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Informing Choice in Post 16
Education and Learning

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Author & Contact Details

Author: Kathryn Crowther

Quality Assured by: Philip Wilson

York Consulting LLP

Smithfield House

92 North Street

LEEDS

LS2 7PN

Tel: 0113 2223545

Fax: 0113 2223540

Email: kathryn.crowther@yorkconsulting.co.uk

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Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

1 Victoria Street

London, SW1H 0ET

www.BIS.gov.uk

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Executive Summary

Introduction

1. This study was overseen by the National Improvement Partnership Board (NIPB). The NIPB created a sub group which has acted as a steering group for the project with representatives from the Skills Funding Agency, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and provider representatives. The NIPB is taking forward development work in course and institutional labelling originally proposed by the UK Council for Employment and Skills (UKCES).
2. York Consulting LLP was commissioned by the Skills Funding Agency, with funding provided by BIS, to undertake research to underpin the NIPB's understanding of information to inform choice in post-16 education and training.
3. The aim of the research was to determine the type of information that would most effectively support learners, employers and advice and guidance intermediaries in making choices about post-16 provision.
4. The key aims of the research were to:
 - determine the type, level (subject or course) and format of information about post-16 provision that is most useful for learners, employers and advisor intermediaries;
 - explore the extent to which different groups of learners may need different information;
 - determine which method of publication, or combination of methods would be most suitable for learners and employers;
 - define the range of information that is currently collected by FE institutions in addition to published prospectuses, and the range of new information that could feasibly be provided;
 - assess the extent to which additional and new information to learners, employers and advisor intermediaries would be used to inform choice;
 - explore which information would be useful at the provider and the national level.

Methodology

5. A multi-method approach was taken to the research. Key activities undertaken included:
 - an **evidence review** focusing on identifying the key messages from existing research and evaluation in this area;

- **pilot provider visits:** visits were undertaken to five providers;
- **focus groups with learners** – 41 focus groups were undertaken, across 19 FE providers, which involved 323 learners;
- **learner panel survey** collecting quantitative data on learners' views on information that would inform decision making – 1,052 interviews with learners across the FE sector were conducted, with a specific focus on the views of under 16s, non-White British, social class C2DE¹ and learners with a disability;
- **parent survey** collecting quantitative data on parents' views on information that would allow them to assist their child/ren in their decision-making – 261 interviews with parents were conducted, including follow-up interviews with parents who agreed to participate;
- interviews with **39 IAG professionals** and **25 employers**.

Information Requirements of Learners and Parents

6. The qualitative and quantitative research explored learners and parents views on the information that they found to be of most use when making decisions about where and what to study at FE.

7. Information on **entry qualifications, cost, length and the location of a course/programme** and the **description of a course/programme** were viewed by learners and parents across the qualitative and quantitative research as the most useful when making a decision about what and where to study.

8. **The importance of descriptive information to learners' decision-making concurs with previous research.** Hoxby et al (2010) found that factual information about a provider can influence whether a potential learner will study at all.

9. **Information on the entry qualifications required for a course/programme was of significant use to learners.** Three-quarters or more of learners from both the survey and focus groups identified this information as being central to their decision-making; a view that was reflected by parents.

10. Information on required entry qualifications was perceived by learners to be crucial in minimising the need for unnecessary time being spent pursuing a study route for which they did not have the baseline entry requirements.

11. **The cost of undertaking a course/programme was also important to learners' decision-making.** Learners and parents across the qualitative and quantitative research

¹ Social Grade C2DE refers to all respondents whose parents' social grade is C2(skilled manual worker), D (semi-skilled/unskilled manual worker) and E (those receiving state benefits for sickness)

valued this highly, with the majority of survey respondents rating it as 'very useful' information (68% of learners and 70% of parents) and three-fifths of the focus groups identifying it as 'must have' information.

12. **Cost information was of particular value to adult learners, allowing them to judge whether a course/programme was affordable.** It was also reported to be of particular importance for learners on benefits, working tax credit or where the course/programme was being provided by an employer.

13. **Information on the length of a course/programme, as would be expected, was important to learners and parents.** Over half of learners from the both the focus groups and learner survey identified information on course length as being central to their decision-making. Parents also valued this information with over three-fifths (62%) identifying it as 'very useful'. It was found to be of particular value to adult learners and for individuals for whom study was providing them with specific skills that would allow them to progress to employment.

14. **Learners and parents valued descriptive information on the content of a course/programme.** Nearly all learner and parent survey respondents identified this as 'useful' information (93% of parents and 98% of learners). Furthermore, nearly three-fifths of focus group learners identified it as 'must have' information.

15. **The location of a course/programme was viewed as being important by the majority of learners, across provider types.** It was identified as 'must have' information by nearly half of the focus groups and over nine-tenths of learners and parents who responded to the surveys identified it as useful information.

Descriptive/Facilities Information

16. In addition to the above five areas, other descriptive/facilities information such as financial support, transport considerations, delivery information (weekly hours, balance of coursework/exams etc) and provider facilities were all rated highly in terms of usefulness by learners and parents. All descriptive/facilities types of information were considered useful by the majority of learner survey respondents (between 70% and 98%) and parents (between 61% and 95%).

Performance Information

17. The surveys and focus groups explored how useful performance information (levels of satisfaction, course/programme and provider reputation and the quality of provision) were in informing decision-making. All performance categories were considered useful by more than 90% of learner survey respondents. Furthermore, information on performance was considered useful by between 84% and 96% of parents.

18. **There were mixed views across learners regarding the influence of information on the quality of teaching on decision-making.** Although the learner survey respondents rated this information highly (37% indicated that it was 'very useful') the focus groups rated it as less useful. Three-fifths of focus groups identified it as 'like to have' information. Parents placed greater value on the rating of the quality of teaching (53% rated as 'very useful') than learners.

19. Learners valued the ability for published ratings of quality to provide an independent, unbiased perspective of a provider. Where there was a reluctance to use this type of information to inform decision-making, learners felt the information could be subjective.

20. **The benefits (i.e. skills and experience) that could be gained through attending a course/programme was important to the majority of learners;** with nearly half of survey respondents rating it as 'very useful' and seven-tenths of focus groups rating as 'like to have' information.

Outcomes Information

21. All outcome categories were considered useful by between 72% and 92% of learner survey respondents. Similarly, between 75% and 90% of parents considered all the outcomes information useful.

22. The destinations and achievements of previous learners were perceived to be of greatest value by learners and parents. Learners and parents rated retention information and salary gains as being of less use to them in their decision-making.

Learner Characteristic Information

23. Information on the characteristics of learners (age, ethnicity, disability status etc) was considered to be of limited use in decision-making by both learners and parents. Between 29% and 63% of learners who responded to the survey rated this as useful. In comparison between 29% and 47% of parents rated this information as useful.

Information Requirements – Variation across Learners Types and Types of FE Provision

24. Adult learners' information requirements to support choices are broadly similar to young people. However they are more likely to consider location, require childcare support and consider timings of FE provision in order to fit in with existing commitments.

25. The learner survey specifically involved young people from particular sub-groups². These were groups of young people whose views were more difficult to explore through the qualitative research.

26. The survey found that, generally, whilst there were some differences observed between these sub-groups and the baseline group of young people who responded to the survey, there were no significant difference in the types of information that were rated most useful.

27. The benefits that could be gained from a course/programme and the achievements of previous learners were reported to be 'most useful' by a greater proportion of young

² Under 16's, not White British, learners with a disability, Social Grade C2DE

people within the sub-groups, compared to the baseline group. The baseline group included all those who did not fall into the sub-group categories³.

28. The destinations of previous learners, descriptive information about a course/programme and the proportion of males/females on a course/programme were rated as being the 'most useful' information by a lower proportion of sub-groups of young people, compared to a baseline group of learners.

29. The research also compared the information requirements of learners and parents, although any differences observed were minimal.

30. Parents rated information on the description of a course/programme significantly lower in terms of its usefulness, compared to young people. Two-thirds (67%) of young people identified this as the 'most useful' type of descriptive/facilities information, compared to less than three-tenths of parents.

31. Young people found information on the reputation of a course/programme and provider, and the satisfaction and destinations of previous learners, as being more useful in their decision-making than parents.

Information Requirements of Employers to Inform Decision-Making

32. The relevance of a course/programme to an employer's organisation and/or sector; flexibility of delivery; costs of provision and the quality of provision were identified by employers as being the key types of information required to inform their decision-making about FE provision.

33. Offering provision that was relevant to employers' organisations and/or sector was identified as a key requirement for employers. Reassurance that employees would develop relevant skills that would contribute to the employers' businesses were of significant importance.

34. Employers valued the ability of providers to be flexible to their needs and requirements, through tailoring provision to meet business needs and structuring delivery (content and times) to fit in with existing responsibilities.

35. Cost was a significant consideration for employers, who were keen to ensure they received value for money from any FE provision.

36. Employers measured the quality of a provider in many ways. Demonstrating credibility and experience in the sector alongside more formal measure of quality including reviewing success rates and inspection grades were used by employers in their decision-making.

³ Under 16's, not White British, learners with a disability, Social Grade C2DE

37. **Word of mouth was critical for many employers in judging the quality of provision.** Many employers had established relationships with FE providers and therefore many did not actively seek information on new learning opportunities.

38. An employer's size and type, the focus on training within the organisation, location of provision and available time and capacity to source information were all key factors that influenced the type of information employers required to make decisions.

Providing Information to Inform Decisions

39. **Learners used multiple sources of information to gain a comprehensive understanding of FE opportunities.** Previous research suggests that information from IAG representatives/brokers and the use of prospectuses and provider websites were the most commonly used sources of information. This view was corroborated through our research.

40. Standard descriptive information was generally provided to learners by FE providers and IAG professionals. Information was commonly provided on course duration, location, entry requirements, cost and delivery model.

41. **IAG Professionals play a significant role in collecting and presenting information to learners to allow them to make an informed choice about where and what to study.** We consulted with both internal (i.e. those who were provider-based) and external IAG professionals (i.e. Connexions, Next Steps Advisors who were not affiliated to a specific provider). Information provided by both external and internal IAG professionals was predominantly needs led, using a range of information sources to provide advice and guidance to learners; including IAG programmes, online and written materials and personal contact.

42. Challenges identified by IAG professionals and providers in sourcing and providing accessible information to learners included:

- **accessibility of information:** keeping up-to-date on the availability and nature of courses/programmes was a key challenge for external IAG professionals;
- **resource and time constraints:** dedicating sufficient time to effective IAG and information giving was constrained by large case loads and working across multiple sites;
- **'too much information':** IAG professionals felt that there was risk of too much information being available, which could overwhelm learners with potentially negatively impacts on decision-making;
- **quality and independence:** some employers and internal IAG professionals raised concerns about the quality and independence of external IAG. Issues around the promotion of non-academic routes and contextual understanding of certain routes were concerns for some.

What is missing?

43. Views were sought from providers and IAG professionals on the types of information that were not currently provided to prospective learners to inform their decision-making and the reasons for this. These views have been analysed alongside existing research and the views of learners and parents to provide an indicative view of *'what is missing?'*

44. It is important to note that generally learners, parents, IAG professionals and employers did not feel that there was key information which was lacking from their decision-making.

45. **Providers collected a wealth of information that was not always presented to learners, particularly in terms of performance data and learner satisfaction.** Providers, however, expressed concerns about the collation and presentation of additional information (to that already in the public domain) to learners, particularly in terms of accessing quantitative performance and outcomes data, which they felt could be open to misinterpretation and may have a negative impact on decision-making.

46. Previous research identified similar challenges in providing more detailed information to learners and employers to assist in decision-making (Holex et al 2010), particularly in terms of the following.

47. **Accessing Course Level Information:** The extent to which the availability of course level information would inform learner choice has been a key area of discussion. Holex et al (2010) identified a number of challenges in publishing information at a course level, including challenges in defining a 'course' of study; methods of data collection; consortium vs. provider-specific information and the cost implications of providing this information.

48. Our research identified similar issues. The feedback from learners suggests that although information at a course level is of some value to them in decision-making, they would like information at as detailed a level as possible but recognised the constraints of cost in generating some types of data.

49. **Performance Information:** The presentation of performance information was a key concern for providers due to significant reservations about their ability to consistently present information to learners on success rates, achievements and satisfaction rates. Issues around understanding and interpretation of data and providing accurate comparisons across providers were raised. However, there was general acceptance that the current Framework for Excellence public information would be of benefit to learners in their decision-making.

50. **Destinations:** There was a disparity in views across providers and learners about the usefulness of destinations data. Although the learner survey and focus groups were positive about the usefulness of this information in decision-making, it was generally found to be of more use for those undertaking courses/programmes with clear progression routes (e.g. A levels, apprenticeships). Often for adult learners, or those undertaking FE study to fill a skills gap, the usefulness of such information was much lower. Holex et al

(2010) identified low responses rates and data bias as being key challenges in the collection and interpretation of destinations information at the provider level.

51. **Wage Gains:** All providers consulted did not feel that it was feasible to collect and present information to learners on wage gains. Although reported to be of some interest to learners and parents, this information did not appear to significantly influence decision-making.

Sources and Formats of Information

52. The sources and formats of information utilised by learners, IAG professionals and employers to assist decision-making were explored through the research.

Learners

53. Learners reported seeking information in various formats including online researching and visits to providers. Online researching of courses/programmes and providers was common and was often used as the 'first step' for many learners, which was then supplemented with information from other sources.

54. **Visiting providers to seek further information about a course/programme and the provider themselves was common for learners.** Value was placed on these visits, including open days, as they allowed learners to find out more detailed information about a course/programme. They also provided the opportunity for personal contact and allowed learners the opportunity to hear about previous students' experiences.

Employers

55. The source and format of information most valued by employers was diverse and sources of information included provider websites, prospectuses and meetings with providers.

56. **Direct contact with providers was integral in allowing employers to make informed decisions.** Employers valued the opportunity to develop relationships with providers and often used face-to-face meetings to obtain appropriate information.

57. Some employers did identify difficulties in sourcing appropriate information about course/programmes. Employers felt that it was difficult to find information in one place that was in an accessible and user-friendly format.

Views on a 'Comparator Style' Website

58. This research started before the FfE PI website was launched and consequently most respondents did not have experience of using it.

59. **Learners' views on a 'comparator style' website were mixed, although generally positive.** It was felt that such a resource would be a useful tool for searching for potential providers and courses/programmes. The majority of learners reported positively on the opportunity to compare FE provision across providers.

60. Learners felt that such a website would be used for supporting their decision-making, but would supplement, rather than replace more one-to-one IAG or other information sources.

61. Issues raised by learners about such a website included its format, lack of accessibility for all and lack of need to use comparison data due to existing knowledge of providers.

62. IAG professionals' views on a comparator website were generally positive, although it was perceived to have some limitations. External IAG professionals felt that the site could be used to support their IAG role, although unmediated interpretation of information by learners presented on the website was a concern for some.

1 Introduction

Context

1.1 This study is being overseen by the National Improvement Partnership Board (NIPB). The NIPB created a sub group which acted as a steering group for the project with representatives from the Skills Funding Agency, provider organisations and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). The NIPB has taken forward development work in course and institutional labelling originally proposed by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES).

1.2 York Consulting LLP was commissioned by the Skills Funding Agency, with funding provided by BIS, to undertake research to underpin the NIPB's understanding of information to inform choice in post 16 education and training.

1.3 A preliminary study by the Association of Colleges (AoC), Association of Learning Providers (ALP) and HOLEX, which reported in 2010, broadly supported the idea of more information being made available to support learner and employer choice, and identified the need for further research to identify the content and form of such information.

1.4 Spreading information more widely, and informed and empowered choice, figure prominently in the coalition's programme for Government. The Cabinet Office announced a new Public Sector Transparency Board to drive the Coalition Government's cross-government transparency agenda. This piece of work will make an important contribution to and inform this cross-government agenda.

1.5 A number of government initiatives in education and training also emphasise the importance of informed and empowered choice. These include, in no particular order of priority:

- improved information, advice and careers guidance pre- and post-19;
- Lifelong Learning accounts;
- increased investment by individuals and employers in training (co-investment);
- raising the participation age to 18.

1.6 UKCES has proposed the creation of a 'community scorecard'. Research in this area is being taken forward in parallel by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and steered by the same NIPB sub group.

1.7 Providers already have a significant amount of additional course level information which could, in principle, be made available to learners. As examples, this could include information about:

- feedback and evaluation from current learners;

- composition of current learner groups;
- purpose/intended benefits (including progression to other courses/HE/employment etc, skill acquisition or personal learning aims);
- the extent to which the purpose/intended benefits of a particular course or programme are achieved.

1.8 Other suggestions have included identification from national data of career prospects or the wage gains associated with particular qualifications, which could be made available to careers advisors and to providers.

1.9 The extent to which any or all of this information would be used to empower and inform choice is unknown, and is thus the subject of this research.

1.10 The primary audience for this research will be the Skills Funding Agency, BIS, providers and their representative organisations. Secondary audiences include the Department for Education (DfE), Young People's Learning Agency, Local Authorities and the Local Government Association (LGA).

Objectives of the Research

1.11 The aim of the research is to determine the type of information that will most effectively support learners, employers and advice and guidance intermediaries in making choices about post-16 provision (all government funded post-16 education and training; excluding higher education provision).

1.12 The key objectives of the research are to:

- determine the type, level (subject or course) and format of information about post-16 provision that is most useful for learners, employers and advisor intermediaries;
- explore the extent to which different groups of learners may need different information;
- determine which method of publication, or combination of methods would be most suitable for learners and employers;
- define the range of information that is currently collected by FE institutions in addition to published prospectuses, and the range of new information that could feasibly and cost effectively be provided;
- assess the extent to which additional and new information to learners, employers and advisor intermediaries would be used to inform choice;
- explore which information would be useful at the provider level.

Methodology

1.13 A multi-method approach has been taken to the research. Key elements of the method included:

- evidence review;
- provider pilot visits;
- learner panel survey;
- focus groups with learners;
- interviews with IAG professionals and employers;
- parent omnibus survey and qualitative interviews.

1.14 Our approach for each of these elements of the method is discussed in more detail below.

Evidence Review

1.15 We undertook an evidence review of all key documents relating to this area of the study. The purpose of this was to provide an overview of the existing research undertaken in this area. This evidence review can be found in **Annex A** and a list of references can be found in **Annex E**.

Provider Pilot Visits

1.16 We undertook visits to five providers as part of the pilot phase (3 Adult and Community Learning (ACL), 1 Further Education (FE) College and 1 Work-based Learning Provider (WBLP)). The purpose of the pilot visits primarily was to test the focus group approach. However, as part of these visits we also consulted with 10 senior managers to explore the range of information currently collected by FE institutions and the range of new information that could feasibly be provided.

Learner Panel Survey

1.17 The Learner Panel is the online research platform set up by the Learning and Skills Council and now funded by the Young People's Learning Agency, Skills Funding Agency and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Panel members are aged 14 and over, enrolled at schools, colleges and other training providers.

1.18 The Learner Panel was utilised within the research to gain access to learners who it was more difficult to access through the qualitative research. Quotas were set to achieve a minimum of 200 interviews in each of the following groups: under 16's, non-White British, social class C2DE learners with a disability and a representative sample of learners.

1.19 Fieldwork for this research was conducted by OpinionPanel between 23rd November and 1st December 2010. The sample consisted of 1,052 interviews with learners from across the FE sector.

1.20 The answer options covered a point scale (very useful, somewhat useful, useful, not noticeably useful and not useful at all). For simplicity of reporting, we have used the term 'useful' to refer to ratings of useful, somewhat useful or very useful. There were nine questions in total taking an average of 6.5 minutes to complete. These questions can be found in **Annex B**.

Parent Omnibus Survey

1.21 The face-to-face omnibus is a bi-weekly survey providing 4,000 in-home interviews with a nationally representative sample of adults aged 16 and over across Great Britain. In order to gain the views of a representative sample of parents, specific questions were included with the omnibus survey.

1.22 Parents were screened for involvement in the survey based on our requirements. Parents aged 30-80 with a child/ren aged 14-21 who were planning to attend FE; currently attending FE or had attended in the last two years were sampled for involvement in the survey. A copy of the questionnaire used can be found in **Annex C**.

1.23 Fieldwork for the research was conducted by TNS-RI between 16th February 2011 and 1st March 2011. The sample consisted of 261 parents.

1.24 The data was then weighted to ensure that demographic profiles matched those for all adults in Great Britain aged 30-80.

Parent Interviews

1.25 Qualitative interviews were conducted with a small sample of parents (6) who were involved in the survey. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain qualitative information about parents' reasons for selecting certain types of information as 'most useful' and to gauge their views on the usefulness of a 'comparator' website as an information source. These interviews were useful for illustrating evidence from the parents survey.

Learner Focus Groups

1.26 We have undertaken a mix of focus groups with young people and adult learners across the FE sector. We delivered 41 focus groups across 19 FE providers, which involved 323 learners. This is an average of 7.8 learners per focus group. Visits were undertaken to:

- 6 FE colleges (completing 14 focus groups);
- 4 WBLPs (completing 8 focus groups);
- 5 ACL providers (completing 9 focus groups);
- 2 sixth form colleges (completing 4 focus groups);
- 4 schools (completing 6 focus groups).

Focus Group Method

1.27 Our focus group approach was specifically developed to provide an interactive and engaging approach to gaining the views of learners on the information they required to inform their choice of FE learning provider and provision. The approach used a simple form of ranking in a semi-structured format with opportunities for learners to contribute their own ideas.

1.28 Learners were provided with various types of information, which they were asked to prioritise into 'must have' (maximum of five), 'like to have' and 'not bothered about'. The discussion then focused on exploring:

- the reasons why particular information was felt to be most useful;
- where learners accessed the information;
- the format required for the information.

1.29 The format of the focus groups involved interactive group work, discussion of reasons behind prioritisation decisions and discussion of visual images of screenshots of comparison websites and, later in the project, the FfE website. The focus group topic guide was approved by the project steering group.

Interviews with IAG Professionals and Employers

1.30 We undertook interviews with 39 IAG professionals and 25 employers over the course of the research.

1.31 Both external (e.g. Connexions, Next Step Advisors) and internal IAG professionals (i.e. based in providers) were consulted as part of the research. We spoke to six external IAG professionals. Our sampling approach involved asking all providers consulted to identify both external and internal IAG professionals that may be willing to participate in the research.

1.32 The purpose of the interviews with IAG professionals was to explore:

- their views on the information learners need to make informed choices;
- the information IAG professionals need to support prospective learners;
- sources of information that IAG professionals use to support learners;
- barriers in accessing appropriate information;
- views on other additional information that could be collected to help learners make an informed choice.

