

Briefing

Learner involvement

This is one of eleven briefings which is part of a range of resources from the project, *The Disability Discrimination Act: taking the work forward 2003–6*, managed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in partnership with NIACE and Skill, supported by the Disability Rights Commission and funded by the Learning and Skills Council. More than 100 organisations have been involved in a total of 20 projects on topics related to DDA implementation. This briefing highlights key messages from the projects on involving learners and is relevant for practitioners such as teachers, support workers and managers working with learners with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Consulting with and involving learners in research, planning and decision-making is an effective way of finding out if provision is meeting their requirements. Learners with disabilities are the experts on their own impairments, and can tell us what we need to do to act equally. A provider reported: *Consultation with young people leaving college and their parents/carers has been a key focus and has enabled us to identify and become more aware of the concerns and difficulties faced at times of transition.*

Learner involvement can impact on **all** aspects of provision for all learners and staff, including teaching and learning, admissions, exclusions, recruitment, sports facilities, marketing, open days, communication strategies, publicity, learner support, the environment, management, strategic decision-making and the overall quality assurance processes.

Why involve learners?

The Disability Discrimination Act gives people with disabilities statutory rights to not be discriminated against on grounds of their disability. The new DDA (2005) and the DRC Disability Equality Duty (DED) Code of Practice requires public authorities, including most education providers, to adhere to anti-discriminatory duties and to prepare a Disability Equality Scheme. For further information see Briefing on *The new duty to promote disability equality*. The DED Code of Practice makes it clear that not only is it expected that disabled people are involved in developing the providers' Disability Equality Scheme, but that this involvement must be meaningful, relevant and not tokenistic.

How can you involve learners?

Learners can be involved through management meetings, graffiti walls, focus groups, questionnaires, surveys, interviews and student councils. Learners can also be involved as trainers, interviewers, auditors and consultants. Each approach to learner involvement has its advantages and disadvantages. It is important to consider the impact of an approach on the learners that you hope to involve. For example, one-to-one interviews give learners personal time to discuss issues, but do not allow learners to respond anonymously in the way they could with a postal questionnaire.

One-to-one **interviews** can give learners the opportunity to explore issues they may be reluctant to discuss during the usual teaching and learning processes. For example, one project site reported:

One student I understood to be, at the very least, content with college life, revealed her unhappiness, feeling overwhelmed by the size of the institution and of not being known to staff as she had been at her secondary school.

Interviews can also offer personal attention, time to be listened to and believed.

Questionnaires can be useful for gathering larger amounts of information. They can also provide opportunities for those not wishing to name themselves as disabled to contribute anonymously. However, anonymity can be lost if learners with poor literacy skills require support in completing written questionnaires. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to probe or follow-up issues fully, or indeed capture learner experiences, as it is in interviews, meetings or other group events.

Tutorial time can be used as an ideal opportunity to meet, and work with, learners who are on the same course. Tutorial groups can concentrate on specific questions in the same way as focus groups, or work on developmental activities such as curriculum or course content issues. Working with a tutorial or class group can help ensure that every learner has the opportunity to participate in the proceedings, as reported by one of the projects:

By considering topics and themes within tutorial sessions, all learners on the target courses would be involved and participating. The project and its research would therefore be more inclusive.

Focus groups provide an opportunity to undertake specific consultation, usually restricted to two or three questions, with small groups of learners. This type of activity requires time, and skilled, well-briefed and impartial facilitators. Many advocacy organisations are offering their services as focus group facilitators and supporters.

Graffiti walls are an open space, usually large sheets of paper headed with a question or topic for others to respond to. The responses may come in the form of written comments, artwork, cartoons, pictures and poems. Graffiti walls can be placed in common areas, such as dining areas, used by learners across the provision, or restricted to the main teaching areas of targeted courses or learners.

Participative activities, games and artwork are other ways that learners can be encouraged to express an opinion, make suggestions or share their experiences. One example is to represent past and present experiences and desired changes to provision by drawing or pasting pictures on to posters and then sharing the results.

Learners might be involved as **representatives of their courses** and invited to take a place at strategic management meetings and events. At one project site, learners formed a management advisory group with a direct line of reporting to and from the senior management team.

