South Nottingham College: using a Learner Survey to improve the learning experience

Summary

Learner Responsiveness is one of the three key dimensions of the Framework for Excellence. South Nottingham College has used a Learner Survey carried out by their Regional Support Centre for the last three years. This captures the Learners’ Voice with regards to their experience with e-learning. The independent survey reports have been used by both the Senior Management Team and the Excellence Team to inform action and improve learning and teaching in the College.

About South Nottingham College

South Nottingham College is a general FE college with a range of further and higher education courses and training opportunities for business and industry with a mission statement of “Success Through Learning”.

It maintained its position as one of the region’s top FE Colleges following an impressive OFSTED inspection in November 2008, in which all curriculum areas were graded as good (Grade 2) and inspectors agreed that curriculum provision was outstanding and met the needs of learners, employers and the community exceptionally well.

The challenge

South Nottingham College had an ILT health check from its Regional Support Centre (RSC) in 2005 that helped give the organisation an overview of its use of technology for learning purposes.

The College views the use of technology in delivering learning in a very positive light. It is considered a tool for:

- Retention – with a focus on learner-centred delivery, technology can help to bring independent learning;

- Success – employing innovative learning makes the experience more engaging for learners and technology can support this.
When its local RSC started to offer an online Learner Survey service the College decided this would be a good way to gather feedback from its learners on what they thought about how technology was used.

The RSC delivers the survey, analyses the data and reports the findings with recommendations.

The purpose of the survey is to enable continued improvement. It reports on learner perceptions, which do not always reflect what is actually the case. However, learner perceptions influence attitudes to learning and hence success and retention.

South Nottingham College undertook their first Learner Survey in Spring 2008.

The activity

Setting up the survey

The survey for South Nottingham College covered the use of technology in the classroom, open access areas (such as the library and large computer access facilities) for independent study and all online services (internet, intranet, email, learning platform/VLE).

The main mode of delivery of the questionnaire was online, but in order to make it inclusive and avoid bias against those learners who do not use technology, a paper version of the survey was also available. Data from paper surveys was inputted by an administrator at the College but it didn’t take very long to do.
Using an online survey has helped South Nottingham College capture Learner Voice

The survey was tailored to meet the needs of the College by including additional questions to the standard version used by the RSC. For example the College wanted more feedback on the student IT induction that it offered.

Rather than the surveys being filled out in the classroom, emails were sent to the learners with a link to an online survey. This ensured that the responses were independent and there was less opportunity for any collusion or manipulation.

**Response rates**

In order to make the survey a worthwhile exercise the College needed to get a decent response rate. It stressed the importance of the Learner Survey to its learners, and internally placed this survey in its top three, alongside the Framework for Excellence survey and the QDP survey (a national student benchmark survey).

With a multi-site campus and lots of learners off-site, in particular on apprenticeships, the College needed to target as many different audiences as possible. To improve the response rate it:
• passed information through internal structures – working with Heads of Schools, to filter down to teaching staff and verifiers for them to prompt learners to fill in the survey;
• worked with the Student Council;
• created internal publicity on notice boards and posters;
• sent out email reminders;
• used the College SharePoint for communicating to both staff and learners; and
• sent out SMS texts.

The College received weekly updates from the RSC on the response level for the duration that the survey was open, so that the appropriate level of promotion could be maintained and targeted to those groups with low response rates.

The results

Once the survey closed, the RSC prepared a draft report and sent it through to the small team at the College who were co-ordinating the survey for an informal review.

The RSC then published a final report for the College. This was a short report with lots of visual representations of the data. Senior managers liked the way in which the evidence was presented, particularly as the format enabled them to easily compare years, see any trends and analyse progress.

“The Learner Survey is a useful guide for senior management to know where the College is on its journey with technology and also as a way of verifying information being provided by IT and teaching staff. The survey is independently run by the RSC and the reports are not judgemental in nature.”  

(Phil Wilson, ICLT Manager)

For the first survey the RSC came in and did a presentation to the Senior Management Team. In the following years the co-ordinating team has done its own presentation to the MIS/ILT committee and to the Senior Management Team.

The College also receives the raw data from the survey, which allows it to explore in more detail and to drill-down to different groups of learners.

The outcomes

The College has had reasonable response rates, particularly in the most recent survey, where over 500 of its learners took part. The surveys have had a good spread across different types of learners as they are completed on an individual basis rather than altogether during class time.

The survey has been repeated annually over the last three years to give a measure of progress at the College:
• Year 1 = a snapshot
• Year 2 = validate the results
• Year 3 = really start to track progress

The College gets more and more out of each survey, as the benefit is cumulative in nature.

The College has built on the survey outcomes in a number of ways. Quotes are included in Self Assessment Reports, especially in relation to learner voice and entitlement. It also provides evidence to strengthen, and to question, plans. The findings help to target resources and decide where to invest money.

The surveys have given the College some clear messages. For example the 2009 survey showed that Interactive White Boards and other classroom technologies were not being used as much as the learners would have liked. So resources were directed to staff training for the following year.

The Learner Survey helped focus resources on Interactive White Board training

The 2010 survey showed that the Interactive White Boards were being used more, and so the College is now considering investing in more devices.

Follow-through communication back to learners is important too. The College feeds back through Learner Reps, Student Council, and general information around
campus, such as “You Said – We Did” posters, all of which helps to prepare learners for doing it again the following year.

The survey results are extremely useful to various members of staff around the College. Jo Shirley started in August 2009 as e-Trainer at the College:

“I took up my role just as the RSC was presenting the findings from the second survey. I used it as a starting point on where the College was at and used the results to identify areas to address. I was then able to make a classroom action plan for the academic year.

“When the survey was carried out this year I was a bit nervous, as I felt it was partly a reflection of my performance over the previous year. So it was really pleasing when I read the results and it showed the progress the College made.”

The impact

Elaine Martin, Head of Quality at the College explains:

“We are so pleased. The surveys have been of massive value in getting the opinion of our learners on the College’s use of technologies – for example we’ve been able to evaluate the impact of our SharePoint portal.

“In particular it was the weight of informed, independent opinion brought by the RSC that enabled the findings to be viewed with confidence.

“We were doing the Learner Survey before OFSTED put extra importance on Learner Voice, so we were in a good position, but this has just added extra impetus to continue with it.

“Students are now used to filling the surveys in, and what is really important is that the College acts on the findings and we then tell our learners what we’ve done in response to what they’ve told us.”

The College plan to conduct a Learner Survey in 2011 and build upon the feedback gathered so far.

Useful links

South Nottingham College website

Jisc RSC East Midlands website

Framework for Excellence
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