1.33 We involved a range of employers across sectors in the research. Potential employers for involvement were identified by a range of Sector Skill Councils and representatives from the Informing Choice Working group. Additionally, all providers visited

during the research were asked to identify employers who may be willing to participate in the research.

1.34 The interviews with employers specifically focused on:

- information that employers require about FE provision and the most useful format for this information;
- use of current sources of information;
- views on other additional information that could be collected to help employers make decisions.

Report Structure

1.35 This report incorporates the following key sections:

- **Section 2: Information Requirements of Learners and Parents;**
- **Section 3: Information Requirements – Variation across learners types and types of FE provision;**
- **Section 4: Information Requirements of Employers;**
- **Section 5: Providing Information to Inform Decisions;**
- **Section 6: Sources and Formats of Information;**
- **Section 7: Conclusions.**

2 Information Requirements of Learners and Parents

Key Findings

1. Descriptive and facilities focused information was viewed as being the most important to learners' decision-making. Information on entry qualifications, cost, course/programme length; a description of the course/programme and location were all identified as being critical to decision-making.
2. Other facilities/descriptive information such as financial support, transport considerations, delivery information (weekly hours etc) and provider facilities were also all rated highly in terms of their usefulness by both parents and learners.
3. Performance information was rated highly by learners and parents. In particular, information on the benefits that could be gained from attending provision and the quality of provision were valued.
4. The destinations and achievements of previous learners were rated highly in terms of usefulness.
5. The retention of learners on a course/programme and salary gain was rated to be the least useful outcomes information by learners and parents.
6. Information on the characteristics of learners was considered to be of limited use in decision-making by both learners and parents.

2.1 This section will:

- identify the key information that learners and parents require to make decisions about where and what to study;
- explore the usefulness of facilities/description information; performance information; outcomes information and learner characteristic information on decision-making.

Key Factors Influencing Decision Making: Learners and Parents

2.2 Survey respondents (young learners and parents) and the learner focus groups identified key information that was perceived to be most useful when making decisions about where and what to study at FE.

2.3 An information matrix was developed for the research that identified key types of information that may be used by learners to help them make informed decisions about FE provision. This information matrix was used throughout the qualitative and quantitative research with learners and parents to explore which type of information they found to be most useful in their decision-making. A copy of this information matrix can be found in Annex D.

2.4 The information in the matrix was categorised into the following categories:

- Descriptive/Facilities: e.g. location, weekly hours, cost, description of the course/programme, facilities at the provider;
- Performance: e.g. reputation of the course/programme/provider, satisfaction of previous learners, benefits gained;
- Outcomes: retention, changes in salary, achievements of previous learners, progression;
- Learner Characteristics: proportion of male and females students, disabled students, age range of students etc.

2.5 Table 2.1 below identifies the ‘top 5’ information types that were reported to be most useful to learners and parents based on a triangulation of evidence across the qualitative and quantitative research. It is important to note that these ‘top 5’ are not presented in any particular order. These were all descriptive and facilities focused information about the course/programme and/or provider:

Table 2.1: Rating of Facilities/Descriptive Information

Type of Information	Ranking ⁴	% of focus groups rated as ‘must have’	% of young people who rated as ‘very useful’	% of parents who rated as ‘very useful’
Entry Qualifications	1	76%	77%	75%
Cost of the course/programme	2	63%	68%	70%
Description of the course/programme	3	58%	77%	74%
Length of the course/programme	4	55%	64%	62%
Location of where the course/programme takes place	5	49%	58%	67%

⁴ Ranking is based on focus group ratings

2.6 The importance of descriptive and facilities information in learners' decision-making concurs with previous research. For example, Holey et al (2010) found that factual information about the provider can significantly influence whether a potential learner will study at all, let alone consider other information such as performance data. Cost, childcare facilities, support available and time commitment are all outlined by Holey et al as examples of factual information.

2.7 IAG professionals' views on the key information that learners require to make informed decisions generally reflect those of the learners. Information on cost, location, descriptive information on a course/programme and provider facilities were reported by IAG professionals to be important to learners in their decision-making.

2.8 The reasons why learners and parents found descriptive/facilities information of particular value to their decision-making are discussed in more detail below.

Entry Requirements

2.9 Information on entry requirements was of significant use to learners' decision-making. Three-quarters or more of learners from both the learner survey and focus groups identified information on entry requirements/qualifications as being central to their decision-making. Nearly all (98%: n=1031) learners who responded to the survey identified entry requirements as 'useful' (encompassing very useful, somewhat useful and useful). This was a view reflected by parents, with nearly all who were surveyed (96%) identifying entry requirements as 'useful' information.

2.10 A much smaller proportion of parents and learners identified information on entry qualifications to be the 'most useful' type of descriptive/facilities information. When prompted less than a tenth of learners (8%) and parents (9%) selected entry requirements as being 'most useful'.

2.11 Information on entry requirements was perceived to be crucial in minimising the need for learners to spend unnecessary time pursuing a potential course/programme for which they didn't have the required entry requirements. This information was therefore important in allowing learners to choose alternative options if they did not achieve the necessary entry requirements.

"There were a couple of learners who started our course, but then had to stop as they didn't have the right entry requirements – they should have been told from the start" (Learner)

"You need to know that you can meet certain standards" (Learner)

"Without the right qualifications there's little point in properly looking at a course" (Learner)

2.12 The importance of entry qualification information reported though our research supports GHK's 2009 research⁵. GHK reported that information on entry qualifications was important in the decision making process; particularly for young and adult learners and IAG professionals.

Cost of Course / Programme

2.13 **The cost of undertaking a course/programme was identified by learners as being important information in their decision-making.** A similar proportion of learners from both the survey and focus groups indicated that on cost information was important; with over nine-tenths (91%; n=1,010) of learner survey respondents identifying it as being 'useful' information (68% identified as 'very useful') and three-fifths of focus groups identifying it as 'must have' information.

2.14 Parents also valued information on the cost of a course/programme when helping their child/ren make a decision about where and what to study. Nearly all (92%) parents identified this as 'useful' (70% identified as 'very useful').

2.15 Cost information was of particular importance for adult learners, allowing them to judge whether a course/programme was affordable. Younger learners were more likely to report that cost information was of less importance to them; as it was less likely that they would be required to pay for a course/programme. However, it was still viewed as useful information to have.

2.16 Cost information was reported to be of particular importance for learners on benefits, working tax credit or where the course/programme was being provided by an employer. An ACL focus group, that included learners on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Access courses for learners with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities discussed considerations of affordability in their choice of course/programme. For these learners, having information on cost from the outset allowed them to easily draw comparisons with other providers.

Length of Course / Programme

2.17 **Information on the length of the course/programme, as would be expected, was important to learners.** Over half of learners from both the focus groups and learner survey identified information on the length of a course/programme as being central to their decision-making, identifying it as 'very useful' information. Furthermore, nearly all (98%;

⁵ GHK, 2009b, Effectively Publishing and Developing Framework for Excellence: Analysis of User Needs – Report on Focus Group with Users, LSC

n=1029) learner survey respondents identified this information as being ‘useful’ information.

2.18 Parents also valued information on the length of a course/programme when supporting their child/ren to make a decision. Over nine-tenths (92%) of parents identified this as ‘useful’ information; and 62% identified it as ‘very useful’.

2.19 **Adult learners found information on course/programme length to be particularly valuable.** They were more likely to be part-time learners, increasing the need for them to consider other commitments, such as work commitments or childcare when making a decision about study. Information on course length was critical in allowing them to explore whether study would fit in with existing commitments.

2.20 Information on course/programme length was also of value for learners for whom study was developing specific skills that would allow them to progress to employment. For example, a focus group at an ACL provider involved learners that were undertaking a 10-week plastering course. For these learners, the short nature of the course was particularly valued as it allowed them to progress to employment quickly.

2.21 Some learners, however, especially those on ESOL courses, recognised that sometimes a course was a necessity. Therefore, while information on course length would be useful, it would not influence their decision to undertake the course.

“I need to know how much of my time I would be investing in a course/programme”
(Learner)

“You might need a qualification for a particular date and you might get bored if it’s too long” (Learner)

Description of Course / Programme

2.22 **Information on the content of a course/programme was highly valued by learners and parents.** Nearly all learner and parent survey respondents identified this as ‘useful’ information (93% of parents and 98% of learners) and nearly three-fifths of focus group learners (58%) identified it as ‘must have’ information.

2.23 A description of the course/programme was identified as the ‘most useful’ type of facilities/descriptive information by two-thirds of learner survey respondents (67%). Conversely, less than three-tenths (28%) of parents selected this as the ‘most useful’ descriptive/facilities information, suggesting that learners placed greater value on course/programme descriptive information than parents.

2.24 **Accessing information on course/programme content helped learners to select the right course/programme.** In particular, it allowed them to differentiate between the same types of provision across providers. Learners indicated that this allowed them to make an informed decision about whether the content of the course/programme would meet their needs.

“Courses offered by different colleges might have very similar titles, but the content may be very different” (Learner)

“I chatted to one college representative and they took me through the content and what I would study. For example, she talked me through which ones did more nursery teaching which is what I wanted” (Learner)

Location of where the Course / Programme takes place

2.25 The location of the course/programme was viewed as being important by the majority of learners, across provider types. Nearly all (96%; n=1012) learner survey respondents rated this information as ‘useful’. Furthermore, nearly half of the focus groups identified this as ‘must have’ information. Parents also recognised the importance of information on location in the decision-making process, with over nine-tenths (93%) rating this as ‘useful’ (67% rated as ‘very useful’).

2.26 **Information on location was particularly important for learners with children.** For these learners it was often important for them to attend an accessible and local provider which would allow them to fit in their study with existing responsibilities.

“The college is 10 minutes from my daughter’s school and 5 minutes from my work placement and it was held at a time and date that just fitted in. I didn’t consider anywhere else” (Learner)

2.27 **For other learners the location of the course/programme was less important.** This was either due to a willingness to travel to undertake the ‘right’ course or a lack of an alternative option. For some learners, particularly those accessing ACL and WBL provision, limited choice often resulted in them selecting a particular provider by default. For example, a focus group involving apprentices reported that they had chosen their selected provider because other apprenticeship providers were over an hour away and were less accessible by public transport.

2.28 These findings concur with previous research. Our evidence review identified that the location of learning provision to home and work can often be the most important information that learners/employers need (GHK, 2009a⁶). Hoxby et al (2010) also conclude from four case studies of LA and FE providers that the location of provider is likely to be an important, if not, the most important, influencing factor.

2.29 In addition to the ‘top 5’ types of information that learners and parents found to be ‘most useful’ in their decision-making (Table 2.1) we present below an overview of the

⁶ GHK, 2009a. Effectively publishing and developing Framework for Excellence: Analysis of user needs, Final report, LSC.

perceived usefulness of additional information types that may inform decision-making across the following key categories:

- **A: Usefulness of Facilities/Descriptive Information;**
- **B: Usefulness of Performance Information;**
- **C: Usefulness of Outcomes Information;**
- **D: Usefulness of Learner Characteristics Information.**

A: Usefulness of Facilities/Descriptive Information

2.30 The surveys undertaken with learners and parents and the learner focus groups collated views on the usefulness of facilities/descriptive information. As outlined in Table 2.1 a number of the facilities and descriptive types of information were viewed as being some of the most important that learners needed in order make informed decisions about what and where to study. Furthermore, parents found them useful in helping their child/ren to make informed decisions.

2.31 **Table 2.2** provides an indicative rating of the other facilities/descriptive information (from the information matrix), based on the evidence from the quantitative and qualitative research undertaken with parents and learners. The Table focuses on the 'must have' information as rated by the focus groups and the 'very useful' information as rated by young people and parents in the survey. Their views on the usefulness of these information types are discussed overleaf.

Table 2.2: Rating of Facilities/Descriptive Information

Type of Information	Ranking ⁷	% of focus groups rated as 'must have'	% of young people who rated as 'very useful'	% of parents who rated as 'very useful'
Whether there would be any financial support available	6	39%	60%	65%
The number of weekly hours of teaching on the course/programme	7	39%	49%	59%
The balance of coursework and exams on the course/programme	8	25%	52%	60%
How to get to the location of the course/programme by public transport	9	21%	37%	54%
A description of the facilities at the provider	10	15%	33%	56%
Whether there would be any other costs of undertaking the course/programme	11	12%	47%	66%
Availability and cost of parking at the provider	12	6%	20%	27%
How to get to the location of the course/programme by car	13	0%	22%	40%

2.32 All facilities and descriptive categories (including those within the 'top 5') were considered useful by between 70% and 98% of learner survey respondents; this helps to which emphasise the importance of these types of information in learners decision-making. Similarly, all facilities and descriptive categories were considered useful by between 61% and 95% of parents.

⁷ Ranking is based on focus group ratings

Other Cost Information

2.33 Learners and parents were asked to rate how useful the following information was:

- financial support available to support study;
- any additional costs that may be incurred through undertaking a course/programme.

Financial Support

2.34 Providing information on the availability of financial support for learners to help pay for a course/programme was viewed as important. Three-fifths (60%; n=630) of learner survey respondents identified this as 'very useful' information and just over a fifth (22%; n=235) indicated that this was 'somewhat useful'. A similar proportion of parents identified this as 'very useful' (65%; n=186).

2.35 **Information on financial support was viewed as being less important by the focus group learners.** Less than two-fifths (39%) of focus groups identified financial support as 'must have' information and just over half (51%) identified it as 'like to have' information. Although this suggests it was still important, focus groups learners generally perceived it to be of less value in their decision-making.

2.36 In addition to considering overall cost, information on financial support allowed learners to judge the affordability of a course/programme. For young learners, for whom there was generally no cost associated with undertaking a course/programme, there was a view that such information would be of little use to them. As the focus groups involved a mix of adult and young learners this is likely to explain the reason for the disparity in views observed between the learner survey and focus groups.

"We found out that she was entitled to a grant because I was out of work.. that was really useful" (Father)

Additional Costs of Undertaking a Course/Programme

2.37 Information on any additional costs of undertaking a course/programme (e.g. field or study trips) was not a major request of learners. Although, learner survey respondents found this more useful than focus group learners; less than half of respondents (47%; n=491) indicated that this was 'very useful' and over a fifth (22%; n=235) indicated that it was 'somewhat useful'. Conversely, only four of the focus groups felt that information on additional costs was 'must have' information; over three-fifths (63%) identified this as 'like to have' and nearly a quarter (24%) indicated this information would not inform their decision-making.

2.38 Focus group learners reported that it was important that they had clarity from the outset regarding the full cost of undertaking a course/programme. As such, any information on additional costs (incurred for trips, equipment etc) would be of use to learners. For example, one focus group reported that as a group they had refused to go on a trip that the teachers wanted to go on as it was *“an expensive trip which no-one could afford”*.

2.39 Parents were generally more interested than learners in whether there would be additional costs associated with undertaking a course/programme. Two-thirds (66%; n=187) indicated that this was ‘very useful information’, with over a quarter (27%; n=76) reporting that it was ‘somewhat useful’ or ‘useful’.

Transport Considerations

2.40 Information on the location of the course/programme and provider was central to learners’ decision-making; however **other travel and transport information was found to be of less significant use.**

2.41 Accessibility of the course/programme by public transport and car was of use to learners, but did not appear to greatly influence decision-making. Learners survey respondents rated this information as being more useful than focus group learners; with 76% and 88% of learner survey respondents indicating that information on how to get to the location of the course/programme by car and public transport was ‘useful’⁸. In comparison, three-fifths (60%) of focus group learners identified information on accessibility by car as ‘like to have’ information and nearly half (48%) of focus groups identified information on accessibility by public transport as ‘like to have’.

2.42 **Parents’ views on the usefulness of transport information were broadly similar to the learner survey responses.** Over three quarters of parents identified information on getting to the location of the course/programme by car and public transport as useful (76% car; 87% public transport).

2.43 **Parking availability and cost were perceived to be of some use in decision-making, but were not generally major considerations.** Seven-tenths (70%; n=729) of learner survey respondents reported that this type of information was ‘useful’⁹. However, less than a fifth (19%) indicated that it was ‘not particularly useful’ information and less than a tenth (9%) reported that it was ‘not useful at all’. Focus group learners rated the usefulness of parking information much lower; nearly three-fifths (58%) of focus groups felt that this information was ‘not at all useful’.

⁸ Useful = (‘very useful; ‘Somewhat useful’ and ‘Useful’)

⁹ Op cit

2.44 Parents' views were generally consistent with those of learners. Over a third (37%) reported that information on parking availability and cost was not useful to them in helping their child/ren to make an informed decision about where and what to study.

Course / Programme Delivery Information

2.45 Information on the approach taken to the delivery of a course/programme was, as would be expected, important to learners in their decision-making. Information on the number of weekly hours of teaching and the balance of coursework and exams on a course/programme was valued by learners.

2.46 **Information on the number of weekly hours of a course/programme was of particular importance to learners.** This reflects the importance placed on course length and description already discussed. Nearly all of the learner survey respondents identified this as 'useful' information; with nearly half (49%; n=517) reporting that this was 'very useful' to their decision-making. Similarly nearly two-fifths (39%) of focus groups learners identified this as 'must have' information and nearly half (45%) identified details of weekly hours as 'like to have' information.

2.47 **Parents also valued information on weekly hours.** Nearly all (94%; n=267) parents identified this as 'useful' information and nearly three-fifths (59%) indicated that this was 'very useful' information.

2.48 **Information on the balance of coursework/exams was also important to learners,** allowing them to understand whether a course/programme would fit their preferred style of learning. Nearly all (96%; 1010) of the learners who responded to the survey indicated that this was 'useful' information and over half (52%; n=548) reported that it was 'very useful'. Furthermore, nearly a quarter of the focus groups identified the balance of coursework/exams as 'must have' information and nearly three-fifths identified it as 'like to have' information.

2.49 Learners used information on the balance of coursework/exams to judge whether a course/programme would meet their learning style. Focus group learners recognised their individual preferences regarding taking a course/programme that had a high exam or coursework content. For example, some learners were more likely to avoid courses where there was a strong focus on exams. As such, information on the balance between coursework and exams allowed them to judge whether it would meet their learning needs.

"People vary a lot in terms of learning styles which will affect their enjoyment of a course" (Learner)

"Coursework is preferred than exams!" (Learner)

"I chose a Btec instead of A levels because I didn't like exams" (Learner)

2.50 Parents were also positive about the usefulness of information on the balance of coursework/exams when assisting their child/ren to make a decision. Nearly all identified this as 'useful' information, with three-fifths (60%; 171) indicating that it was 'very useful' information.

Facilities at the Provider

2.51 Information on the facilities available at the provider was viewed by some learners as being important, although it did not appear to have a major influence on decision-making. Nearly nine-tenths of learners who responded to the survey (89%; 946) indicated that this was 'useful' information and a third (33%, 351) reported that it was 'very useful' information.

2.52 **The focus group learners were less positive about the usefulness of provider facilities information to their decision-making.** Less than a fifth (15%) of focus groups identified provider facilities as 'must have' information and nearly three-quarters identified it as 'like to have' information. This suggests that although learners valued information on provider facilities, it did not appear to significantly influence decision-making.

2.53 **Information on crèche facilities was felt to be of most use to learners.** As discussed previously, for learners with children, timing and location was of particular importance. Providing information on childcare facilities available at a provider was therefore also judged to be useful. Other learners commented that it was important for them to know about the availability and comprehensiveness of library and IT facilities. Where there was limited interest in information about the facilities available at a provider, learners felt there were negligible differences in facilities between providers and therefore such information did not influence their decision-making.

2.54 **Parents placed greater value on information about facilities available at a provider than learners.** Whilst a similar proportion of parents identified this as 'useful' information (93%), a much greater proportion identified it as 'very useful' information (56%), compared to young people (33%).

B: Usefulness of Performance Information

2.55 The surveys and focus groups explored how useful performance information was in decision-making. The usefulness of information on previous learners' levels of satisfaction, the reputation of courses/programmes and providers and the quality of provision were all rated by learners and parents.

2.56 All performance categories were considered useful by more than 90% of learner survey respondents. Furthermore, information on performance was considered useful by between 84% and 96% of parents.

2.57 **Table 2.3** provides an indicative rating of performance information (from the information matrix), based on the evidence from the quantitative and qualitative research

undertaken with parents and learners. The table focuses on the 'must have' information as rated by the focus groups and the 'very useful' information as rated by young people and parents in the surveys.

Table 2.3: Rating of Performance Information

Type of Information	Ranking ¹⁰	% of focus groups rated as 'must have'	% of young people who rated as 'very useful'	% of parents who rated as 'very useful'
A description of the benefits that the course could provide for the learner (e.g. the types of skills and experience that could be gained)	1	30%	46%	57%
Rating of the quality of the teaching (e.g. Ofsted, inspection results)	2	16%	37%	53%
Reputation of the course/programme (from relatives/friends)	3	9%	32%	46%
Reputation of the college/provider (from relatives/friends)	4	6%	34%	47%
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the standard of teaching	5	3%	43%	51%
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the course/programme	=6	0%	36%	47%
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the provider	=6	0%	33%	48%
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the support and guidance they had received	=6	0%	34%	49%
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the feedback on their work they had received from tutors/teachers	=6	0%	29%	44%

¹⁰ Ranking is based on focus group ratings

Benefits

2.58 The benefits that learners could gain from attending a course/programme (e.g. skills, experience gained) was important to the majority of learners in their decision-making. Nearly all (94%; n=986) of learner survey respondents identified this as 'useful' information; with nearly half (46%) rating it as 'very useful'. The focus groups were also positive about the usefulness of this information with seven-tenths identifying it as 'like to have' information and the remaining three-tenths identifying it as 'must have' information.

2.59 Just under a fifth (18%) of learner survey respondents selected the description of the benefits that a course/programme could provide as the 'most useful' type of performance information. In comparison, just over a tenth (12%) of parents identified this as the 'most useful' information.

2.60 Information on the benefits gained from a course/programme provided learners with a clear understanding of the skills, experience and knowledge they would gain from their involvement. This assisted them in knowing whether a course/programme would provide them with the necessary benefits to progress to employment, further study or would equip them with the basic skills they required (e.g. ESOL learners).

"Then you will have an idea of what you will gain, whether it would be good for you and whether you'll progress afterwards" (Learner)

Satisfaction of Previous Learners

2.61 Views were sought from learners on how useful information on the satisfaction of previous learners on a course/programme and/or at a provider would be when making a decision about where and what to study.