Preparing learners for involvement

Involving learners and keeping them informed throughout any process can help to alleviate some of their fears and anxieties. Even then, some may withdraw at a later date.

One of the learners who was asked to take part in the consultation exercise, experiences mental health difficulties. He originally agreed to take part, but on being contacted by telephone to arrange an appointment, became extremely anxious despite being assured that we were asking for his help and not 'testing' him...

Practical considerations, such as transport, timetabling, staffing and site location may need addressing before learners can be involved. One reporter expressed some of the logistical problems for her:

The nature of life at an ACL college made it difficult to arrange meetings... Students are not resident on site and may only attend one or two sessions per week, tutors too are part time and thus are not always available. Also, college staff and managers have multiple roles and so have many demands on their time and availability.

However, it is important not to assume that problems are insurmountable:

One learner, who is a wheelchair user and who has communication difficulties, made her own way to the meeting. The learner negotiated with staff in her residential home. She ensured they brought her to the meeting (on an unfamiliar campus), and collected her. She did not know if anyone she knew would be at the meeting. She brought her own questions and contributed fully.

The impact of involvement on learners

Being involved can have a powerful impact on learners. Practitioners in the LSDA-led projects reported personal growth with increased confidence and improved self-esteem among learners. Learners have developed skills in representing themselves and others, speaking out, being assertive, turn-taking, listening to others and collecting and collating information.

Learners have gained confidence and skills through participating in meetings. A learner with dyslexia who would not normally express her opinions in an unfamiliar setting has contributed to discussions on how information is presented. Similarly, a learner with mental health difficulties has taken the lead in organising one of the sub-groups. Before joining the group neither learner would have had the confidence to do this.

Involvement enables learners to understand some of the management and administrative processes that go on around them.

Importantly too, learners feel listened-to and valued if they are appropriately involved.

I have found it very interesting to work with the college and have been able to give my opinions freely about what it feels like to be a sight-impaired learner. I have been able to help quite a few staff by discussing my difficulty in using some forms and other resources at the college. I am finding my time at the college much more enjoyable and my learning is becoming easier for me.

The impact of involvement on practitioners

Involving learners can have a positive impact on staff. Involvement can improve communication and help iron out difficulties between learners and staff, leading to improved communication and understanding.

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Like learners, staff too can feel more confident about speaking up. The fact that they had the information or issues first-hand from the learners themselves produced a much more powerful argument when fighting for resources or changes in practice:

I felt that it reminded staff that we were talking about real people and it was not just an exercise in theory.

The impact of involvement on providers

Many of the DDA projects looked at procedures and processes. Involving learners in reviewing and auditing both internal and external processes such as enrolment forms, student information sheets and handbooks can yield powerful results. Importantly, involving disabled learners can lead to improvements for all learners and staff. The process of involving learners led to organisations having to face up to various assumptions they had made about their provision. For example, one project site reported that some learners did not understand their learner support arrangements:

[on the responsibilities of a learning advice worker] *Not a single student knew the answer to this. Very few students were able to identify a learning support space or area. There was nowhere that students could think of to go if they needed to seek help or they wanted to self-refer.*

More than listening

Involving learners is more than listening. Involving learners can help staff at all levels of the organisation to relinquish their power of decision-making, policy planning and delivery decisions to those who are disability experts, ie disabled people.

For learners, involvement can bring about empowerment, increase skills and promote a greater understanding of the organisation that they learn in. Involvement is a learning experience.

- How do you think learners could influence provision?
- What outcome would you most desire for learners as a result of involvement activities?
- In what ways could you involve disabled learners more?
- How could you go about ensuring the involvement of learners with a range of impairments?
- How could you ensure involvement of learners from black and minority ethnic communities?
- How could your organisation support you in involving disabled learners?


For further information, including other briefings in this series, contact LSN (www.LSNeducation.org.uk) or these organisations:

Disability Rights Commission
(www.drc-gb.org)
Helpline 0845 762 2633)

Learning and Skills Council
(www.lsc.gov.uk)

NIACE (www.niace.org.uk)

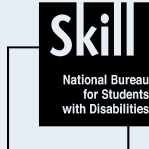
Skill (www.skill.org.uk)

 Disability Rights Commission

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 **Skill**
National Bureau
for Students
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