfaction and levels of retention and achievement;
- connecting disparate aspects of provision and delivery centres;
- involving all staff in developing more effective provision for the future; and
- receiving additional LSC funding to make developments happen.

Some of these benefits are illustrated by examples offered by an adult education service and a work based learning provider.

At Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Adult Education Service the overall investment in self-assessment is considerable, for example with management information system costs and the role of the quality and staff development manager. However, as a core process it delivers good value. Tangible benefits are evident in the greater involvement of administrative staff in the service, greater motivation from part-time tutors, consistency in the operation of quality processes, and the knowledge which staff acquire about sharing good practice in other geographical areas covered by the service. Self-assessment also contributes to 'getting it right first time', and this has reduced some costs. The involvement of all staff, full-time and part-time staff, managers and administrators, has been a key benefit.

At Assa Training, rapid actions in response to strengths and weaknesses identified during self-assessment are leading to improvements. For example, negative responses from staff during self-assessment have resulted in the creation of a staff development programme, improved communication of key performance indicators, better induction processes, and an evaluation system. The organisation has also received funding from the local LSCs to develop quality assurance and equal opportunities policies and procedures.

Alongside the acknowledged benefits of self-assessment and development planning, however, some providers also raised concerns about competing purposes of self-assessment and development planning and inconsistencies in how self-assessment reports and development plans are evaluated by local LSCs.

Arrangements have been put in place recently to ensure that providers' plans are only checked by one local LSC.

Conclusion

The providers who took part in this survey viewed self-assessment as beneficial. Most considered that it is focussed on the learners, is making an impact on teaching and learning and that it helped to raise retention and achievement rates. The focus on the learner is thought by respondents to contribute to the raising of retention and achievement rates. The self-assessment report and development plan requirements introduced in April 2001 were welcomed by several providers, such as the Women's Technology and Education Centre: 'By working to the Common Inspection Framework, preparing the self-assessment report has become more relevant to staff, and data has been collected in an appropriate format to inform analysis of performance'.

The more successful providers are making self-assessment and development planning an integral part of quality assurance and planning for continuous improvement. Most providers were able to show how their self-assessment and development planning form a continuous process that connects with planning and quality assurance arrangements. These processes were clearly focused on learners, and took good account of learners' opinions, obtained through classroom observations, surveys, visits, focus groups and other methods.

The extent to which all staff were involved in self-assessment and development planning was varied. Practices ranged from work based learning providers which devolved most responsibility to front-line practitioners, arguing that personal responsibility for targets was of paramount importance, to colleges where responsibility for target setting and monitoring was essentially the role of senior managers. A few providers gave examples of links between development plan targets and individual and team performance reviews. Several also involved staff from other sites in moderating the self-assessment report judgments made by their colleagues.

There was diversity in how providers involved their partners in self-assessment. Colleges seem mainly to work with each other, whereas work based learning and adult education providers appear to involve a wider range of partners in their quality processes generally. Providers tended to rely on staff more than consultants to moderate their self-assessment judgments. Sometimes, especially for dispersed adult education services and national work based learning providers, this involved staff from one site moderating the judgements made by colleagues at other sites. Elsewhere (often in colleges) senior managers had lead responsibility for moderating self-assessment judgements made by colleagues in the programme areas, when compiling the overall report for the provider.

This report shows that self-assessment and development planning are complex and demanding activities, which present significant challenges to providers. When done well, they bring about many benefits. The continual challenge is to carry out the process rigorously and thereby to derive the maximum benefit from undertaking them.

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Appendix 1

Contributing Providers

Local Education Authority Adult Education Services

- Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council Adult Education Service
- Birmingham City Council Adult Education Service
- Cornwall County Council Adult Education Service
- London Borough Hammersmith and Fulham Adult Education Service

General Further Education Colleges

- City of Bath College
- Dearne Valley College
- Tower Hamlets College

Sixth Form Colleges

- Alton College
- John Leggott College
- Sir John Deane's College
- Shrewsbury Sixth Form College
- Wyggeston and Queen Elizabeth I College

Work based Learning Providers

- Access Training
- Assa Training
- Alstom Power UK Ltd
- Bury Municipal Borough Council
- Care Learning Centre
- ETW
- First College
- James Beattie PLC
- PDM Training
- Royal Marines Commando Training Centre
- TQ Training Management Services
- Women's Technology and Education Centre

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Appendix 2

Questionnaire and interview schedule

A Key questions

Please provide a single-paragraph answer for each of the following questions:

- In your experience, how does self-assessment and development planning contribute to learner retention and achievement?
- How have the new requirements for self-assessment reports and development plans introduced in April 2001 enhanced continuous quality improvement?

B Examples of good practice

We are seeking examples of good practice under the following headings, drawn from the article by Phil Cox, 'Take a look at yourself', Quality Matters (LSDA, February 2002).

Please provide a single-paragraph answer with concrete examples for each of the following questions, illustrated with reference to relevant sections in your most recent self-assessment report and development plan where appropriate.

Making self-assessment responsive to organisational needs.

- How have you gone beyond a 'compliance approach' to develop your own organisational strategies and processes for quality improvement?

Focusing on the needs and attainments of learners.

- How do you involve learners in self-assessment and development planning to improve learner experience and attainment?

Collaborating with other providers.

- Which other organisations do you collaborate with to improve responsiveness, provide an external focus and involve key partners?

Improving the rigour of self-assessment processes and judgements.

- How do you involve staff at all levels and in all parts of your organisation and develop their skills for analysing and improving performance?

Going beyond self-assessment.

- How do you work with your local Learning and Skills Council to determine learner-centred priorities for your development plan?

Evaluating outcomes.

- How do you monitor your development plan actions to ensure the benefits of the process outweigh the costs?

Promoting quality ownership within providers.

- How do you work with your local Learning and Skills Council to assess your quality improvement processes and outcomes?

Other publications

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