2.62 **There were mixed views about the usefulness of satisfaction information by learners.** Whereas learner survey respondents rated satisfaction information highly; focus groups learners were less positive about its usefulness. For example:

- 95% (n=988) of learner survey respondents reported that information on the **proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the standard of teaching** as being 'useful'; with over two-fifths (43%) indicating that this was 'very useful' information. In comparison; nearly half of focus groups learners identified this as 'like to have' information and 45% reported that it was 'not at all useful';
- 92% (n=976) of learner survey respondents reported that information on the **proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the support and guidance they had received** was 'useful'; with over a third (34%) indicating this was 'very useful' information. In comparison, three-fifths (60%) of focus group learners identified this as 'like to have' information and the remaining two-fifths did not feel that this was useful information;

- 90% (n=954) of learner survey respondents indicated that they would find information on the proportion of learners that **were satisfied with feedback on their work they had received from tutors/teachers**; with nearly three-tenths (29%) rating that as ‘very useful’ information. Conversely, over half (51%) of focus group learners identified this as ‘like to have’ information and the remaining 49% did not feel this was useful information.

2.63 Providing information on the satisfaction of previous learners with a course/programme and a provider was viewed as being of greater use by learner survey respondents. Over nine-tenths reported that this information would be useful to them in their decision-making; 36% of respondents thought that information on satisfaction with the course/programme would be ‘very useful’ and a third (33%) reported that information on the satisfaction with the provider would be ‘very useful’.

2.64 **Focus group learners provided mixed views regarding the usefulness of satisfaction information.** Over half (55%) indicated that previous learners’ satisfaction with a course/programme was not useful information to them (45% indicated that it was ‘like to have’). Similarly, half of the focus groups reported that previous learners’ satisfaction with the provider was not useful information – the other half felt that it was ‘like to have’ information.

2.65 Some learners were concerned about the independence of such ratings and therefore felt that they would be of limited use in their decision-making.

“The college may lie or just pick out feedback that is good” (Learner)

2.66 **All satisfaction categories were considered useful by nine-tenths or more of parents.** The categories with the highest percentage of parents indicating that they were ‘very useful’ included satisfaction with the standard of teaching (51%), satisfaction with support and guidance received (49%) and satisfaction with the provider (48%).

Quality of the Provider

2.67 There were mixed views across learners regarding the influence of information on the quality of providers, for example as reflected in Ofsted inspection results, on decision-making. Nearly nine-tenths (89%; n=937) of learner survey respondents reported that this was ‘useful’ information in their decision-making; with over a third (37%) indicating that it was ‘very useful’.

2.68 Focus group learners also found information on the quality of teaching useful in decision-making, but to a lesser degree. Three-fifths (60%) identified it as ‘like to have’ information, with less than a fifth (16%) reporting that it was ‘must have’ information.

2.69 **Parents placed much greater value on the rating of the quality of teaching than learners.** Over half (53%; n=152) reported that this was ‘very useful’ information.

Parents were also asked additional about how useful they would find ‘the position of the organisation in published ratings or performance tables’. Over four-fifths (84%; n=238) of parents identified this as ‘useful’, with nearly a third (32%) identifying it as ‘very useful’.

2.70 The ability for published ratings of quality (i.e. inspection, Ofsted reports) to provide an independent, unbiased perspective was reported to be one of the key benefits of learners using this information in their decision-making. For example, one school focus group commented that it was important they were able to look at providers who were well rated by independent inspectors, as opposed to using information that may be produced by the provider. Another focus group felt that Ofsted reports provided impartial information which could be used to compare against any anecdotal information. Learners valued the opportunity to compare this information with other providers, particularly if there was a choice of providers who were rated higher in the same area.

2.71 Where there was a reluctance by learners to use this ‘ratings’ information to inform decision-making, it was because they felt interpretation could be subjective. Some learners commented that Ofsted grades could be influenced by factors such as local area demographics and learner intake, which they felt needed to be taken into account in any interpretation.

2.72 The documents reviewed as part of our evidence review discussed the concept of whether ‘the provider is good enough?’. GHK (2009a) found that quality in decision-making is only an influence if/when there is a failure, as otherwise a quality standard is presumed to be met. The research suggests that learners assume standards are met through publicly funded provision. This is useful context for this research in understanding the potential influence of quality-focused information on learners’ decision-making.

Reputation of the Provider

2.73 **Friends and families’ views of the provider and course/programme were important to learners in their decision-making.** Survey respondents rated highly the importance of this information in their decision making with over nine-tenths reporting that this was ‘useful’ information and approximately a third (34% reputation of college/provider and 32% reputation of the course/programme) identifying it as ‘very useful’ information.

2.74 **Parents also highly valued friends and families’ views on the reputation of the course/programme and provider.** Nearly half of all parents identified friends and families’ views on the reputation of the provider and course/programme as being ‘very useful’ (47% and 46%) respectively.

2.75 Just over a fifth of learners identified the reputation of the college/provider from friends/relatives (21%) as being the ‘most useful’ type of performance information. In comparison, 7% of parents identified it as the ‘most useful’.

2.76 The majority of focus group learners also valued the views of friends and families; however their views were more disparate. Three-fifths (60%) of focus groups felt that their views on the provider was ‘like to have’ information; whereas 58% felt that their views on the course/programme was ‘like to have’ information. There was however a large

proportion of focus group learners who did not think that such information was useful in their decision-making (30%-33%). As the focus groups also involved adult learners this suggests that younger learners were more likely to take into account the views of friends/family.

2.77 For some learners, particularly younger learners, friends and family were instrumental in encouraging learners to choose a particular provider. This was either because they had attended themselves or had a particular view about the suitability of the providers. For example, two focus groups were conducted at a WBL provider offering apprenticeships. The provider had an established reputation within the local areas and learners recognised their interest in the apprenticeship programme.

“Everyone would say, oh that’s great that you’re going there – you must be clever”
(Learner)

“The whole town knew about the Apprenticeship programme” (Learner)

2.78 Some learners felt that that friends and family offered a balanced view on providers and therefore welcomed this insight when making a decision. Other learners were less influenced by the views of friends and family and did not feel that their views would influence their decision-making. They felt that it was important to recognise and take into account different perspectives and needs when interpreting any such information.

“Their experience doesn’t necessarily affect you” (Learner)

“It’s subject to personal opinion” (Learner)

C: Usefulness of Outcomes Information

2.79 The surveys and focus groups explored how useful outcomes information was in informing decision-making. Information on destinations, achievements, retention and changes in salary were all rated by learners and parents.

2.80 Table 2.3 provides an indicative rating of the usefulness of outcomes information in informing decision-making, based on the evidence from the quantitative and qualitative research with parents and learners. The table focuses on the ‘like to have’ information as rated by the focus groups and the ‘very useful information’ as rated by young people and parents in the survey. Their views on the usefulness of these information types are discussed below.

Table 2.3: Rating of Outcomes Information

Type of Information	Ranking ¹¹	% of focus groups rated as 'like to have' ¹²	% of young people who rated as 'very useful'	% of parents who rated as 'very useful'
What learners who had previously been on the course/programme had achieved (e.g. grades, qualifications)	1	70%	45%	42%
What learners who had previously been on the course/programme went on to do afterwards (e.g. jobs, further study)	2	67%	48%	39%
Changes in salary after completing the course/programme for students who previously had a job	3	52%	39%	28%
Proportion of learners that had previously dropped out of the course/programme	4	18%	21%	24%

2.81 All outcomes categories were considered useful by between 72% and 92% of learner survey respondents. Similarly, between 75% and 90% of parents considered the outcomes information useful. Across the focus groups between 18% and 70% of groups rated the outcomes categories as 'like to have' information.

Destinations of Learners

2.82 The destinations of previous learners (i.e. what learners went on to do after attending a course/programme) was valued in helping learners to make decisions about where and what to study. Over nine-tenths (92%) of learners who responded to the survey identified this as 'useful' information, with nearly half (48%) indicating that it was 'very useful'. Furthermore, nearly half of learners (49%) selected destinations of previous learners as being the 'most useful' outcomes category.

¹¹ Ranking based on focus group ratings

¹² A very low proportion of focus groups identified as 'must have' information

2.83 Information on the destinations of previous learners was less valued by the focus group learners. Just over two-thirds of focus groups identified learner destinations as 'like to have' information and just over one fifth (21%) felt that it was not useful information.

2.84 **Parents were also very positive about the usefulness of information on the destinations of previous learners.** Nearly two-fifths (39%; n=110) identified destinations as being 'very useful' information, with just less than nine-tenths (89%), rating this as 'useful' information overall. This was also rated as the 'most useful' types of outcomes information by parents (34%; n=98).

2.85 Focus group learners reported that it was beneficial to know what potential there was to progress to employment or further study. Information on the destinations of previous learners was therefore viewed by some as being a useful measure of progression and allowing the learners to judge what they could potentially go on to do after a course/programme of study.

"It's useful to know what I could go on to do" (Learner)

Achievement of Previous Learners

2.86 Learners were asked to rate the usefulness of information about the achievements of previous learners on a course/programme (e.g. grades, qualifications).

2.87 **The achievement of previous learners was generally valued by learners and parents.** Over nine-tenths of learners who responded to the survey identified this as 'useful', with nearly half (45%) reporting that it was 'very useful'. Nearly three-tenths (29%) of survey respondents identified achievement data as being the 'most useful' type of performance information.

2.88 Over two-fifths (42%; n=121) of parents rated the achievements of previous learners as being 'very useful'. Nearly three-tenths (27%) identified it as being the 'most useful' type of outcomes information.

2.89 **The learner focus groups were also positive about the usefulness of achievement information, but to a lesser extent.** The majority (70%) of focus groups felt that this was 'like to have' information and just over a fifth (21%) felt that it was information that they were 'not bothered about'.

2.90 Information on the achievement of previous learners was reported by some focus group learners to provide an indication of the quality of the teaching. Others felt that it was important as they needed confidence that they would achieve the necessary qualification. Where achievement information was viewed as less useful, this was due to learners perceiving this to be about individuals' own engagement and learning style.

“It’s an indication of the quality of the teaching” (Learner)

“Qualifications are the most important factor. You get paid more with qualifications, everyone in this group are doing their course in order to get a job” (Learner)

Retention of Learners

2.91 Information on the retention of previous learners on a course/programme (i.e. the proportion of learners that had previously dropped out) was not perceived to be of significant use in decision-making. Over seven-tenths (72%) of learners who responded to the survey indicated that retention information was ‘useful’. A fifth (21%) felt that it was ‘very useful’ and over a quarter (27%) rated it as ‘not particularly useful’ and ‘not useful at all’.

2.92 The focus groups of learners also rated the usefulness of retention information as low. Over three-quarters (78%) identified that it was information that they were ‘not bothered about’ and just less than a fifth (18%) felt that it was ‘like to have’ information.

2.93 **Parents’ views on the usefulness of retention information were generally consistent with learners’ views.** Although three-quarters of respondents indicated that this information was ‘useful’, less than a quarter (24%) identified it as ‘very useful’ with a quarter rating it as ‘not particularly useful’ and ‘not useful at all’.

2.94 Learners recognised that there were a number of variables that may influence drop-out, including personal circumstances, opinions and experience. As such many did not feel that quantitative data on learner retention would be helpful, as they felt that such data would not fully represent the reasons for drop-out and therefore they would be reluctant to rely on this information in their decision-making.

“Depends which college because it could be the fact that the pupils are just lazy, not actually the education” (Learner)

“Everyone has their own reason for dropping out” (Learner)

“That’s personal choice not a reflection of the course” (Learner)

Salary Gains

2.95 The views on the usefulness of information on salary gains through undertaking a course/programme were disparate across learners and parents. Nine-tenths of learners who responded to the survey felt that it would be useful to have information about changes in salary after completing of a course/programme. Of these, nearly two-fifths (39%) felt that this was ‘very useful’ information. Parents provided similar views to the learner survey;

with nearly a third (28%) rating this as 'very useful' information and over four-fifths (84%) rating it as 'useful' overall.

2.96 Both learners and parents rated information on salary gains low in terms of it being the 'most useful' outcomes information. Less than a tenth (7%) of parents rated it as being the 'most useful' information, compared to 14% of learners.

2.97 The focus groups rated salary gains information as being of less use. Seven-tenths identified information on salary gains as being 'like to have' information. Furthermore, a large proportion (39%) felt that it was information that did not influence their decision-making.

D: Usefulness of Learner Characteristic Information

2.98 Information on the characteristics of learners was considered to be of limited use in decision-making by both learners and parents. As shown in Table 2.4 this information was consistently identified as the least useful information in informing decisions about where and what to study at FE. The table focuses on 'not bothered about' information as rated by the focus groups and the 'not particularly useful' or 'not useful at all' information as rated by young people and parents in the surveys.

2.99 Across all learner characteristics categories between 29% and 63% of learners who responded to the survey rated this information as useful. In comparison between 29% and 47% of parents rated this information as useful.

Table 2.4: Rating of Facilities/Descriptive Information

Type of Information	Ranking ¹³	% of focus groups rated as 'must have'	% of young people who rated as 'very useful'	% of parents who rated as 'very useful'
The age range of students at the provider	1	78%	36%	53%
The proportion of male and female students at the provider	2	97%	56%	67%
Ethnic background of students at the provider	3	97%	69%	70%
The number of international students at the provider	4	97%	64%	65%
The proportion of disabled students at the provider	5	94%	69%	64%

2.100 Over half of learners survey respondents thought that the age range of students was the 'most useful' (56%), with just under a quarter identifying the proportion of male and female students (23%) as being the 'most useful'. In comparison, less than a fifth (18%, 51) of parents identified age range as being the most useful learner characteristic information.

Other Useful Information

2.101 Learners were asked if there was other information, not presented in the information matrix that would be useful to them in their decision-making. Other information cited by learners included:

- providers' links with universities;
- availability and nature of extra-curricular activities;
- additional non-contact time required e.g. amount of study time outside of taught hours that would be expected;
- transferability of the course e.g. learners taking apprenticeships were interested in whether it was possible to transfer their study to another employer if they moved jobs.

¹³ Ranking is based on focus group ratings

3 Information Requirements – Variation across Learner Types and Types of FE Provision

Key Findings

1. Adult learners' requirements for information are broadly similar to young people. However, they are more likely to consider location, require childcare support and consider timings of FE provision in order to fit in with other commitments.
2. A lower proportion of sub-groups of young people rated the destinations of previous learners, descriptive information about a course/programme and the proportion of males/females on a course/programme as being the 'most useful' information compared to a baseline group of learners. The baseline group involves all those who did not fall into the sub-groups (non White-British ethnicity, learners with a disability and, learners in social group C2DE).
3. Benefits gained and the achievements of previous learners were reported to be 'most useful;' by a greater proportion of young people within the sub-groups, compared to the baseline group.
4. Parents rated information on the description of a course/programme significantly lower in terms of usefulness than young people.
5. Young people found information on the reputations and satisfaction of previous learners as being more useful in their decision-making than parents.
6. Young people were more interested in the destinations of previous learners than parents.

3.1 The surveys and focus groups conducted with learners and parents provided useful insight into how information requirements differ across types of learners and FE provision. In this section we provide a discussion on the differences observed in information requirements across the following:

- **Learners: Adults;**
- **Learners: Young People;**
- **Parents;**
- **Types of FE provision.**

Learners: Adults

3.2 A literature review and stakeholder consultations by GHK (2009a) identified that choices for adult learners are broadly similar to young learners apart from some key differences. Adults are more likely to:

- need a provider closer to work rather than home;
- have a car rather than use public transport, so require parking facilities rather than feasible public transport routes;
- require childcare support;
- have other commitments, meaning that timing is more of a priority.

3.3 Primary research undertaken by GHK (2009b) identified that information on location, financial support, entry qualifications, course times and course facilities were the types of information most valued by adult learners in their decision-making.

3.4 Our research with adult learners found that the requirements of adult learners are broadly similar to those of young people. As outlined in the previous Section, one key difference was that those learners with children were more likely to be interested in information on childcare facilities. This is also consistent with the findings of previous research.

Learners: Young People

3.5 Previous research (GHK 2009a, GHK 2009b, Simmons 2010) has suggested that there are predominant factors that influence young people's choice of FE provision and that there is also 'currently used' information that they will use to make decisions. Our evidence review and the research we have conducted with young people, suggests that it is difficult to distinguish between these '*factors*' (e.g. accessibility, enhancement of career) and '*currently used*' information (e.g. information on location, financial support etc) in terms of the role they play in the decision-making process. For example, there may be a number of factors why a learner decided to choose a particular FE provider and this may or may not link to the type of information that they then choose to access in order to confirm their decision.

3.6 Broadly, the literature review and stakeholder consultations by GHK (2009a) highlight that choices for young learners were mostly determined by the following factors:

- existing learning/provider – may lead to an obvious progression route;
- location to home and/or work;
- 'fit' with ability (entry qualifications, likelihood of success);
- 'fit' with needs (skills gained);
- duration (length and intensity);

- support (financial/pastoral);
- peer influence (where friends are going).

Young People Learner Survey

3.7 The learner survey explored the views of specific sub-groups of young people for whom it was more difficult to fully represent their views within the focus groups conducted. The survey sought to explore the views of under 16's; not White British learners; those with a disability; and those whose parents were in Social grade C2DE¹⁴.

3.8 Table 3.1 provides an overview of the prevalence of each key sub-group within the overall survey sample.

Table 3.1: Learner Survey Sub Group Proportions

Sub-Group	Number	% of overall sample
Under 16's	196	27%
Not White British	211	29%
Those with a disability	162	22%
Social Grade C2DE	261	35%
Baseline Group (those who do not fall into the sub-groups)	181	24%
Base=740		

3.9 We have analysed views across sub-groups to explore whether there are any differences in views on the 'most useful' type of information required to inform their decision-making, compared to the baseline group of learners. This was across the four main categories of information collected through the survey: facilities/descriptive; performance; outcomes and learner characteristics.

Sub-Group Analysis

3.10 The analysis of survey responses by sub-group identified some key differences between ratings of 'most useful' information, compared to the baseline group of learners. In particular it found that:

¹⁴ Social Grade C2DE refers to all respondents whose parents' social grade is C2(skilled manual worker), D (semi-skilled/unskilled manual worker) and E (those receiving state benefits for sickness)

- a lower proportion of learners in the sub-groups **rated descriptive information on a course/programme as being the ‘most useful’ descriptive/facilities information** (range of 61%-67% across sub-groups), compared to the baseline group of learners (73%);
- a greater proportion of learners across the sub-groups rated the **benefits gained from a course/programme as the ‘most useful’ performance information** (range of 15%-23% across sub-groups), compared to the baseline group (13%);
- a lower number of learners across the sub-groups rated information on the **destinations of previous learners as being the ‘most useful’ type of outcomes information** (40%-50% across groups), compared to the baseline group of learners (54%);
- information on the **achievement of previous learners was perceived to be more important by the survey sub-groups** (27%-36% of sub-groups rated as the ‘most useful’ outcomes information) than the baseline group (24%);
- learners across the **sub-groups found information on the proportion of males/females on a course/programme less useful** (19%-23% rated this as the ‘most useful’ learner characteristic information), compared to the baseline group of learners (30%).

3.11 The differences across the sub-groups, although subtle in some instances, reflect the importance of information being tailored to the needs and requirements of particular learner groups to effectively inform decision-making.

3.12 We outline in **Table 3.2** overleaf further differences observed between the survey sub-groups and the baseline group of learners.

Table 3.2: Variation in Views on the Usefulness of Information across Young People Learner Sub-Groups

Type of Information	Under 16's	Non-White British learners	Learners with a Disability	Social Grade C2DE ¹⁵
Descriptive/Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a much lower proportion of under 16 learners identified a description of the course/programme as being the 'most useful' descriptive/facilities information (64%), compared with the baseline group of learners (73%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> there was a lower proportion of non-White British learners who rated the description of the course/programme as being the 'most useful' descriptive/facilities information (64%), compared to the baseline group (73%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a lower proportion of learners with a disability rated the description of the course/programme as being 'most useful' descriptive/facilities information (67%), compared to the baseline group (73%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a smaller proportion of learners in this social grade rated information on the description of the course/programme as the 'most useful' descriptive/facilities information (61%), compared to the baseline group (73%).
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no major differences observed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> there was a slightly higher proportion of non-White British learners who rated a description of the benefits of a course/programme (20%) as being the 'most useful' performance information, compared with the baseline group of learners (13%); non-White British learners rated the reputation of the course/programme (from friends/relatives) as being of less use in their decision-making (9% rated as 'most useful') than the baseline group (16%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a higher proportion of learners with a disability rated the benefits of a course/programme as being the 'most useful' performance information (18%), compared with the baseline group; learners with a disability rated the reputation of the course/programme (from friends/relatives) and the proportion of learners that were satisfied with the course/programme as being of less use, compared to the baseline group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> learners from this social grade were more interested in the benefits they could gain from a course/programme (23% rated as 'most useful') and the quality of the teaching (15% rated as 'most useful'), than the baseline group of learners (13% and 11% respectively).
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a much lower proportion of under 16 learners identified information on the destinations of previous learners as being the 'most useful' outcomes category of information (40%), compared with the baseline group of learners (54%); a higher proportion of under 16 learners identified information on the achievement of previous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the achievements of previous learners were viewed as being of more use by non-White British learners (29%), compared to the baseline group of learners (24%); the destinations of previous learners was perceived to be of less use to non-White British learners (48% rated as the 'most useful' outcomes category), compared to the baseline group (54%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> learners with a disability found information on the proportion of learners that had previously dropped out of a course/programme as being 'more useful' (12%) than all other sub-groups and the baseline group (9%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a greater proportion of learners from the C2DE social grade rated the achievements of previous learners as being the 'most useful' outcomes information, compared to the baseline group of learners

¹⁵ Social Grade C2DE refers to all respondents whose parents' social grade is C2(skilled manual worker), D (semi-skilled/unskilled manual worker) and E (those receiving state benefits for sickness)

Type of Information	Under 16's	Non-White British learners	Learners with a Disability	Social Grade C2DE ¹⁵
Learner Characteristics	<p>learners (i.e. grades, qualifications achieved) as being the 'most useful' outcomes category (36%), compared with the baseline group of learners (24%).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 16's found information on the age profile and ethnicity of learners at a provider as more useful (58% rated age as 'most useful' and 11% rated ethnicity as 'most useful') than the baseline group (50% and 4% respectively). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a much greater proportion of non-White British learners identified the ethnic background of learners at a provider being the 'most useful' characteristics information (18%), compared with the baseline group of learners (4%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners with a disability were more interested in the proportion of disabled students at a provider (8%) than the baseline group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners were less interested in the proportion of males/females at a provider (19% rated as 'most useful'), than the baseline group (30% rated as 'most useful'). Ethnicity was of more interest to these learners however (13% compared to 4% of the baseline group).

Variation in Usefulness of Information - Parents

3.13 The parent survey aimed to explore the **key information that parents required to assist their child/ren in making a decision about where and what to study**. The views of parents were compared with the responses from the learner survey. The purpose of this was to explore how parents' and young people's views differed in relation to the information that they found to be 'most useful' when making decisions about FE provision across key information types (descriptive/facilities, performance, outcomes and learner characteristics).

3.14 It is important to note that there are a number of limitations with this analysis which should be taken into account in the interpretation of the findings. In particular:

- the analysis does not take into account the views of the focus group learners;
- there were a much greater number of young people who completed the survey than parents.

3.15 However, whilst recognising its limitations, this analysis is useful for understanding how parents and young people rate different types of information.

3.16 **Descriptive/Facilities Information:** Parents placed less value on the description of a course/programme than parents. Two-thirds (67%; 706) of young people identified this as the 'most useful' type of descriptive/facilities information, compared to less than three-tenths of parents (28%; 80).

3.17 **Information on entry qualifications was equally important to young people and parents.** Nearly the same proportion of both identified this as being the 'most useful' type of descriptive/facilities information (9% of parents, 8% of young people).

3.18 **Performance Information:** Young people found information on the reputation and satisfaction of previous learners as being more useful in their decision-making than parents. For example:

- just over a fifth of young people (21%) identified the reputation of the college/provider (by friends/family) as being the 'most useful' type of performance information;
- parents identified the proportion of people that started the course than went on to successfully achieve the qualification¹⁶ as being the 'most useful' (15%);
- nearly a fifth of young people (18%) identified the benefits that could be gained from a course/programme as being the 'most useful' performance information; compared to just over a tenth (12%) of parents;

¹⁶ It should be noted that this was not included in the young person learner survey

- the proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the course/programme was of greater interest to young people than parents.

3.19 A similar proportion of parents and young people identified the benefits that could be gained from undertaking a course/programme and the quality of the provider as being the 'most useful' performance information.

3.20 **Outcomes Information:** Young people were more interested in the destinations of previous learners than parents. Nearly half of young people identified this as being the 'most useful' outcomes information, compared to just over a third of parents (34%; 98).

3.21 There were similar proportions of parents and young people who identified the achievements of previous learners as being 'most useful'; 29% of young people, compared to 27% of parents.

3.22 **Learner Characteristics:** Young people had a much greater interest in the age range of learners at a provider than parents. Nearly three-fifths of young people (56%) identified this as the 'most useful' learner characteristic information, compared to less than a fifth of parents (18%).

3.23 The gender breakdown of providers was also of more interest to young people; with nearly a quarter (23%) identifying this as the 'most useful' information, compared to only 4% of parents.

Variation in Information Requirements across Different Types of Learning Provision

3.24 The research provides an insight into how the information requirements may differ across types of learning provision.

3.25 There were some emerging differences in views about information requirements across the different types of FE provision. It is important to note however that the variation in views presented below are indicative and are based on observations collated through the focus group research.

Type of Provision	Information Requirements
FE	Requirements are very variable, due to the wide range of learner characteristics, types of learning and age groups. Specific requirements of different groups were not identifiable.
WBL	Work-based learning participants were found to be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less interested in the satisfaction of previous learners, or ratings of the quality of teaching; • less likely to pro-actively seek out information to inform decision-making; • more likely to express strong interest in salary gains, destinations of previous learners.
ACL	ACL participants expressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greater interest in the accessibility of provision in terms of their existing commitments (work, childcare etc). Therefore timing and number of learning hours are seen to be key requirements; • less likelihood of comparing information across providers, due to limited choices of similar providers in their local area.
School Sixth Form/Sixth Form College	These learners indicated: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greater interest in outcomes and performance information, particularly in terms of quality, achievements of previous learners and destinations for those learners who are considering HE; • that cost is viewed as less relevant, due to the age group of learners.

3.26 Hoxley et al (2010) provided some interesting findings in relation to WBLP. The reputation of the employer (the employment based element) rather than of the training provider (training based element) was an influencing factor for work-based schemes such as Apprenticeships. This was a similar observation from our research with a number of the WBLP focus groups reporting on the influence of employer reputation in their decision-making.

4 Information Requirements of Employers to Inform Decision-Making

Key Findings

1. The relevance of a course/programme; flexibility of delivery; costs of provision and the quality of the provider were identified by employers as being key information that they required when making decisions about FE provision.
2. Offering provision that was relevant to an employers' organisation and/or sector was important to employers. Reassurance that employees would develop relevant skills that would contribute to wider business needs was of significant importance.
3. Employers valued the ability for providers to be flexible to their needs and requirements, through tailoring provision to meet business needs and structuring delivery (content and times) to fit in with existing commitments.
4. Cost was a significant consideration for employers, as was ensuring that they received value for money from FE provision.
5. Employers measured the quality of a provider in many ways. Demonstrating credibility and experience in the sector alongside more formal measures of quality including success rates and inspection grades were used by employers in their decision-making.

4.1 Views were sought from employers and providers with regards to the type of information they required to allow them to make informed decisions about learning provision for their staff.

4.2 A range of employers were consulted as part of the research, across sectors. This ranged from large employers (PCT's, Hilton Hotels) to small, local employers (care homes, retailers). Employers identified a number of key types of information that they felt assisted them in making an informed decision about learning provision. These included:

- **the relevance of benefits to sector/organisation;**
- **flexibility of delivery;**
- **cost of provision;**
- **quality of provision.**

4.3 In practice, it was clear that employers rely on a combination of different types of information when making decisions about FE learning provision.

4.4 The key types of information required by employers identified through this research concurred with previous research. For example, GHK (2009a)¹⁷ referenced **reputation, flexibility and value for money being key information requirements of employers**. Furthermore, survey findings from research undertaken by the LSC (2007) suggest that course cost was central to employers making decisions about training provision alongside course information.

4.5 GHK (2009a)¹⁸ also referenced three key factors that influenced employers' choice of provider. These were compulsion¹⁹, location and pre-existing relationship.

4.6 The key information types identified as being important to employers through this research are discussed in more detail below.

Relevance and Benefits to Sector/Organisation

4.7 Offering provision that was relevant to an employers' organisation and/or sector was identified as a key requirement by employers. They reported in particular on the importance of a provider being able to develop provision that was suited to their business and was well matched to their needs.

"We've had training in the past which hasn't been pitched at our industry so we know that this can be a problem" (Employer)

4.8 Providing information on the skills that learners would gain through undertaking a particular course/programme was essential for employers. Although employers were keen for any learning to be beneficial for the individuals involved they were also particularly interested in the benefits that would be gained at a business level. The term 'return on investment' was cited by a number of employers, emphasising the importance that learning provision had benefits for the organisation more widely. For example, through developing skills that could then be used to enhance the business.

"Just saying that you are a quality provider won't help on its own. Most providers around here are high quality so providers need to demonstrate the return on investment employers will get" (Employer)

¹⁷ GHK, 2009a. Effectively publishing and developing Framework for Excellence - Analysis of user needs. Final Report, LSC.

¹⁸ GHK, 2009a. Effectively publishing and developing Framework for Excellence - Analysis of user needs. Final Report, LSC.

¹⁹ Defined as "the need for accredited learning arising from business need and identified workforce skill gaps"

4.9 This view was reflected at a provider level. For example, one provider reported that it was important to provide employers with reassurance that sending their employees on a particular course/programme would add value in terms of their skill development and contribution to the business. For example, one FE college reported that when engaging employers they used personalised course leaflets, and were also able to tailor qualifications to meet the needs of employees.

4.10 **Employers were also keen to know whether a course/programme led to a recognised qualification.** For many employers this was an indication of the quality of provision and helped provide reassurance about the benefits/skills that would be gained.

Flexibility of Delivery

4.11 **Employers valued the ability for providers to be flexible to their needs and requirements.** Tailoring provision to meet business needs in terms of both content and mode of delivery was particularly welcomed by employers. This reassured employers that providers understood the context in which they were operating and were willing to work around this as necessary to meet needs.

4.12 Providing clarity from the outset on the number of hours of learning and study time that would be required was particularly important in allowing employers to assess a provider's flexibility. Employers valued having this information upfront and appreciated providers meeting their requirements for delivery, for example, through delivering onsite, considering staff needs and making the course/programme manageable for individual learners and employers.

"They are very good and are extremely flexible. They come in at night to deliver training to our night staff. They also do work on Dictaphones to help staff with lower literacy levels" (Employer)

"Employers are frustrated because their employees are having to take a whole day off for a two hour training session for example. In our industry if you take someone off the production line, the machine stops working. There is just not the time to do it" (Employer)

"I'm always interested to know about how many hours of taught study will be undertaken as I do not want my employees disappearing for half a day" (Employer)

4.13 **Offering flexible delivery was reported by providers to be a key driver in securing employers' business.** Providers offered examples of tailoring courses specifically to employers' needs and being as flexible as possible to secure engagement. For example this may involve delivering provision outside of work hours, or commonly on a Friday afternoon. For some employers, there was clearly a requirement that any training provided was tailored and bespoke, as oppose to *'off the shelf'*.

Cost of Provision

4.14 The cost of provision and understanding the funding available to support learning was a significant consideration for employers when making decisions about learning provision. For example, a number of employers mentioned the usefulness of Train to Gain funding in providing training provision over the last few years.

4.15 Some employers found seeking appropriate funding challenging and in particular matching available funding with the needs of employees. A number of employers reported having previously accessed funding through RDAs, Train to Gain and Skills for Life. However, many employers recognised that funding through such routes either no longer existed or did not always allow access to appropriate provision for their business needs. Employers therefore reported having to balance funding availability, with an understanding of whether the learning provision would suit their needs.

4.16 Value for money was also a key consideration of employers who reported on the importance of balancing cost with the quality of provision. Providers also reiterated the importance of cost in employers' decision-making.

“Courses are so price sensitive for employers. 99% of their concern is cost” (Head of Adult Learning)

Quality of the Provision

4.17 **The quality of provision was an important consideration for employers.** Employers' definitions of quality were varied, with differing levels of importance placed on measures of 'quality'. Credibility, professional expertise of tutors/assessors, capacity to deliver, available support and more formal measures of quality (e.g. achievement and inspection grades) were all identified as playing a role in informing employers' decisions.

4.18 Some employers had concerns about the impartiality of IAG provided to those in year 11, in particular citing a lack of information on Apprenticeships.

4.19 **Demonstrating credibility and experience in the sector was seen as a big draw for employers.** Employers identified this as a measure of quality that allowed them to feel comfortable 'buying into' FE provision that was sensitive to and understood the sector they were working in. Similarly, using experienced tutors/staff and having strong support in place for employees was reported to be important.

4.20 **More formal measures of quality such as success rates and inspection grades were viewed as being important by some employers.** Some employers reported using success rates and achievement information to inform their decision-making and to allow them to make judgements on value for money; however this was not common across all employers. **Other employers reported not using this type of information in their decision-making**, although it must be recognised that this could be due to a number of reasons, including placing a lack of value on these measures or simply a lack of awareness of its availability.

4.21 Providers felt that the demonstrating and delivering quality provision to employers and developing effective relationships was crucial to securing repeat business.

“Reputation, method of delivery and good success rates with previous learners are the main reasons for repeat business and increased numbers of courses. We have found that when a company finds a deliverer they like and can provide a service they want then they will stick with them” (WBL Provider)

4.22 **Word of mouth was critical for many employers in judging the quality of provision.** A number of employers had established relationships with FE providers which they had used over the long-term to provide training to their employees. As such, many employers reported that they did not actively seek information on new learning providers, instead choosing to rely on the providers with whom that they had an established relationship.

4.23 Employers that were actively seeking information on learning provision reported being more likely to buy into provision that was recommended by other employers.

Influence of Employer Characteristics

4.24 There were found to be a number of employer characteristics that influenced the type and amount of information that employers required to make decisions about FE provision. These included:

- **size and type of organisation:** larger employers/organisations were more likely to report going through formal tendering processes, requiring a greater level of information from providers and allowing them to compare across a number of providers;
- **focus on training within the organisation:** for some employers the focus on training within the organisation was limited due to other priorities and therefore seeking training opportunities had a low priority;
- **time and capacity to source information:** a number of employers reported having limited time to seek information on learning provision and therefore were more likely to choose provision that they were either familiar with or for whom information was easily accessible;
- **location of provision:** some employers specifically chose provision nearby that was easily accessible for their learners.

5 Providing Information to Inform Decisions

Key Findings

1. Learners use multiple sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of study opportunities.
2. IAG professionals play a significant role in collecting and presenting information to learners. This is generally needs-led, using a range of information sources.
3. Accessibility of information, resource and time constraints and quality and independence were identified by IAG professionals and providers as key challenges in sourcing and providing accessible information to learners to inform decision-making.
4. Providing course level information, performance information and information on destinations and wage gains were identified in this and previous research as being challenging for providers.

Collection and Presentation of Information

5.1 The research sought to explore views on the type and level of information that was currently collected and presented to learners by providers and IAG professionals. We also explored views on the feasibility of collecting and/or presenting additional information to learners to inform their decision-making.

Information Collected and Presented to Learners

5.2 **Previous research suggests that learners use multiple sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of study opportunities.** As such it is common for a range of information to be collected and presented to learners to inform their decision-making.

5.3 Simmons (2010) and GHK (2009b) broadly agree on the most commonly used information to make decisions. Focus groups conducted by GHK (2009b) demonstrate that most user groups want the opportunity to **gain information from IAG representatives/brokers** and would also **use the prospectus and provider website to gain** information. This view is corroborated through our research.

5.4 Ensuring the availability and use of multiple information sources for learners was perceived to be important by providers and IAG professionals in our research. They felt that dependent on the provider and learner context, potential learners chose to access information through different media and formats. For example, this may involve finding out

basic information about a course/programme or provider on a website, but then choosing to seek further information through visiting the provider or seeking more one-to-one IAG.

5.5 Providers utilised a wide range of sources of information to ensure that they were providing comprehensive information to learners to support learners in their decision-making. Throughout this Section, we have included illustrative examples of approaches to making information available in the organisations visited. The range of information sources included:

- Provider websites;
- Prospectuses (online and hard copy);
- Advertising and marketing through local news;
- Provider events e.g. face to face promotion at events.

Example: Information Available to Learners

Information for learners at this provider is currently obtained through course leaflets (and in less detail, A5 flyers and Facebook and Twitter pages). At the provider level the brochure includes information on venue accessibility, learner satisfaction and financial support.

At a course level this includes information on level, course title, day, time, number of weeks, venue, course fee and award costs.

“People from other institutions are amazed by our brochure. It’s got everything learners need in it. Other institution booklets are short and flimsy ours are detailed, but concise” (Learner Engagement Manager)

5.6 Providers and IAG professionals identified descriptive information about a course/programme as being the type of information that was most commonly accessible to learners. Learners were generally presented information on:

- course/programme duration;
- location;
- entry qualifications;
- cost and financial support;
- delivery model (e.g. description of course/programme; number of hours etc).

5.7 This information reflects what learners and parents identified as being of most use to them when making a decision about what to study. The differing formats used by

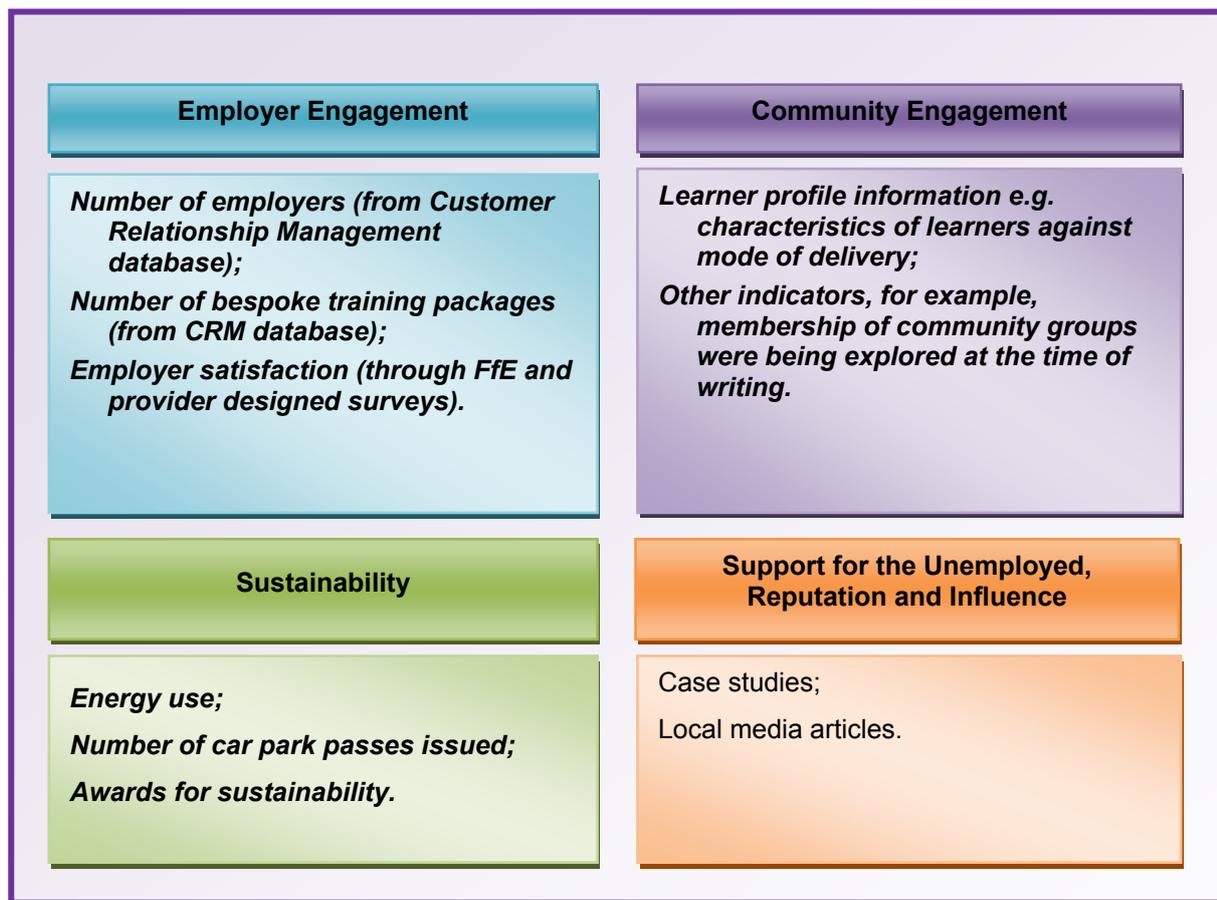
providers and IAG professionals to present such information to learners are discussed in section six.

5.8 Previous research by Hoxby et al (2010) suggests there is specific performance information that providers promote or publicise to learners, identified through six case studies of providers. These include:

- **Ofsted results:** published/promoted by all six case studies;
- **Success results:** published/promoted by four of the case studies;
- **Learner Satisfaction:** published/promoted by four of the case studies;
- **Employer Satisfaction:** published/promoted by four of the case studies;
- **Involvement in the Community:** qualitative information published/promoted by three of the case-studies;
- **Training Quality Standard (TQS):** promoted/published by two of the case studies;
- **Other kite marks:** IIP, and Beacon Status information was promoted/published by five of the case studies.

5.9 Hoxby et al (2010) also described an 'institutional scorecard' approach that is used by some providers to monitor performance. It was reported that the information described below may often be collected by providers, but summarising it for external presentation is rare. Hoxby et al provides the example of one college that was in the process of gathering the data in **Figure 5.1**, with the aim that it was available to users on their website.

Figure 5.1 Institutional Scorecard Example



Role of IAG Professionals in Collecting and Presenting Information to Learners

5.10 IAG professionals play a significant role in collecting and presenting information to learners to allow them to make an informed choice about where and what to study.

5.11 The type of information provided to learners by IAG professionals were generally needs led. In addition to providing one-to-one IAG to potential or current learners there were many examples of the types of information that IAG staff used to support learners (see example overleaf).

Example: Information Provided to Learners (ACL Provider)

The types of information that IAG staff use to support learners includes:

- Presentations at the end of courses to speak to learners about progression;
- Support on the 'Adult Directions' software package to fund suitable career options for learners;
- Delivering a 6 week course on job skills. This includes transferable skills, building confidence and enabling learners to make an informed choice in the learning path to take;
- Weekly drop-in sessions for community residents. They can look at prospectuses, write an action plan that describes their goals and from this gain advice on the next steps to take;
- Attend a quarterly road show for the community to attend;
- Signposting to provide websites/phone numbers/prospectuses.

5.12 **The information sources utilised by learners were reported by IAG professionals to be wide ranging.** There was a consensus across IAG professionals that it was common for them to have access to a significant level of information which they then tailored to the requirements of individual learners. For example, this may involve providing learners with further detailed information on course modules or success rates as required.

5.13 The type of information required by IAG professionals to provide effective IAG to learners was viewed as not being a '*one size fits all*' approach. It was reported that IAG professionals would provide different types and detail of information dependent on the individuals that they were working with. As such, IAG professionals generally used a range of information sources.

Example: Information Provided to Learners (Sixth Form College)

The college has 14 feeder/primary schools and they have internal IAG professionals who provide information to students on the options available.

The college received a lot of enquiries from potential learners who want to look at other career options such as apprenticeships and they work with individuals to establish the route that is best for them, even if it isn't the college itself.

They run a Bridging the Gap day when potential students can come and try six lessons and get a taste of student life.

IAG staff at the college have information on internal courses to hand to be able to respond to enquiries as well as providing information on their own website. This has links to other sources and can help students narrow down their study options. They realise there is a lot of external information available and work hard to keep up-to-date on this by undertaking their own research, attending career functions around the country and generally updating information constantly.

5.14 External IAG professionals provided a number of examples of information sources that they used to provide advice and guidance to learners. As discussed above the sources used by professionals were varied dependent on the needs and requirements of the learners. However highlighted below are details of some of the key sources cited by professionals.

Table 5.1: Sources of Information used by IAG Professionals

IAG Programmes	QDOS, Cascade, internal careers website, eCLIPs Careers and Information Site
Online Materials	Prospects, Higher Education Careers Services Unit, Adult Directions
Written Materials	Books, prospectuses
Personal Contact	Building knowledge and links with local providers

5.15 Previous research identified the most commonly named sources of information across user groups (GHK 2009b). This research specifically identified the information sources that Connexions PAs and Adult IAG advisors cited as being most important. These included:

- **Connexions PAs:** own/colleagues' experience; all potentially useful depending on the specific needs of learners;

- **Adult IAG adviser:** Learndirect, prospectus, provider website, JobCentre Plus (for unemployed clients).

5.16 The IAG professionals and providers who were consulted through the research did identify a number of challenges in sourcing and providing accessible information to learners. These were particularly pertinent for external IAG professionals.

5.17 **Accessibility of information:** Keeping up-to-date information on the availability and nature of courses/programmes was a key challenge for external IAG professionals. This was important in ensuring that professionals were providing useful information to learners to aid their decision-making.

5.18 Professionals commented that information on where learners could access courses required updating constantly. Keeping informed about the availability of niche or uncommon provision was particularly difficult as information became out of date quickly.

5.19 **Resource and Time Constraints:** The ability for IAG professionals to provide detailed and useful information to learners to inform their decision-making was impacted on by their capacity and time. External IAG professionals found that dedicating sufficient time to learners to ensure they were providing sufficient information was particularly challenging, due to often large case loads and working across a number of sites. Signposting learners to sources of information to allow them to undertake their own research was therefore common, although not always ideal.

5.20 **An issue around the amount and nature of IAG available to some young people was a view reflected in previous research.** Surveys by Spielhofer et al (2008) identified that some young people, particularly those with LDD, teenage parents and young people not in employment education or training (NEET) feel that they have not received enough support or information and as such do not feel prepared for their future when completing Year 11.

5.21 Spielhofer et al (2008) also reported that IAG for these groups needs to be engaging and accessible, in order to aid young people's understanding of the opportunities available to them. This needs to be accompanied by personal support to ensure young people receive the advice and support suitable to their particular needs, interests and circumstances.

5.22 **'Too much information':** External IAG professionals reported that there was a risk of too much information being available, which could be potentially overwhelming for learners. IAG professionals commented that their role was often to relay complex information to potential learners in an easy and accessible way to avoid any confusion; although as discussed above, due to resource and capacity constraints this was not always feasible.

5.23 In previous research, IAG and support emerged as an issue for young people who had found the decision about what to study difficult (Spielhofer et al, 2008). One in 10 young people who reported that the decision was difficult explained that they found the range of choices too wide; two per cent felt that there was too much information to absorb.

5.24 **This research highlights the importance of the role of IAG professionals in supporting learners to make informed decisions.** This is particularly important in ensuring that they are provided with sufficient information for their needs, but that this is balanced with the potential risk of providing too much information, which may be detrimental to decision-making.

5.25 **Quality and Independence:** Some employers and internal IAG professionals raised concerns about the quality, and in particular the independence, of external IAG. There were concerns expressed about IAG professionals' contextual knowledge of certain routes and also views that non-academic routes were not promoted strongly enough to potential learners as a serious alternative. Concerns were raised in particular by employers and providers offering Apprenticeships.

5.26 There were concerns that this was hindering learners' choices particularly at the transition point to post-compulsory education due to a lack of information to inform decision-making.

“Often the advisors do not understand the sector, let alone the routes to a career, this is the case for Connexions and educators” (Employer)

“Vocational routes are portrayed as a second option” (Internal IAG Professional)

“Awareness of apprenticeships is the biggest problem and the career options from it. Parents need to know about it” (External IAG Professional)

“There’s a tick in the box mentality for some schools” (Internal IAG Professional)

5.27 These concerns reflect the mixed satisfaction with the Connexions service reported through research undertaken by LSC (2009). This research found that middle-achievers can feel somewhat neglected, as the Connexions and school-based advice was felt to be focused on those at risk of becoming NEET and those described as high flyers. This was a view reflected by some providers and internal IAG professionals within our research.

What is missing?

5.28 Views were sought from providers and IAG professionals on the types of information that were not currently provided to prospective learners and the reasons for this. These views have been analysed alongside existing research and the views of learners and parents to provide an indicative view of ‘what is missing?’ We aim to provide an understanding of how additional information may or may not be of value in supporting learners to make an informed decision, when factors such as affordability, timing and capacity are considered.

5.29 It is important to note that there was not a clear view from learners, parents, employers and IAG professionals regarding information that they did not feel was available when they were making a decision about where and what to study. Learners in particular did not feel that they were lacking in any specific information when making a decision. Where there were issues raised by IAG professionals and employers about the availability

of information this was about accessibility, rather than the type and level of information available.

5.30 Providers reported collecting a wealth of information that was not always presented to learners to assist in their decision-making. Information that was reported by providers to be collected and could be provided to learners if required included more detailed information on *course/programme content; success rates, quality of provision and satisfaction information*. It should be acknowledged however that information on success rates and learner satisfaction is now available at a provider and course/programme level through the Framework for Excellence²⁰.

5.31 **Providers did express some concerns about the collation and presentation of additional information to learners.** Concerns were raised in particular about providing learners with access to quantitative performance and outcomes data which they felt could be open to misinterpretation and could potentially have a negative impact on decision-making.

5.32 Previous research identified very similar challenges in providing more detailed information to learners and employers to assist them in their decision-making. For example, Holey et al (2010) identified the following types of information as being challenging to provide to learners:

- accessing course level information;
- performance information (inspection grades, success rates, achievements etc);
- destinations;
- wage gains.

5.33 We provide further discussion below on some of the key challenges faced by providers in effectively collecting and presenting this information to learners.

Accessing Course Level Information

5.34 The extent to which the availability of course level information would inform learner choice was a key area of discussion in both this and previous research. Holey et al (2010) identified a number of challenges in publishing information at a course level:

- **defining a ‘course’ of study.** Holey et al found that the lowest level of data aggregation most useful to learners would be at a ‘programme’ or ‘qualification level’ i.e. additional key skills/functional skills. This is due to considerations about the size of learner cohorts for some providers, thresholds for minimum number of guided learning hours;
- **methods for data collection** are so varied that comparisons are difficult;

²⁰ <http://ffepublication.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/Search%20Providers/FfEPubSimpleSearch/>

- **consortium vs. provider specific information:** sub-contracting delivery through a consortium creates difficulties in providing performance information, as a provider may be part of more than one consortium, and learners may have elements of their programme delivered by different providers;
- **cost implications** – there was a general consensus that additional costs would be incurred for providers where there needed to be an increased proportion of learners sampled; additional requirements or new information is needed and data needs to be re-categorised for reporting.

5.35 Our research identified similar issues, with FE providers expressing concerns about their ability to collect and present all course/programme level information that may inform decision-making.

5.36 The feedback from learners suggests that information at a course level is of some value to them in their decision-making. Information on course descriptions, length, cost, etc in particular was rated highly by learners in terms of their usefulness and influence on decision-making. However, in general, learners in this research did not have a clear view on the level at which they would most value information, when making a decision about where and what to study.

Performance Information

5.37 **The presentation of performance information to learners was a key concern for providers.** As identified through our previous research, some providers had significant reservations about their ability to present information on success rates, achievements and satisfaction rates consistently to learners.

5.38 The providers consulted were commonly collecting qualitative information on satisfaction through learner voice forums and evaluations forms. However, this information was generally used for internal purposes as opposed to being presented to learners, concurring with previous research (Holex et al 2010).

5.39 **Understanding of data:** There were concerns by providers that presenting too much quantitative information to learners (particularly on success rates, retention, achievement etc) could lead to difficulties in interpretation.

“The information would have to be clear, accessible and interpreted easily. A lot of our learners are parents so they are used to Ofsted gradings etc. I think they would want programme level data rather than individual course level data” (Programme Area Lead)

“Why should we look bad if we have progressed a learner so far that they no longer need to take the course – maybe they got their dream job for example” (Curriculum Manager)

5.40 **Accurate comparisons across providers:** Providers raised concerns that providing more information on success rates, satisfaction, achievement and quality may increase competition across providers. There were concerns that the figures presented would not always be comparable against different types of FE provider, particularly in relation to success rates and achievement.

5.41 Providers indicated that any requirement to provide course/programme level information in relation to performance should be approached with care. It was suggested that there was the potential for such data to be manipulated in order for it to appear more appealing to learners.

“We wouldn’t want learners or employers to see our blip years” (Programme Area Lead)

“A provider could put a level 2 learner through skills for life level 1 and whizz them through to boost their success rates”

5.42 Providing information on the satisfaction of previous learners in relation to courses, providers, support provided and feedback on outputs was important to some learners (see Section 2). Other learners however recognised its limitations, particularly in terms of the potential for bias and its openness to interpretation. Overall, this level of information did not appear to play a significant role in learners’ decision-making. As such, decisions on providing this level of information to learners clearly needs to be balanced with providers’ capacity to collate and produce such information, and the overall value that this would have in allowing learners to make informed decisions.

5.43 Previous research suggests that there are concerns about ensuring consistency across the collection and presentation of satisfaction data. Five out of six Hoxby et al’s (2010) case study providers identified concerns. Central surveying was deemed by these providers as being essential. However there were specific concerns raised in terms of:

- **sample size:** inappropriate sample sizes and levels of aggregation may lead to data not being robust;
- **time required for providers and learners to complete the surveys,** which may have an impact on response rates;
- **accessibility:** internet availability for online surveys is an issue. Hoxby et al (2010) cited information from one LA provider that 19% of Adult Learner Responsive learners study in centres with no or limited internet access and many of the other 81% may have no scheduled access to the internet;
- **timing:** surveys conducted mid-year are indicators for quality assurance and improvement and end of programme surveys reflect the full experience of learners;

- **potential bias:** it is important to consider who completed them. One provider identified disparities in responses from employers which were dependent on who completed them.

Destinations

5.44 The relevance of destination data for all learner types is a key consideration. The type of FE provision available is wide-ranging in terms of qualification focus, nature and length. Whereas some FE provision (e.g. A Levels) may lead to a clear destination (e.g. HE) the progression from other FE provision is less clear. As such, the value of providing information on destinations in terms of what it would add to decision-making needs to be taken into account.

5.45 There is clearly a divergence in views across providers and learners about the usefulness of destinations data. Although the learners' survey and focus groups were generally positive about the usefulness of this information this was generally found to be of more use for those undertaking courses/programmes with clearer progression routes (e.g. A Levels, Apprenticeships). For those learners who were engaged in FE study to develop particular skills (e.g. ESOL learners), or for ACL learners the value placed on destinations information appeared to be much lower.

5.46 Previous research (Holex et al, 2010) identifies challenges in the collection and interpretations of this information due to:

- **low response rates** – responses by learners can be low (i.e. one FE college had a 1 in 6 response rate to requests for learner destination);
- **data bias** – data may be skewed because learner destination may not be expected i.e. qualifications may not be chosen because they directly improve employment status;
- **a positive destination does not mean that learners will stay in employment.**

5.47 The destinations of previous learners, although generally perceived to be useful by both learners and parents in our research, did not seem to significantly influence decision-making. For many, destination information was seen as 'like to have' information. As such the value and associated resources and costs of providing information on destinations should be considered carefully.

Wage Gains

5.48 All providers that were consulted as part of this research did not feel that it was feasible to collect and present information to learners on wage gains.

5.49 Holex et al's (2010) survey found that over half of colleges and training providers surveyed (77 out of 132) felt that it was possible to collect data on wage gain at a course/programme level and a majority saw benefit in providing the information to potential learners and employers. However, maintaining anonymity and achieving a viable response rate are barriers to collecting this information. The research also discussed whether this information would actually be based on individual learner information, because it may be

affected by local employment markets, and also because in some sectors gaining a qualification tends to lead to an increase in salary.

5.50 The findings from the learner and parent research suggest that information on salary increases gained from undertaking a course/programme are of interest to learners and parents. However, there is limited evidence that such information is central to decision-making, with only 14% of learners and 7% of parents identifying this as the 'most useful' outcomes information.

5.51 Potential issues about viability, maintaining anonymity and the capacity of providers to collect such information therefore need to be considered when deciding about the appropriateness of collecting and consistently presenting such information to learners.

6 Sources and Formats of Information

Key Findings

1. Providing information to learners in an accessible format was important to decision-making.
2. Learners reported seeking information in various ways including online researching and visits to providers.
3. There were varying views as to how accessible and useful certain formats of information were for particular types of learners.
4. Employers utilised a range of information sources when choosing learning provision, however face-to-face contact was highly valued.
5. Learners and IAG professional's views on a 'comparator style' website were generally positive, although potential issues in providing such a website were identified including in terms of interpretation and accessibility.

6.1 The sources and formats of information utilised by learners, IAG professionals and employers to assist decision-making were explored through the research. This section provides an overview of the most effective sources and formats of information used by these groups, providing feedback on their views on the usefulness of a 'comparator style' website and specifically the Framework for Excellence comparison website²¹.

6.2 It is important to note that the Framework for Excellence comparison website was launched during the research, it was therefore not possible to get any direct feedback on the site. None of the learners consulted through the focus groups reported that they had used the website. Therefore, they were only able to provide feedback on the screenshots of the website.

6.3 Although the preferred format of information in decision-making was explored to some degree within the research, it should be noted that this was not its primary aim. This should be therefore taken into account in the interpretation of the findings overleaf.

²¹ <http://ffepublication.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/Search%20Providers/FfEPubCompareResult/>

Effective Sources and Formats of Information

Views from Previous Research

6.4 Previous research had explored learners and providers views on establishing league tables for FE provision and data comparisons to Higher Education.

FE League Tables

6.5 Simmons (2010) discussed both positive and negative opinions about producing league tables for FE provision, reporting that learners would probably access them if available. The course type would influence the likelihood of using such a site. It was reported that learners who participate in 'learning' activities, as opposed to a 'leisure' activity would be more likely to want to make an informed comparison between providers and courses because the course is an investment rather than a pastime.

6.6 The content of such a league table would also include destinations and success rates of learners, and may additionally include verbatim feedback from learners. Focus groups conducted by Simmons (2010) identified both positive and negative views on the concept of FE league tables.

Table 6.1: Views of FE League Table

Positives	Negatives
Prompt learners to find out more about the provider/course	Difficult to produce accurate information
Influence decision on whether to do the course/not	Subjectivity of learner satisfaction
Increases choice as informs learners of other local providers	Learners choose FE courses based on location and therefore have few choices available
Comparison between providers	League tables are too focused on results rather than content and quality
Destination data may help influence decision about long term goals	Word of mouth is preferred

Comparison to Higher Education

6.7 Hoxley et al (2010) compared FE information collected to information currently collected for Higher Education. Data is collected centrally through the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education survey (DHLE), which takes place six months and then three years after the course has been completed. Information is presented on the 'Unistats' website which shows a number of statistics about all higher education institutions. This includes:

- average UCAS points achieved;
- satisfaction %;
- employed in a graduate job %.

6.8 Users can compare up to three institutions to find further detail on student profile; proportion of those doing further study; employment sector profile and responses to individual student satisfaction survey questions.

6.9 Mixed-method research (surveys and focus groups) commissioned by HEFCE (2010) found that the most important information that learners use to make about participating in Higher Education are grouped as follows:

- satisfaction with the institution/course (with standard of teaching and with their course);
- employment rates;
- cost (halls of residence are ranked higher than information on bursaries).

6.10 The top-rated information types from HEFCE's research can be found in **Annex A**.

6.11 The information that is viewed as least useful is similar to previous FE focused research and is broadly similar to the findings from our research. This included having little interest in the characteristics of other students and also proportion of drop outs.

6.12 It is interesting that less than half of the sample in the HEFCE research had tried to find the most highly ranked information. This suggests that even though information may appear useful it may not have actually been sought to make a decision between institutions/courses.

6.13 Participants in the HEFCE (2010) research indicated that the two main sources of information used are websites and prospectuses (88%) and UCAS (81%). Similarly to young learners, family and friends are the third most used source of information (70%). Visits to institutions, interviews and teachers from previous institutions (e.g. the current school/college of a learner) are also used by around two thirds of respondents.

Learners

6.14 IAG professionals consulted as part of our research were keen to emphasise that being able to provide information to learners in an accessible format was important in the decision-making process. Although potential learners may be presented with written or electronic information, it was then the role of the IAG professionals to either provide additional information as required, or to simplify existing information.

“IAG professionals require a little bit of information across a lot of areas but then they need to know where to go to find the detailed information to really help the learner. Learners need very specific information about a course-once they have chosen the provider” (IAG professional)

6.15 There was a lot of additional information that was available to learners that may not be provided through the provider website or prospectuses, but which could be provided to learners if required. IAG professionals reported that this may involve learners requesting more information about a particular subject area which the IAG professionals would then provide to learners through more personalised IAG and 1:1 discussion.

“They are ways of delivering information to learners through tailoring it and signposting them to key information” (IAG Professional, FE College)

6.16 Learners and parents reported on the importance of being able to access varying formats and sources of information in their decision-making. Use of written and online materials was common. It was clear that individual learners chose to access different formats of information dependent on their needs, and their preferences for certain formats of information. As such learners used a wide range of range of sources and formats and there was limited evidence that some *formats or sources were preferred over others*.

“Sitting down and being able to look through the prospectus and chat with my daughter was helpful. There was lots of information about support for students which was useful.” (Father)

6.17 **Online researching of courses/programmes and providers was commonly reported by learners.** Many of the learners consulted saw the internet as an accessible approach to obtaining top-level information that was central to their decision-making (i.e. course/programme descriptions, entry requirements, location etc). Using the internet to seek FE learning opportunities was often the first step for many learners, which they then supplemented with seeking other information through other formats and sources.

“Good to get some overview information from a website and then have facility to call somebody or read a brochure to get more detail” (Learner)

6.18 Providing case-studies of existing learners that were available through providers' websites or prospectuses was a commonly reported marketing strategy by providers. Similarly, the involvement of student ambassadors at open evenings or similar events was viewed as being able to provide learners with an insight into others' experience of a particular course/programme and provider which could not be encapsulated through statistical information.

“Learners need to understand the distance travelled they can gain. They need to know where someone has come from and identify that they ‘could be me’. Just like a slimming magazine article!” (Head of Adult Learning)

6.19 Visiting providers to seek further information about a course/programme and the provider themselves was common for learners. Learners valued the opportunity to visit providers as it allowed them to find out more detailed information about providers and course/programmes, allowing them to explore what facilities they have and how they operate. Furthermore, it offered the opportunity for personal contact, which was invaluable to learners in their decision-making.

6.20 Learners found talks from previous students useful, allowing them to hear about their experiences. The direct contact with the provider and or IAG professionals through open days/evenings often allowed them to build on information that they had collected through their own researching. This allowed them to develop a more detailed understanding of particular courses/programmes and how suitable they would be for their needs.

6.21 Providers stressed the importance of personal contact and the ethos/culture of the provider in learners’ decision-making process; a view that was supported by learners. For example, one provider commented that the most useful information to learners was of their reputation in terms of being friendly and welcoming.

“This comes from when they first walk through the doors-there is a friendly face. We invest a lot of time with our learners to make sure they are happy with the course and that it is right for them” (Provider)

“Learners come because we are welcoming and have a positive position within the community. A brand new school nearby had an excellent course, but our learners don’t relate to the new building. How do you reflect that through statistics?” (Head of Adult Learning)

6.22 The ‘feel’ of a provider was also very important to learners, and it was generally reported that this could only be obtained through direct contact with the provider. None of the learners consulted reported that they would make a decision about what and where to study before visiting a provider. These visits allowed the learners to make their own judgement about whether they would feel comfortable attending provision.

Variation in Use of Sources and Formats of Information across Learner Types

6.23 There were varying views as to how accessible and useful certain formats of information were for particular types of learner. Providers were conscious about the importance of understanding their potential learners, and providing information to suit their needs. For example, one ACL provider commented that, due to the community-based nature of the organisation, their prospectus and paper-based materials had limited impact, with there being a much greater focus on word of mouth, and one-to-one IAG. Similarly,

the WBL provider visited relied heavily on a ‘telephone sales’ approach to identify and engage learners in apprenticeships, meaning that there was little learner interest in standard printed materials.

“People like to flick through a brochure – it would be shame if everything was just to be online. Printed copies are particularly useful for those without IT access. I know that quite a few of my learners don’t have computer access; they don’t access course documents on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for example” (Curriculum Manager)

6.24 Previous research (GHK 2009b) identified differences in the most and least sources of information for adult and young learners (see Table 6.2 below). It is clear that learners used a range of sources and formats of information to inform decision-making.

Table 6.2: Most and Least Important Sources of Information (GHK, 2009b)

User Group	Most Important	Least Important
Young Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connexions PA • careers adviser • careers fair • provider visit • friends • visits to the provider • internet search engines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provider websites, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – as they don’t provide the specific information users need
Adult Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nexstep • Learndirect • tutor • prospectus • provider website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) • family and friends (providing a narrow perspective) • Jobcentres (unhelpful)

Employers

6.25 **As with learners, the source and format of information most valued by employers was diverse.** Sources of information including provider websites, prospectuses and meetings with providers were all cited as approaches that employers took to seeking the information they required to make decisions about FE provision. This was similar to research conducted by the LSC (2007) which provided detail of information that was currently used by employers (in the North East) which included:

- Business Link and One North East were the most commonly used websites when gathering information about training providers;
- Internet search engines were the third most commonly used website, with Google being the main search engine used when beginning research;

- the most commonly used 'offline' information source was having an existing provider relationship.

6.26 Face-to-face contact with providers was integral to employers in their decision-making process. They valued the opportunity to build a relationship with providers and used face-to-face meetings to ensure that that they were obtaining as much information as possible about the opportunities available.

6.27 The value placed on face-to-face contact with providers by employers highlights the importance of relationships in choosing FE provision. As discussed in **Section 4**, for the majority of employers, credibility, skills and perceived quality of the provider was of greater importance than the format in which they were receiving information. This concurs with previous research. For example GHK (2009a and 2009b) identified that employers most valued using information directly from the provider, through face-to-face or telephone contact to assist in decision-making. GHK (2009b) reported that employers were least likely to use Skills brokers, learndirect, libraries and Union Learning Reps to seek information that they required.

6.28 Employers reported seeking information directly from potential providers themselves through a competitive tendering process. This allowed providers to ask employers for specific information they required about learning provision which providers then submitted through a formal tendering process. This more easily allowed employers to compare provision across providers. Other employers discussed presentation by providers to seek information.

Example: Employer Approach to Seeking Information

The employer invites 3-4 local colleges to present information about the provider and courses. The Business Development Manager and the relevant tutors attend from the provider. This process is beneficial for the providers because the contracts with the employer are large-scale. The process is beneficial for the employer because it is a simple way to get all information at provider and course level all at one time.

6.29 A number of employers identified some difficulties in sourcing appropriate information about courses/programmes. Employers felt that it was difficult to find information that was in one place and that was in an accessible and user-friendly format. Time restraints faced by employers meant that they were often reluctant to spend too much time researching learning opportunities, and therefore were much more likely to value providers who were proactive in approaching them with information or those with whom they had existing relationships. There was a heavy reliance on local networks and contacts to fill gaps in information or to increase an employer's knowledge and awareness about the availability of FE provision.

6.30 Although there are tools available within different employment sectors to assist employers when choosing FE provision, these were not mentioned by employers. As such we cannot draw any conclusion on their perceived use for employers in making informed decisions. For example, a Sector Skill Council stakeholder consulted reported on a '*skills matching tool*' aimed at employers and individuals. For employers it allowed them to

compare their company competence profile against the industry standard and find further information about relevant qualifications and training standards.

Views on ‘Comparator Style’ Website

6.31 The views of learners, parents, IAG professionals and employers were sought on a comparator style website. In particular this was to explore whether the principle of having a comparator site would be of value to the decision-making process. The Framework for Excellence website was launched during the focus group process and therefore there was not the opportunity to gain feedback specifically on it within the research.

Views of Learners and Parents

6.32 Learners views on the ‘comparator style’ website that could be used to inform decision making was mixed, although generally positive, It was felt that this would be a useful tool for searching for potential providers and course/programmes. The majority of learners reported positively on the opportunity to compare FE provision across providers.

6.33 Learners felt that such a website would be useful for supporting the decision-making process, but would supplement, rather than replace more one-to-one IAG or information. It was felt that such a website would need to be advertised widely by providers in order for it to be effectively utilised by potential learners.

“It’s good as a summary, you could enter the postcode to find the location and have entry qualifications listed. You could sort the information by these items dependent on what is more important to you” (Learner)

“Being able to make comparisons using a website would be good” (Learner)

“I think if there was a website that gave you all the detail that you can get in a prospectus, that would be really useful, and I would use it” (Parent)

6.34 The key advantages of a comparator style website cited by learners and parents included:

- allowing access to information easily that enables comparisons to be made across providers;
- providing information all in one place;
- providing information about courses/programmes that they may not have known about previously.

6.35 For learners that were less positive about the value of such a website the following reasons were cited:

- **the format of the website** – some learners commented that the FfE screenshots were not attractive and did not appear intuitive and therefore they would be reluctant to use;
- **lack of accessibility for all** – a lack of internet access by some learners would hinder their ability to use;
- **a lack of need to use due to existing knowledge of local provision** – a small number of focus groups reported that due to a small number of FE providers in their local area they did not feel there was a need to use a comparison website.

“This sort of comparison website would be something that is useful for something you’re really investing in, but for a short term course it’s not really worth searching around” (Learner)

6.36 Learners’ views on the use of ‘Amazon-style’ ratings were more mixed. Whereas some learners felt that they would be a useful reference point, others held the view that the ratings would be based on individuals’ experiences and preferences and therefore would be of limited value in their decision-making.

“It’s about someone’s personal experience – that’s very subjective and no description if given, it’s better by word of mouth” (Learner).

Views of IAG Professionals

6.37 **IAG professionals’ views on a comparator site were generally positive, although it was perceived to have some limitations.** External IAG professionals felt that the site could be used to support their IAG role and that learner would value the comprehensiveness of the information provided on it.

“There can be nothing wrong with having the information to hand and in one place. It gives potential learners a better and more informed choice in terms of what exists” (External IAG representative)

6.38 **Interpretation of information presented on the website was a concern for IAG professionals.** Presenting a significant amount of statistics on the site was felt to leave the information open to interpretation which may be potentially detrimental to decision-making. For example, one external IAG professional commented that parents may make certain assumptions about data presented on the website (e.g. high drop-out means poor quality) which was a risk to decision-making.

“It’s too statistics focused, it doesn’t tell the full story” (IAG professional)

6.39 This was a view reflected by other IAG professionals who suggested that there was a risk that such a website became too much like a 'league table'. This potentially encouraged learners and parents to process information too simplistically and out of context.

6.40 IAG professionals (both internal and external) and providers themselves gave examples of existing 'comparator style' websites that already existed. For example, one FE provider discussed a local website that had been developed to provide potential learners with information. The provider suggested that the local website was not well utilised currently and therefore there was little need to develop a national website.

6.41 There were a number of IAG professionals who reported that they had not previously been aware of the Framework for Excellence website. Others suggested that the views of employers should be incorporated within the website for comprehensiveness. This is perhaps a reflection of the lack of understanding of the information on the site, as the FfE does include employer ratings.

Views of Employers

6.42 **Employers had limited views on the usefulness of a comparator style website for their purposes.** As discussed previously, employers relied heavily on personal contact with providers to gain the information they required to choose FE provision. Therefore for many, such a website would not meet their needs and was viewed as not being of value.

6.43 Other employers recognised the benefits that such a website could provide; in particular that it could offer easily accessible information on providers. This was perceived to be beneficial in reducing the need to seek information from individual providers.

7 Conclusions

7.1 The research has provided a useful insight into the type of information that is required by learners, employers and IAG professionals to allow them to make informed decisions about FE provision.

Key Information Requirements

7.2 The research clearly identified that learners and parents find a significant amount of information useful when making a decision about where and what to study. Across all categories of information, learners and parents generally provided high ratings about the usefulness of information in their decision-making.

7.3 **Figures 7.1 and 7.2** provide a diagrammatic illustration of the focus groups (Figure 7.1) and the learner and parent surveys prioritisation of information sources based on the evidence.

7.4 **Descriptive and facilities information about a course/programme and/or provider was of particular value to learners and parents.** Across the surveys and focus groups, entry requirements, location, length and descriptive information about a course/programme was identified as key information that was found to be of particular value. The importance of factual information in decision-making concurs with previous research.

7.5 **Performance and outcomes information was also viewed as being of use to learners and parents in decision-making.** Information on benefits, the quality of provision and the achievements and destinations of previous learners were rated to be of particular use. This highlights the importance of learners understanding what they will gain from their involvement in a course/ programme. Information on the characteristics of learners was found to be of limited use to learners and parents in their decision-making.

7.6 **The extent to which information provided to learners influences decision-making is more difficult to determine from the research.** For many learners the choice about where and what to study is influenced by many external and internal factors which are challenging to define and differ across individuals. As such, the type of information required and the approaches taken by learners to seeking this information can differ greatly. Although our research provides some useful steer on the most commonly used information in decision-making, the importance of individual circumstances and needs should not be underestimated.

7.7 It is important to distinguish between high ratings of the 'usefulness' of information by learners and parents and how much that information actually informs choice. Although ratings of 'most useful' or 'very useful' can be used as a proxy for the influence of different types of information in decision-making, it is difficult to establish whether learners will, or did, use that information when making a choice about where and what to study.

7.8 **The relevance of a course/programme to an organisation and/or sector; flexibility of delivery and cost and quality of provision were all identified as being important to employers.** Employers were more likely to request information that is

tailored to their needs, appreciating face-to-face contact with providers. As such a '*one size fits all*' approach to providing information would not be appropriate or meet the needs of employers. The production of any standard information on a course/programme or provider for employers to support their decision-making should take this into account.

Variation in Information Requirements across Different Groups of Learners and FE Provision

7.9 **Defining differences in information needs across different groups of learners is difficult to achieve, although the research did suggest that there are certain types of information that may be of more use to certain learners than others.** For example, adult learners were more likely to require information about timing and childcare support due to other commitments, whereas young people were more to consider a 'fit' with their ability and needs, although would also consider timing and location.

7.10 Analysis by sub-groups of young people found that the information requirements of under 16's, not White British, learners with a disability and those in Social Grade C2DE did differ in some areas, although generally these groups ratings of the usefulness of information was broadly similar. For example, learners across the sub-groups rated information on the **destinations of previous learners, a description of the course/programme and the proportion of males/females on a course/programme as being less useful than the baseline group of learners.** Conversely, the benefits that could be gained from a course/programme and the achievements of previous learners were more highly rated in terms of their usefulness by all learner sub-groups.

7.11 Overall the research did not find any significant differences in the type of information that is required across the age and characteristics of learners and the type of FE provision.

Format of Information

7.12 **Learners clearly access a significant amount of information when choosing FE provision using various sources and formats.** Our research does not indicate that there is a preferred format or source of information for learners across types of FE provision or learner type. Learners require information that meets their needs and for their personal circumstances, and as such will choose to access information that best meets their needs. They will often use a range of electronic and paper-based material in addition to seeking more personalised support from IAG professionals and providers to allow them to come to an informed decision.

7.13 **IAG professionals used similar sources and formats to learners, although these differed dependent on their role and the sources available to them.** IAG professionals broadly saw their role as signposting learners to appropriate information to assist them in their decision-making and providing information to learners in a digestible and understandable format.

7.14 **Accessibility of information, resource and time constraints and the quality and independence of IAG were all identified as challenges in being able to source and provide accessible information to learners.** This does highlight wider issues regarding learners both having access to appropriate information that will assist in their

decision-making, but also being supported and advised where appropriate by IAG professionals to allow them to make informed decisions.

7.15 Employers also used a range of formats and sources when making decisions about FE provision. Provider websites, prospectuses and meetings with providers were all cited as approaches that employers took to seeking information about FE provision. It was clear that face-to-face contact and the importance of relationships were crucial for employers. Many employers with established provider relationships reported that they rarely sought information on alternative learning opportunities for their employees.

7.16 Views on a ‘comparator’ website to allow learners to compare FE provision across providers was generally viewed positively by learners and IAG professionals. It is important to note however that such a website would be the first port call for many, who would then still seek information from other sources to further inform decision-making. It was generally felt however to be a useful resource for easily accessing information on potential FE opportunities. The limitations of such a website however were also recognised.

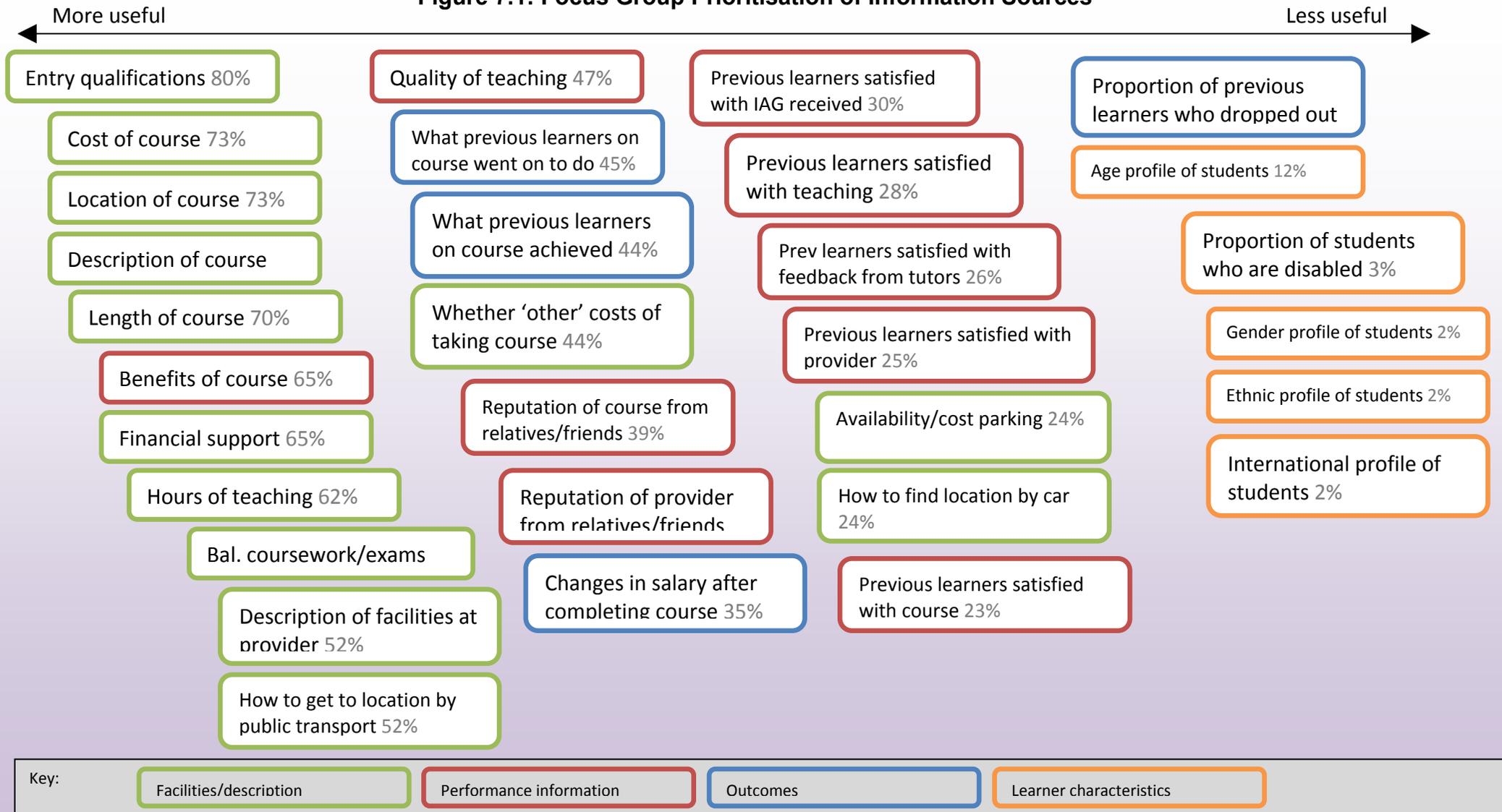
Providing Additional Information to Learners

7.17 Providers collected a wealth of information about performance and outcomes in particular that they did not consistently present to learners. Providing course-level, performance (satisfaction, achievements etc), destinations and wage gains information was identified by previous and our research as being particularly challenging. There were logistical concerns about providers’ capacity and resources to publish such information, in addition to concerns about the robustness of some forms of data collection.

7.18 The Framework for Excellence website clearly displays some information already that providers would find difficult to collate and publish themselves, within available resources and capacity. Both our research and previous research has provided an indicative view from providers about the feasibility of collecting additional information. However the small sample size should be considered and as such there needs to be further exploration about the feasibility of providers’ nationally collecting further information that could be published at either a provider or national level.

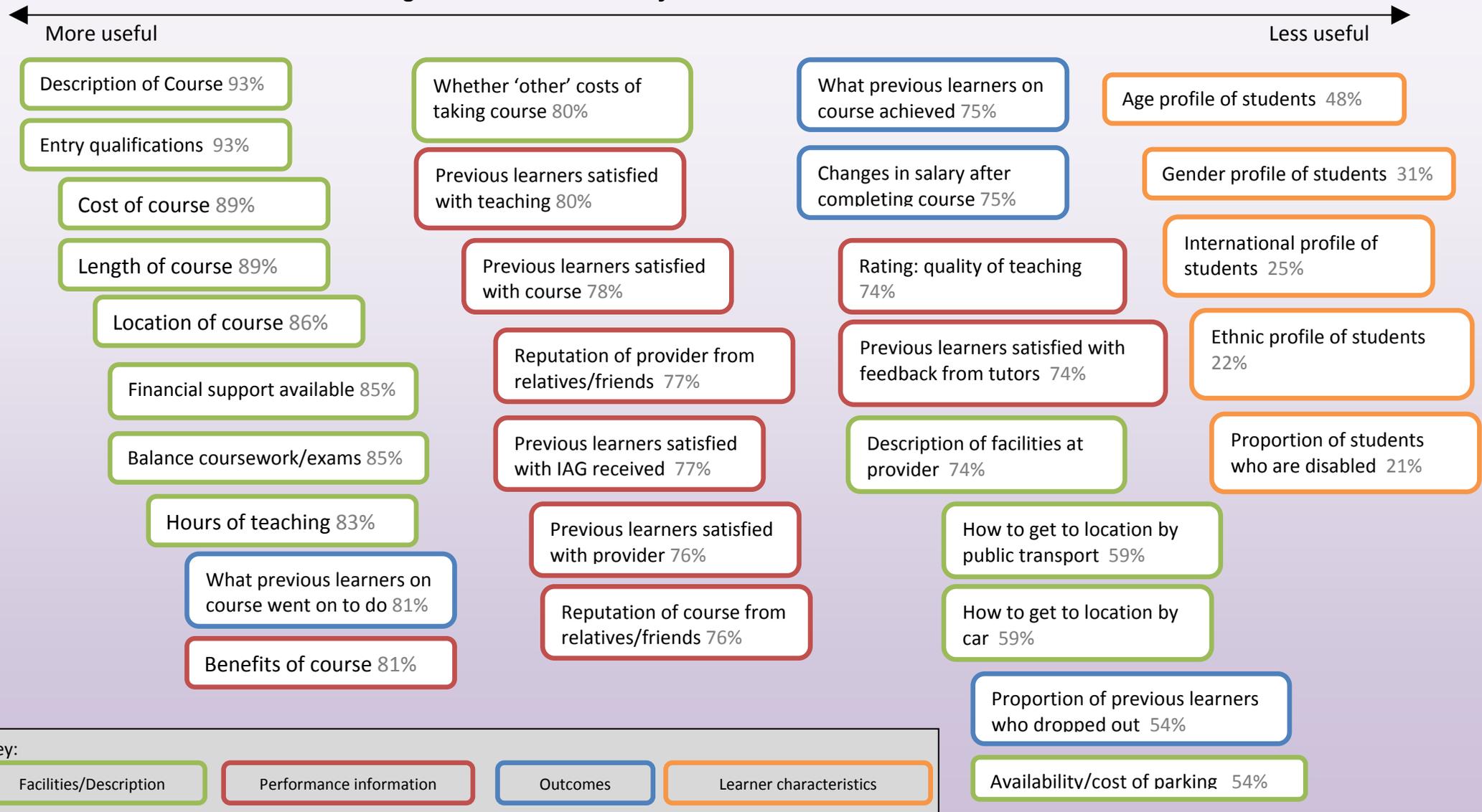
7.19 The extent to which providing additional information to learners and parents adds value to decision-making is questionable. Although information on destinations, achievements and satisfaction was rated to be useful by some learners, it was less clear from the research how such information would actually inform decision-making.

Figure 7.1: Focus Group Prioritisation of Information Sources¹



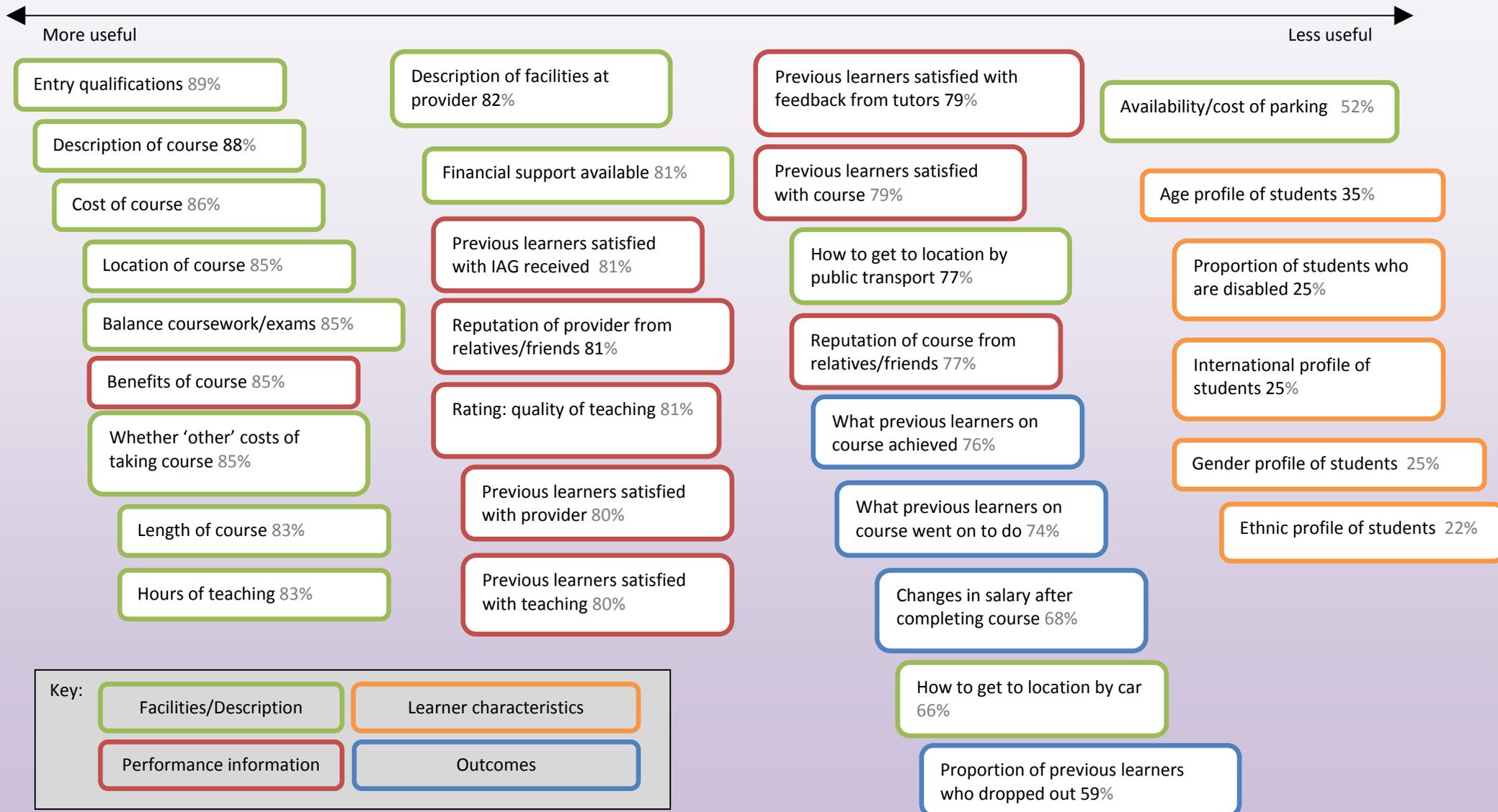
Note 1 - Values are weighted as follows: must have=2; like to have=1; not bothered=0 – based on the number of focus groups that identified each item respectively as a percentage of the maximum possible score

Figure 7.2: Learner Survey Prioritisation of Information Sources¹



Note 1 - Values are weighted as follows: very useful=5; somewhat useful=4; useful=3; not particularly useful = 2, not useful at all=1 – based on the number of learners that identified each item respectively as a percentage of the maximum possible score

Figure 7.3: Parent Survey Prioritisation of Information Sources¹

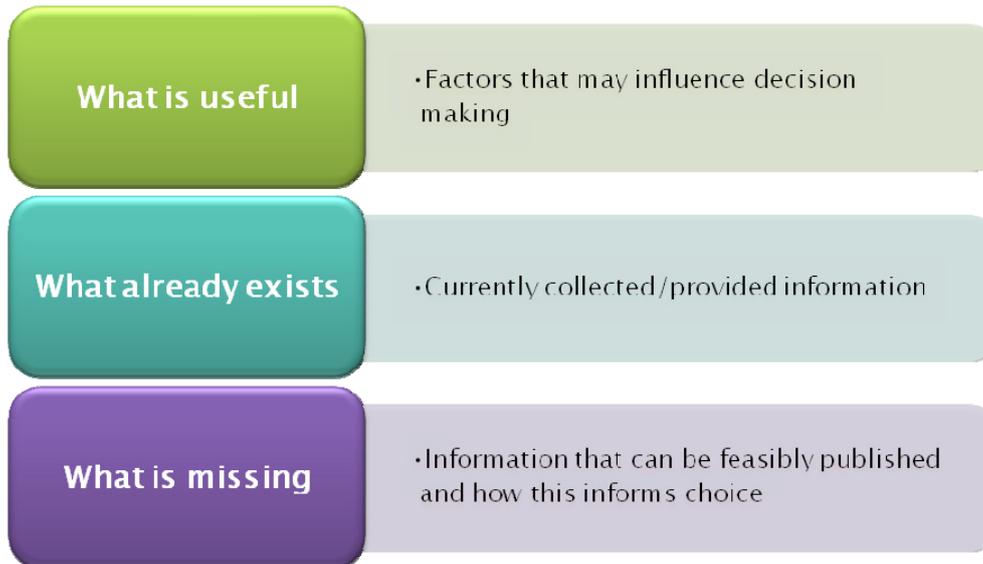


Note 1 - Values are weighted as follows: very useful=5; somewhat useful=4; useful=3; not particularly useful = 2, not useful at all=1 – based on the number of parents that identified each item respectively as a percentage of the maximum possible score

Annex A

Evidence Review

1. This section presents a review of the evidence from literature sources found through our study. Nine documents were reviewed in total, and a brief description of each is provided. The evidence is presented under the following themes:

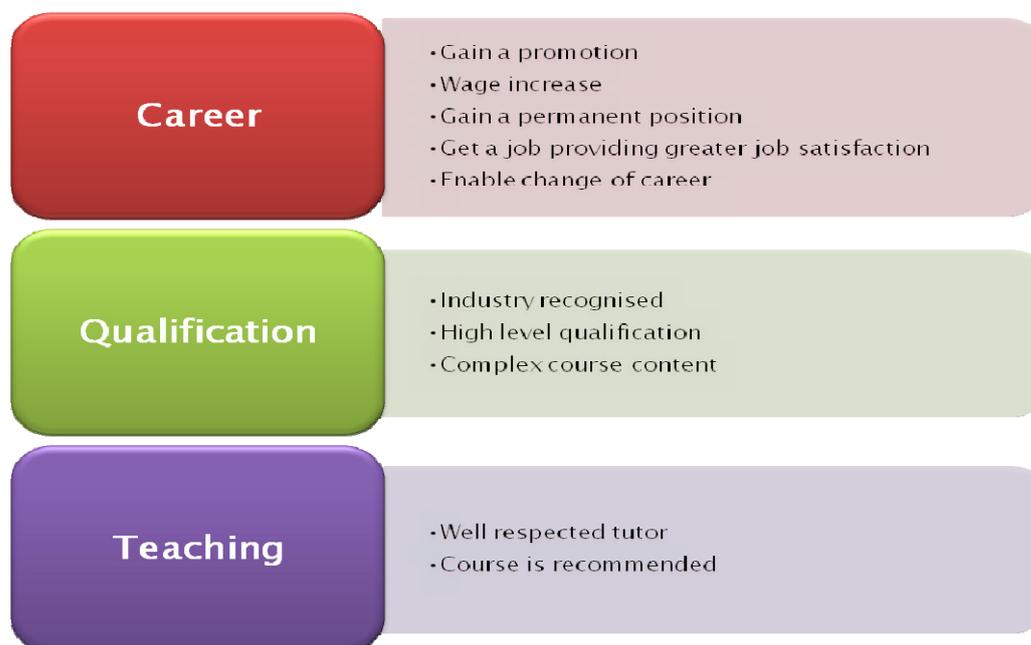


2. The documents that were reviewed did not form part of a systematic literature process. Subsequently, the evidence review is not representative of all relevant information sources, or of the current policy landscape. For example, Train to Gain is no longer an active policy.

Factors that may Influence Decision Making

3. This sub-section describes the information that is seen to be most influential for learners, employers and IAG representatives when choosing or advising on a provider/programme. Simmons (2010) firstly finds that learners would be more likely to invest in learning in the first place if they would gain enhancement to their career, receive a highly regarded qualification or have recognised high standards of teaching. This is shown in Figure 1 overleaf.

Figure 1: Investment in Learning



4. There is mixed evidence of which types of information are most useful to making a decision of provider/course. The documents reviewed suggest that there are some overriding factors which present barriers to the choice of provider/course. Two sources suggest that these overriding factors are **accessibility** and **factual information** about the provider.

Accessibility

5. The location of learning provision to home and work can often be the most important information that learners/employers need (GHK, 2009a). Hoxley et al (2010) also conclude that location of provider is likely to be an important, if not the most important, influencing factor, through four case studies of Local Authority and Further Education (FE) providers. Hoxley et al find that location is a particular issue for FE education, where:

“There is no real choice of accessible provider, particularly in specialist vocational areas.”

(Hoxley et al 2010. p 18)

6. GHK (2009a) build on the term ‘accessible’, stating that,

“Accessibility is not just about distance, but could be because that provider meets a specific learning need or provides certain support, delivers learning at a certain time... or delivers in a certain way...”

(GHK, 2009a, p7)

7. GHK (2009a) provides further examples to why a limited number of providers/courses are accessible:

- only one programme meets learning needs (e.g. to become a hairdresser);
- only one accessible provider delivers the appropriate programme (e.g. distance/learning needs);
- the progression pathway or career enhancement leads to a clear and identifiable choice (e.g. moving from Entry to Employment into an Apprenticeship);
- the employer/funder chooses the provider on behalf of the learner.

Factual Information

8. Hoxley et al (2010) find that factual information about the provider is important as it can influence whether the potential learner will study at all, let alone consider other information such as performance data. Cost, childcare facilities, support available and time commitment are all outlined in the report as examples of factual information. Similarly, focus groups by GHK (2009b), highlight that adult IAG staff think financial support is influential. Provider facilities (e.g. childcare) are commonly mentioned as important by adult users²².

Other Factors

9. According to GHK (2009b), most types of information could be useful when deciding upon learning provider/programme, dependent on the user's "characteristics, needs and circumstances." (p9) However, GHK also (2009a) finds that after making the decision to undertake the learning, potential learners/employers mainly consider:

1. Who delivers the course/programme?
2. How **close/accessible** is that provision? [accessibility]
3. Is the **provider** good enough? [quality]

10. They (GHK, 2009a) conclude that there is not a more sophisticated process because:

"...for the large majority of users there is either limited choice and/or there is a good enough provider close by."

(GHK, 2009a, p6)

11. Out of the three steps mentioned above, we have already discussed the importance of accessibility, and now GHK consider if the provider is 'good enough'. GHK (2009a) find that quality is only an influence if/when there is failure as otherwise a quality standard is

²² The LSC defines users to be a wider group than simply learners: "Those who are anticipated to have an interest in Framework scores (learners, employers, skills brokers, Connexions and Learndirect service advisors, parents and represented bodies of the aforementioned) with the exception of providers, commissioning and regulatory bodies" (LSC ITT specification, July 2008, cited in GHK, 2009a p1).

presumed to be met. Users assume sufficient standards are met through publicly funded provision.

12. The Hoxby et al (2010) survey of provider organisation members finds that learner success and indicators of satisfaction are also perceived to be useful in informing choice²³ for both learners and employers. Similarly, Connexions PAs viewed success rates as important during focus groups (GHK, 2009b).

13. Entry qualifications are also important, as found during GHK's focus groups (2009b). This was particularly the case for young and adult learners, and subsequently also to IAG professionals (Table 1).

²³ Multiple choice selection: learner success, customer satisfaction, positive destination, wage gain and Ofsted grades.

Table 1: Most Important Type of Information

	Young Learners	Adult Learners	Non Learners	Employers	Connexions PAs	Adult IAG Advisers	Train to Gain Brokers
Location	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Financial support		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Entry Qualifications	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Provider facilities			✓	✓		✓	
Course times		✓		✓			✓
Destinations			✓		✓	✓	
Provider reputation			✓				✓
Success rates					✓		✓
Provider flexibility				✓			✓
Course facilities		✓					
Delivery type				✓			
Training and apprenticeship vacancies					✓		

Different Learners

14. GHK (2009b) distinguish what information is most important to different types of users. As already stated, location is the predominant factor across all user groups. These findings from focus groups are mapped out in **Table 2** and discussed below.

Young Learners

15. A literature review and stakeholder consultations by GHK (2009a) highlights that choices for young learners are mostly determined by the:

- existing learning/provider - may lead to an obvious progression route;
- location to home and/or work;
- 'fit' with ability (entry qualifications, likelihood of success);
- 'fit' with needs (skills gained);
- duration (length and intensity);
- support (financial/pastoral);
- peer influence (where friends are going).

16. In agreement to this, the focus groups of young learners, also conducted by GHK (2009b), found that in particular, the location and entry qualifications are the most useful information (**Table 2**).

Adult Learners

17. A literature review and stakeholder consultations by GHK (2009a) highlights that choices for adult learners are broadly similar to young learners apart from some key differences. Adults are more likely to:

- need the provider closer to work rather than home;
- have a car rather than use public transport, so require parking facilities rather than feasible public transport routes;
- require childcare support;
- have other commitments so timing is more of a priority.

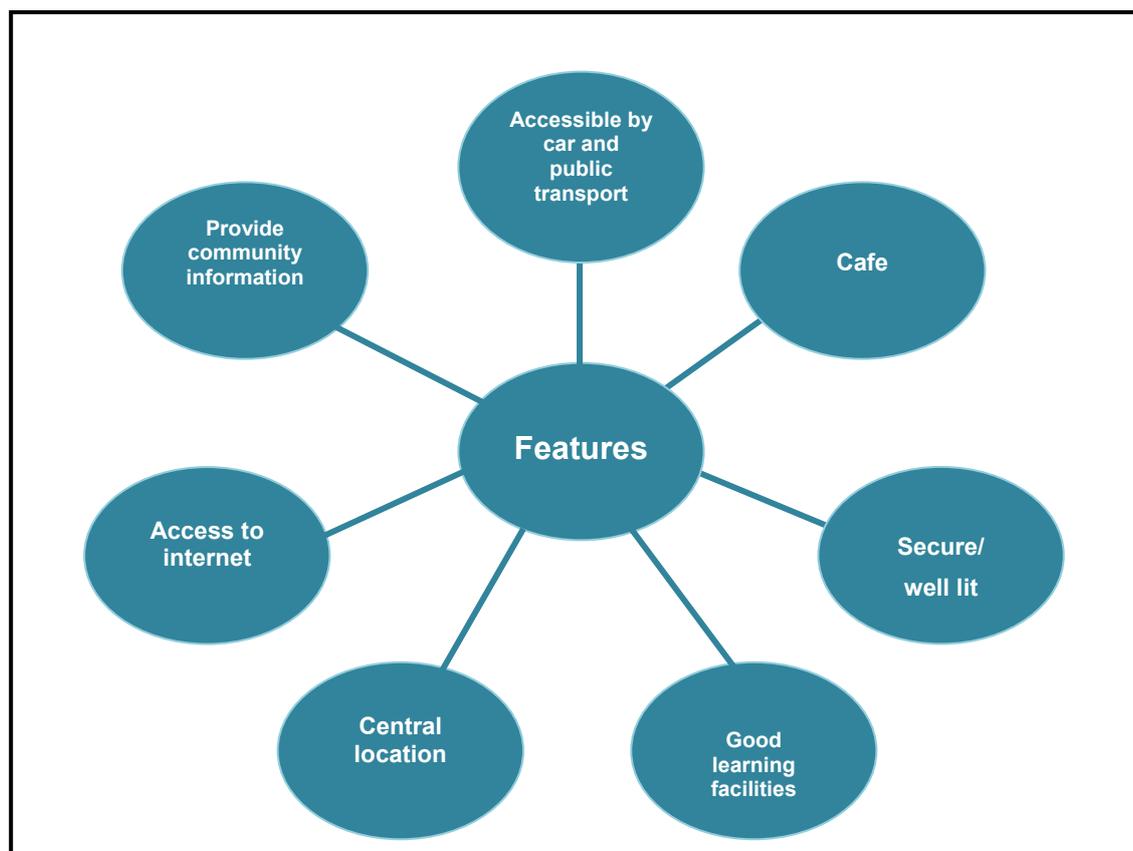
18. The findings from the focus groups (**Table 1**) support this, where similarly to young learners, adult learners find entry qualifications and location most useful alongside financial support, course times and course facilities. The Learning and Skills Council (2009) concur, reporting that adults are most influenced by all of the above plus the quality of teaching. Furthermore, the LSC find that the most significant influence on choice out of these is the qualification itself.

19. The LSC (2009) provides further detail in relation to cost, stating that potential adult learners are making choices without a full knowledge of what financial support may be available to them. There is considerable confusion around sources of funding and eligibility, particularly for those in the more vulnerable cold-starter²⁴ group.
20. Simmons (2010) finds that for community learners, a good provider includes features as demonstrated in **Figure 2**. These may not necessarily be the most important influences on decision making however.

Different Learner Routes

21. Hoxby et al (2010) have some interesting findings when it comes to learning relating to employment. For example, through two case study visits to training providers, the reputation of the employer (the employment based element) rather than of the training provider (the training based element) may be the influencing factor for work-based schemes such as Apprenticeships.
22. The same case study visits also demonstrates that both learners and employers are less likely to be influenced by information on positive destinations when learners (employees) participate in training that is funded/recommended by a current employer. Overall survey findings in the same report find that destinations were rated as highly useful in informing learner/employer choice.

²⁴ Cold starters are: more vulnerable adults in the process of making choices in learning and require more intensive support. They are more likely to be from socio-economic groups C2DE – they do not have a clear idea of their own goals, they know that they want to need to participate in learning, but are unsure about what they need to achieve and what type of route in learning they should follow.

Figure 2: Features of a Good ACL Provider**Employers**

23. GHK (2009a) references three key factors that influence the choice of provider: compulsion²⁵, location and pre-existing relationships. Niche expertise may be considered if outside of the local area however. Reputation, flexibility and value for money of learning provision are required by employers. Survey findings from the LSC (2007) also suggest that course cost is key to employers making decisions about training provision, alongside course information.

Currently Collected/Provided Information

24. This section provides an overview of the information that is currently collected and that may be provided to learners in terms of type, level and format of information.

Information Type**Information Collected**

25. Hoxley et al (2010) provide a matrix of performance information/kite marks that providers promote or publicise, identified through six case studies of providers. They find

²⁵ Defined as: “the need for accredited learning arising from business need and identified workforce skill gaps.”

that all providers promote and publish some form of performance information; as shown in **Table 2** below:

Table 2: Performance Information

Kite Marks / Performance Indicators	Case Study 1	Case Study 2	Case Study 3	Case Study 4	Case Study 5	Case Study 6
Framework for Excellence				Learner Satisfaction		
Ofsted results	√	√	√	√	√	√
Success rates	√			√	√	√
Learner Satisfaction	√	√	√	√		
Employer satisfaction			√	√	√	√
National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE)	N/A	N/A	√	NSS*	N/A	N/A
Involvement in the community	√**	√**			√**	
Training Quality Standard (TQS)				√	√	
Other kite marks	MATRIX Beacon Status	MATRIX Beacon Status	MATRIX IIP √√	MATRIX IIP √√		MATRIX

*Published on own website: too small a sample for national publication

** Qualitative information

Source: *Holox et al (2010)*

26. The same report presents further detail on how providers collect some of this data:

- **Learner satisfaction:** typically through paper based surveys at varying times at the beginning, middle and end of programmes. A significant proportion of providers asked questions relating to enjoyment of the course / programme (96%), achievement of learning aims / outcomes (92%) and willingness to recommend (82%);

- **Employer satisfaction:** all six case study providers conduct employer surveys and frequently participate in review meetings. This is generated internally at Sector Subject Area²⁶ level;
- **Learner destination:** the majority of providers collect intended destinations at the end of programmes and a 'significant proportion' followed this up afterwards via phone or letter (training providers, FE colleges but not ACL providers);
- **Success rates²⁷:** established data collected for the Individualised Learner Record at a variety of levels internally.

27. In addition, a minority of providers currently collect data on **wage gain** according to survey responses by Hoxley et al (2010).

Information Used

28. The location, financial support and non-financial support, course times and success rates are the most frequently mentioned types of information used when deciding upon provider/programme²⁸ (GHK, 2009b) (**Table 3**). Location is the only factor to be mentioned across every user group when unprompted about information types in focus groups.

29. According to Table 3, the information used differs between user types however:

²⁶ Classifies an aim within the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority Sector Subject Area (SSA) classification system.

²⁷ According to Hoxley et al (2010), "Success rates are an established part of the data generated by the ILR [Individualised Learner Record], and the case studies showed that this data is produced at a variety of levels for internal performance management and quality assurance purposes."

²⁸ Not taking into account unprompted or prompted responses during focus groups.

Table 3: Currently Used Information

	Young Learners	Adult Learners	Non Learners	Employers	Connexions PAs	Adult IAG Advisers	Train to Gain Brokers
Location	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Financial support	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Non-financial support	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Course times	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Success rates	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Provider facilities	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Provider reputation		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Entry Qualifications	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Destinations		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Learner Satisfaction	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Provider flexibility				✓			✓
Course facilities		✓			✓		
Delivery type				✓			✓
Fees and costs		✓				✓	
Course Duration	✓	✓					
Benefits/progression	✓	✓					
Previous knowledge				✓			

- **Young learners:** the information that young learners use to make decisions (unprompted) about learning and skill choices included location, entry qualifications and duration. When prompted, learners realise that a range of other information is used;
- **Adult learners:** use similar information (unprompted) in terms of location, entry qualifications and duration, but also use course fees and costs and progression prospects to make their choice. When prompted, learners realise that a range of other information is used;
- **Adult non-learners:** only use elements of the adult learners' information, and only location when unprompted. When prompted, the information they do not find useful in comparison is generally in relation to course level information i.e. non-learners would make choices based on provider not course;
- **Employers:** without prompt, employers (GHK, 2009b) said location is the information they use to make a decision. They expect the programme to take place at least partly on their premises. When prompted however, employers reveal that they use a range of other information. This includes both provider and course level information.

Level of Information

30. Hoxley et al (2010) state that data is published at 'relatively high levels of aggregation'. However, learner satisfaction data is shared with learners at provider or 'department' level in some providers (Hoxley et al, 2010).

Sources of Information

31. Simmons (2010) explains that many learners use multiple sources to gain a 'full picture' of the programme. Conclusions from GHK's focus groups (2009b) also state that:

"Users would prefer...information in a variety of formats." (p9)

32. Simmons (2010) and GHK (2009b) broadly agree on the most commonly used information to make a decision. Focus groups conducted by GHK (2009b) demonstrate that most user groups would want the opportunity to gain information from **IAG representatives/brokers, and would also use the prospectus and provider website** to gain information.

33. Stakeholder consultations and a literature review from GHK (2009a) broadly corroborate these findings. Some of the users (adult learners, employers and some IAG representatives) perceive all information sources to be potentially useful. There are some common differences between the learner groups however:

- **Young learners:** are the only user group to take advice from friends. GHK (2009a) also cite the LSC (2009), stating that young people tend to be 'passive' IAG consumers rather than proactively seeking information, where the most widely used source of information is informal – friends and family. Therefore experiential sources, such as college open days and having an opportunity to meet older

students are valued as being more informative and interactive than traditional information dissemination;

- **Employers:** prefer to use information directly from the provider, including phoning the provider directly;
- **Adult IAG advisers and Train to Gain brokers:** also prefer information directly from the provider;
- **Connexions PAs and Train to Gain brokers:** decide that their own knowledge of their locality or information from colleagues (if they did not know the information) is one of the most useful information sources. However the most relevant sources of information vary between client needs.

34. The sources in terms of most and least important across different user groups are listed in **Table 4** (GHK, 2009b). The most commonly named influential sources across user groups are the provider website and **IAG representatives**. The least useful sources are mentioned because the level of information was either too general or too specific.

Table 4: Most and Least Important Sources of Information

User Group	Most Important	Least Important
Young Learners	PA, careers adviser, careers fair, provider visit, friends, visits to the provider, internet search engines (e.g. Google)	Provider websites as they often don't provide the specific information users need
Adult Learners	Nextstep, Learndirect, tutor, prospectus, provider website	ULRs (have to be a union member), library (limited resources), family and friends (providing a narrow perspective), Jobcentres (unhelpful)
Non Learners	Nextstep, current provider, library, Learndirect	Learndirect (too expensive) and Jobcentres (unhelpful)
Employers	Direct provider contact, provider websites, sector provider directory, no provider websites (e.g. sector specific), specialist professional body.	Skills brokers (too general), learndirect, libraries, Union Learning Reps (declining numbers and lack of consistency)
Connexions Pas	Own/colleagues experience, all potentially useful depending on the specific needs of learner	All considered potentially useful
Adult IAG Advisers	Learndirect, prospectus, provider visit, provider website, Jobcentre Plus (for unemployed clients)	ULRs, libraries
Train to Gain Brokers	Own/colleagues experience, direct provider contact, provider websites, employer/sector organisations	ULR (limited/specific information), library

35. Hoxby et al (2010) provide examples of how performance information in particular is published by training providers, for example through e-shots tailored to employers, or newsletters to show headline messages. Some local authority providers use television screens in foyers to communicate performance information to learners for example.

36. The LSC (2007) find further detail about the information currently used by employers (study conducted in the North East), this includes:

- Business Link and One North East are the most commonly used websites when gathering information about training providers;
- Internet search engines are the third most commonly used website, with Google being the main search engine used when beginning research;
- the most commonly used 'offline' information source is having an existing provider relationship.

Feasibly Published Information and How this Informs Choice

37. We detail below the information that is not currently published or could be published in a different way and outline challenges in collecting/publishing this data.

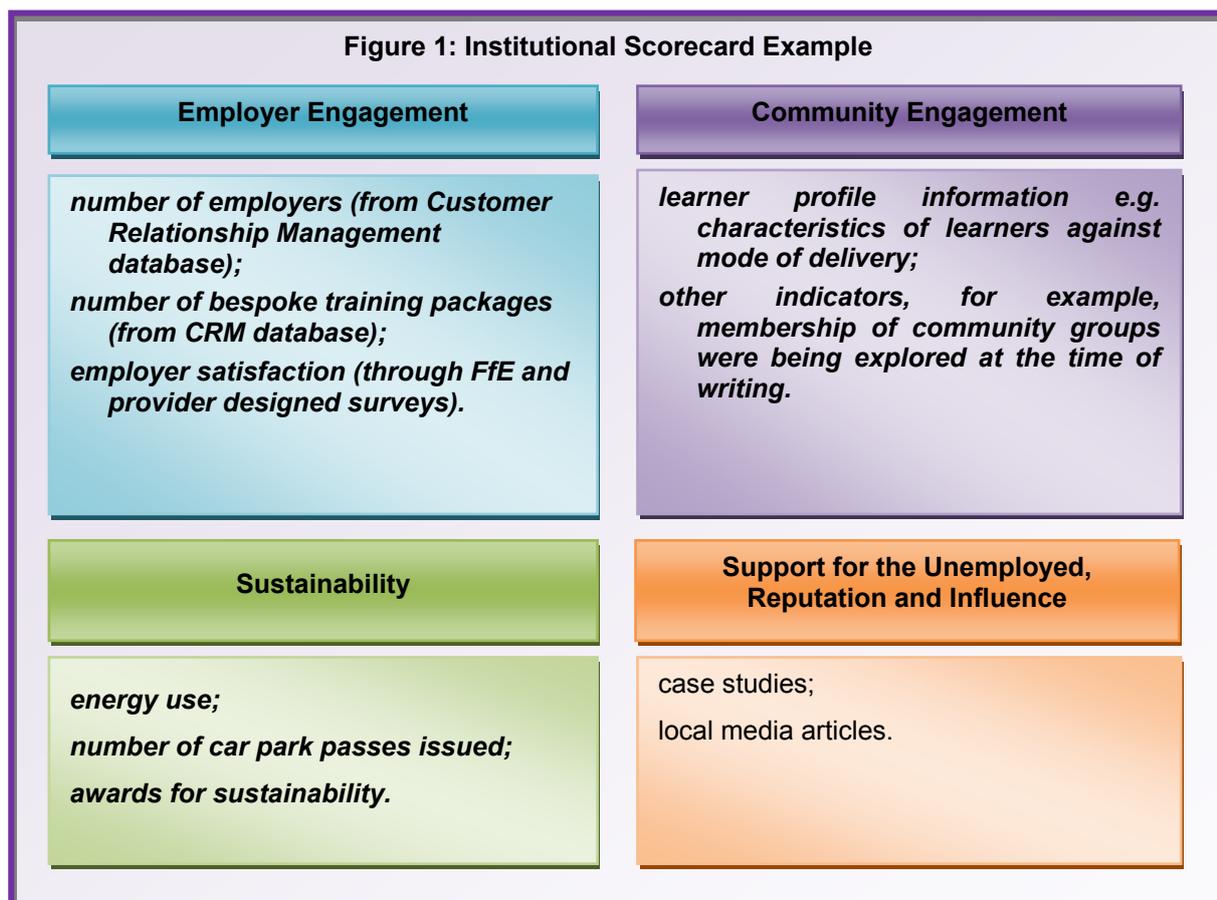
Information Not Currently Published

38. The documents reviewed explore a range of information that is not currently collected or available to users in a particular format. This includes the possibility of:

- an institutional scorecard;
- Framework for Excellence data;
- the concept of league tables and comparison websites;
- the type of information that is provided for Higher Education;
- information that could be available online for employers.

Institutional Scorecard

39. Hoxby et al (2010) describe an 'institutional scorecard' approach that is used by some providers to monitor performance. The information described overleaf may often be collected by providers, but summarising it for external presentation is rare. Hoxby provides the example of one college that was in the process of gathering the following data, with the aim that it be available to users on their website:



Framework for Excellence

40. Most of this evidence relates to the situation before the Skills Funding Agency launched the FE Public Information website, and should be understood in this context.

41. Framework for Excellence (FfE) information is currently collected at provider level and Hoxley et al (2010) consider the need for the data to be collected at lower levels. Sector Subject Area level is perceived by survey and case study participants to be too broad, where as 'qualification aim' is seen as too low a level. Hoxley et al suggest that success rates, learner views, employer views and learner destinations could be produced at a lower level however:

42. GHK (2009b) find that users are generally positive about FfE and feel that some information could be useful. However:

"...they felt that the information it contained was secondary to how they made their decisions or would not be available in the level of detail they required." (p22)

43. Although some users want to get an overall picture of the provider, most users want information to be at a lower level than provider level. Users also want information which is not included in FfE data, for example qualitative information (for example, not just describing why learners were satisfied with a course, but also why they were not) and course specific information.

44. The information that users from focus groups found most and least useful is presented in **Table 5**.

45. The format of FfE information should be both in a paper and digital format (GHK, 2009b). The internet is an appropriate medium for users, but they would also want information in a paper based format so it would be transportable.

46. GHK (2009b) presented mock up websites to the users which were viewed positively, however there is caution expressed by the IAG intermediaries who feel that information should not duplicate existing sources; i.e. the FfE information should be on provider/current websites.

Table 5: Most and Least Useful Information

User Group	<i>Most Useful Information</i>	<i>Least Useful Information</i>
Young Learners	Learner views (for some), destinations, pass rates, Government Inspection results, financial health, Qualification Success Rates (QSRs), use of resources	Learner views (for some), pass rates (for some), financial management and control
Adult Learners	Learner views, employer views, QSRs, Inspection grade, financial health, use of resources (for some)	Destinations, employer views, financial management, use of resources (for some)
Non Learners	Destinations (whether it leads to a job), learner views, amount of employer training	Inspection grade
Employers	Learner views (for some), employer views, destinations, amount of employer training, QSRs (for some), TQS, Inspection grade, financial health (secondary)	Learner views (for some), employer views (for some), destinations (for some) QSRs (for some), financial management and control, use of resources, financial health (for some)
Connexions Pas	Learner views, destinations, employer views (for some), QSRs, Inspection grade	Employer views (for some), Inspection Grades (for some), financial information
Adult IAG Advisers	Most could be useful but only in the right format i.e. specific and accessible	Financial information but could be useful for some courses
Train to Gain Brokers	Learner views (for some), destinations (for some), employer views, amount of employer training (for some), QSR, Inspection grade, financial health	Learner views (for some), destinations (for some), amount of employer training (for some), use of resources

Source: FfE user needs focus groups GHK (2009b)

League Tables

47. Simmons (2010) discusses both positive and negative opinions about producing league tables for FE provision, reporting that learners would probably access them if available. The course type would influence the likelihood of using such a site however, particularly between leisure or learning activities. Learners who participate in 'learning' activities may want to make an informed comparison between providers/courses because the course is an investment rather than a pastime.

48. The content of such a league table would include destinations and success rates of learners, and may additionally include verbatim feedback from learners.

49. Focus groups undertaken by Simmons (2010) discuss the concept of an FE league table, finding both positive and negative views (see **Table 6**).

Table 6: Views of FE League Table

Positives	Negatives
Prompt learners to find out more about the provider/course	Difficult to produce accurate information
Influence decision on whether to do the course/not	Subjectivity of learner satisfaction
Increases choice as informs learners of other local providers	Location is key factor so few choices are available
Comparison between providers	League tables are too focused on results rather than content and quality
Destination data may help influence decision about long term goals	Word of mouth is preferred
	IAG: should focus on long term goals, should be impartial, should take the time to provide personalised advice, should not conflict other information sources

Comparison Websites

50. Using the 'Train2Gain' website as a 'one-stop-shop' for the above is also considered to be useful, in conjunction with training methods and courses available.

51. The LSC (2009) finds that when a wrong choice has been made by learners, they often feel that they had insufficient information about alternative options; they want access to a 'single portal' for information. This is viewed as being an impartial source that they can access, which provides information about the number of different learning routes and providers. This could be something similar to the NextStep and Careers Advice Service and the future Adult and Advancement Careers Service.

Comparison to Higher Education

52. Hoxby et al (2010) compare FE information collected to Higher Education, as shown in Table 7 below. Data is collected centrally through the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education survey (DLHE), which takes place six months and then three years after the course has been completed. Information is presented on the 'Unistats' website which shows a number of statistics about all university institutions. This includes:

- average UCAS points achieved;
- satisfaction %;
- employed in a graduate job %.

53. Users can compare up to three institutions to find further detail on:

- student profile;
- proportion of those doing further study;
- employment sector profiles;
- responses to individual student satisfaction survey questions.

Table 7: Comparison to Higher Education

Indicator	Schools	Learning and Skills	Higher Education
Customer Satisfaction	Pupils' perceptions parents' perceptions (these may be linked to Ofsted data collection)	FfE Learner Views Survey FfE Employer Views Survey – both at provider level	National Learner Survey
Achievement/Outcomes	Progress Attainment Narrowing Gaps in Achievement	FfE Qualification success rates at provider level	Progression year 1 to Year 2 (i.e. retention) Degree classifications Both at degree level
Inspection Outcomes	Scores based on four judgements	Currently available from Ofsted website only	Link to QAA Reports
Destination Data	no	FfE destination survey – each provider overall score	√
Provider/Institutions' own contextual comments	√	no	√

54. Mixed-method research (surveys and focus groups) commissioned by HEFCE (2010) find that the most important information that learners use to make decisions about participating in Higher Education are grouped as follows (**Table 8**):

- **satisfaction with the institution/course** (with standard of teaching and with their course);
- **employment rates**;
- **cost** (halls of residence are ranked higher than information on bursaries).

Table 8: Students' Information Requirements: Higher Education

'Very useful' rank	Information item	% indicating that this information would be 'very useful'
1	Proportions of students at the university satisfied or very satisfied with the standard of teaching	54.4%
2	Proportions of students at the university satisfied or very satisfied with their course	50.5%
3	Proportion of students in employment in the first year after completing this course	44.6%
4	Professional bodies which recognise this course	44.3%
5	Proportions of students at the university satisfied or very satisfied with the support and guidance they received	43.6%
6	Proportions of students at the university satisfied or very satisfied with their feedback on assessment	41.7%
7	Proportion of students employed in a full-time professional or managerial job one year after completing this course	40.5%
8	Proportions of students at the university satisfied or very satisfied with the library facilities	40.1%
9	Cost of halls of residence	37.7%
10	Weekly hours of teaching contact time	37.6%
11	Proportion of the assessment that is by coursework	35.2%
12	Average salary in the first year after completing this course	35.1%
13	Proportions of students at the university satisfied or very satisfied with the Student Union	34.7%
14	Maximum available bursary	34.5%
15	Proportions of students at the university satisfied or very satisfied with the IT facilities	33.6%
16	Maximum household income for eligibility for a bursary	33.3%

55. The information that is viewed as least useful is similar to the FE findings, including having little interest in the characteristics of other students and also proportion of drop

outs. These factors are not perceived to be caused by course design and academic support.

56. It is interesting that less than half of the sample had tried to find the most highly ranked information. This suggests that even though information may appear useful it may not have actually been sought to make a decision between institutions/courses.

57. Similarly to FE, the two main sources of information used are websites and prospectuses (88%) and UCAS (81%). Similarly to young learners, family and friends are the third most used source of information (70%). Visits to institutions, interviews and teachers from previous institutions (e.g. the current school/college of a learner) are also used by around two thirds of respondents.

Online Information for Employers

58. LSC research (2007) considers issues surrounding the launch of the North East Employer Guide to training. Key information that should be provided on the website, as found through focus groups of *'individuals who were considered to have sufficient experience in the discipline of learning and development'* includes:

- **feedback of providers and courses**, so that existing relationships do not have to be relied upon, perhaps including a ranking system based on previous ratings, particularly with respect to funding and support received, delivery and commercial impact;
- **simplification of process and terminology in relation to regional funding opportunities**;
- **being available/accessible to the voluntary sector**, in terms of content and terminology used e.g. the term 'business' is not inclusive of the third sector.

59. There may be opportunities to connect the FE Public Information website to the Business Link website resulting from recent changes.

Challenges in Providing Information

60. The documents reviewed identify a number of issues with providers or IAG representatives providing this information however. These are grouped under the following headings:

- accessing course level information;
- learner and employer satisfaction;
- destinations;
- wage gains;
- inspection grades;

- IAG;
- performance information.

61. The challenges across these themes include who provides the raw information, the time to collect it, when to collect it, problems with defining units of information, having consistency across providers and cost implications of collecting/collating data.

Accessing Course Level Information

62. The findings from Hoxley et al (2010) show that even though potential learners/employers may find course level information useful, providers are not clear whether course level information will inform choice.

“In a demand-led system there may be an understandable difference between the information which learners/employers might find useful and the information which providers think they ought to find useful.” (p2)

63. Hoxley et al (2010) found that publishing information at course level yields the following challenges:

Definition of a ‘course’

64. Defining a ‘course’ is problematic because this has connotations for learners, “working together in the same place at the same time, towards the same qualification: this does not reflect the reality of activity across the sector as a whole.” (p8) Hoxley et al find that the lowest level of data aggregation that would be most useful to potential learners would be at a ‘programme’ level, i.e. the programme including main qualification and additional Key Skills/Functional Skills. This is because:

- there are small cohorts of learners for some providers, for example one LA in the study had cohorts of qualification aims ranging from 1 to over 5,000 learners;
- there may need to be a threshold for the minimum number of guided learning hours within published data;
- for Apprenticeships, Sector Framework Codes should be the lowest level (reported by one provider);
- Sector Skills Areas (SSA) are too broad to use as a comparison.

65. The recommendation from Hoxley et al is subsequently to:

“Identify the most appropriate level of data reporting to support learner and employer choice, consistent with giving high levels of reportable data (i.e. not too low a level of disaggregation) and low demands on the public purse” (p11)

Methods for Data Collection

66. Methods for data collection are varied so comparisons are difficult. One college stated:

“there is no potential for manipulation of data, nor its interpretation by the provider, nor discretion about the data provided.” (p12)

67. Although Holey et al go on to say that the surveying for Framework for Excellence largely addresses these concerns, detailed analysis of responses is not passed on to providers.

Consortium Verses Provider Specific Information

68. Sub-contracting programme delivery through consortia is a challenge to providing performance information that is provider-specific. This is because:

- a contract holder may have partners with different performance levels;
- one provider may be part of more than one consortium;
- one learner may have elements of their programme delivered by different providers.

Cost Implications.

69. Additional costs would be incurred for providers where:

- there needs to be an increased proportion of learners sampled;
- additional requirements or new information is needed;
- data needs to be re-categorised for reporting.

70. Many providers are unwilling to pay for such costs, as shown in **Table 9**.

Table 9: Costs Implications of Collecting Extra Information

	Destination			Wage Gain		
	Believe additional cost	Willing to meet cost	% willing to meet	Believe additional cost	Willing to meet cost	% willing to meet cost
HOLEX	14	6	43%	13	2	15%
AoC	44	22	50%	56	12	21%
ALP	35	21	60%	42	16	38%
All	93	49	53%	111	30	27%

Learner and Employer Satisfaction

71. Five out of six of Hoxley et al's (2010) case study providers are concerned with ensuring consistency across collecting and presenting satisfaction data. Central surveying is deemed essential, with the option of questions chosen by individual providers that would not be externally published. However, with surveys:

- there is concern over the sample sizes and levels of aggregation leading to data not being robust;
- there is also a time issue for providers and learners having time to complete the surveys, so response rates may be low;
- internet availability for online surveys is also an issue. Hoxley et al (2010) cited information from one LA provider that 19% of Adult Learner Responsive learners study in centres with no or limited internet access and many of the other 81% may have no scheduled access to the internet, so time must be taken out of programmes. This leads to additional accommodation and staff costs within limited IT facilities.
- surveys conducted mid-year are indicators for quality assurance and improvement, and end of programme surveys reflect the full experience of learners;
- it is important to consider who completes them. One provider as part of a case study (Hoxley et al, 2010) said there were disparities in responses from employers which were dependent on who completed them.

Destinations

72. Collecting and interpreting destination data is perceived to be challenging by case study providers (Hoxley et al, 2010) because:

- actual destination is more useful to potential learners but this is more difficult and expensive to collect due to the low response rates. One FE College had a 1 in 6 response rate to requests for learner destination;
- data may be skewed because learner destination may not be expected i.e. qualifications may not be chosen because they directly improve their employment status;
- destination does not mean that learners will stay in employment.

Wage Gain

73. Hoxley et al's (2010) survey responses show that over half of colleges and training providers surveyed (77 out of 132) believe it is possible to collect data on wage gain at a course/programme level, and a majority see benefit in having this information provided to potential learners and employers. However, maintaining anonymity and achieving a viable response rate are barriers to collecting this information. There is also discussion around this not being based on individual learner information because:

- it may be affected by local employment markets;
- in some sectors, gaining a qualification tends to lead to an increase in salary.

Inspection Grades

74. In the use and presentation of inspection grades, Hoxby et al (2010) suggest that the following should be considered:

- smaller cohorts of SSAs do not attract an inspection grade;
- the unit of the inspection grades;
- differing time intervals between inspections for different providers;
- dissimilarity in judgement from Ofsted and FfE.

75. In addition the increasing requirement for lighter touch inspection regimes is leading to variable intervals between different intensity inspections.

Information, Advice and Guidance

76. There is an issue around the amount and nature of IAG available to some people. Surveys by Spielhofer et al (2008) show that a substantial minority of young people, particularly those with LDD, teenage parents and young people in jobs without training or who are not in education, employment or training feel that they have not received enough support or information. As a result, they do not feel prepared for their future when completing Year 11.

77. IAG and support emerged as an issue for several young people, who had found the decision about what to study difficult. One in 10 young people who had said the decision was difficult explain that they found the range of choices was too wide. Two per cent feel there was too much information to absorb (Spielhofer et al, 2008).

78. IAG for these groups needs to be engaging and accessible to aid young people's understanding of the opportunities available to them. This needs to be accompanied by personal support to ensure young people receive the advice and support suitable to their particular needs, interests and circumstances. (Spielhofer et al, 2008)

79. Conversely, the LSC (2009) find that satisfaction with sources of IAG used by young people to formulate their post-16 choices is generally high.

80. Satisfaction with the Connexions Service is variable. Middle-achievers can feel somewhat neglected, as the Connexions and school-based advice is felt to be focused on those at risk of becoming NEET and those described as high flyers (LSC, 2009).

81. Aldridge et al (2010) find that the provision of IAG should be flexible in terms of when it is provided to potential learners. Interviews with learners show that potential learners over the age of 19 face similar barriers to learning as young people, but without the same level of support (for example Connexions is stated to be only available until age 19).

Performance Information

82. Case studies indicate that providers are highly cautious of potentially presenting information to users (Holex et al, 2010) including:

- when implementing a 'traffic light' rating system, satisfactory becomes amber, and this could be regarded as a warning sign. A star rating may therefore be more suitable;
- grade boundaries do not reflect the continuum of performance. Holex et al give the example of, "a good provider may be only 1% better than a satisfactory one." (p20) Raw scores measures against benchmarks may be more appropriate therefore;
- there may be confusion for performance measures where a high proportion (e.g. 80%) is interpreted negatively for one measure (e.g. low satisfaction) and positive for another (e.g. high success);
- there is concern that over-simplifying performance information may mean that some learners do not enrol in a course at all if 'high scoring' providers are not accessible.

Annex B

Learner Panel Survey

Informing Learner Choice

Introduction:

The Skills Funding Agency have asked York Consulting to find out more about the type of information that young people need to help them make decisions about what to study and where.

This short questionnaire will ask for your views about what type of information learners like you need in order to make decisions about which provider (e.g. college, sixth form, work based learning provider) and course/programme (e.g. A level's, apprenticeships, NVQs) to attend.

When looking at the questions, please think about what it was like for you when you were making a decision about what to study and where and what information you either had, or would have liked to have that would have helped you with making an informed decision.

Your views are very important to us. All information that you provide will be kept anonymous and confidential.

1. From the list below, please you can indicate how useful you would find the following information when making a decision about which provider and/or which course/programme of study to undertake?

	Very useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Not particularly useful	Not useful at all	Don't know
Description of course/programme (e.g. what subject/topics will be covered)						
Location of where the course/programme takes place (e.g. college campus, location of provider)						
How to get to the location of the course/programme by car						
How to get to the location of the course/programme by public transport						
Availability and cost of parking at the provider						
The length of the course/programme (e.g. the number of months and years it lasts)						
The number of weekly hours of teaching on the course/programme						
The balance of coursework and exams						

	Very useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Not particularly useful	Not useful at all	Don't know
on the course/programme						
The entry qualifications/requirements you would need to get on the course/programme						
How much it would cost for you to do the course/programme						
Whether there would be any financial support available to you to pay for the course/programme						
Whether there would be any other costs of undertaking the course/programme (e.g. field or study trips)						
A description of the facilities at the provider (e.g. IT, library, crèche/nursery, facilities for religious faiths)						

1(a) Which of the above did you find the most useful?

2. We are interested in how useful it would be to you to know about the reputation of the course/programme and the provider when making a decision about where to study. Please rate how useful you would find the following information:

Reputation of Course/programme and Provider	Very useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Not particularly useful	Not useful at all	Don't Know
Reputation of the college/provider (from relatives/friends)						
Reputation of the course/programme (from relatives/friends)						
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the course/programme						
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the provider						
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the standard of teaching						
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with feedback on work that they had received from tutors/teachers						
Rating of the quality of the teaching (e.g. Ofsted, inspection results)						

Reputation of Course/programme and Provider	Very useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Not particularly useful	Not useful at all	Don't Know
Proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the support and guidance they had received						
A description of the benefits that the course could provide for the learner (e.g. the types of skills and experience that could be gained)						

2(a). Which of the above did you find the most useful?

3. We are interested in how useful you would find it to know about how well other learners on the course/programme had succeeded when you were making a decision about where and what to study. Please rate how useful you would find the following information:

How well other learners had done on the course/programme	Very useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Not particularly useful	Not useful at all	Don't Know
Proportion of learners that had previously dropped out of the course/programme						
What learners who had previously been on the course/programme went on to do afterwards (e.g. jobs, further study)						
What learners who had previously been on the course/programme had achieved (e.g. grades, qualifications)						
Changes in salary after completing the course/programme for students who previously had a job						

3(a). Which of the above would you find the most useful?

4. We are interested in how useful you would find it to know about the types of students that attend a provider (college, sixth form etc) when making a decision about where to study. Please rate how useful you would find knowing the following information:

Types of Learners at provider	Very useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Not particularly useful	Not useful at all	Don't Know
Ethnic background of students						
The proportion of male and female students						
The number of international students						
The age range of students						
The proportion of disabled students						

4(a). Which of the above would you find the most useful?

Please outline below any other information that would feel would be useful to you when making a decision about what to study and where? {open question}

Thank you and Close

Annex C

Parent Survey

QS7638 – Education (edub107q) – USE BMRB template

Scripter: Do not invert lists unless instructed otherwise

(Base all GB adults aged 30 -80)

SHOW SCREEN

Q1. Do you have either a child aged 14-21 who may attend or is currently attending a course of further education learning or a child that has done so in the last two years?

By course of further learning we mean a Further Education course or programme like **A level's, apprenticeships, NVQs or BTECs** that take place at a **college, school sixth form** or a **work based training provider**. Please note that this does **not** include University or other higher-education courses.

01: Yes

02: No

(DK)

(Route: If code1 at Q1 ask Q2, others go to next link)

(Base all GB adults aged 30 -80 with a child aged 14-21 who will attend/is attending/has attended Further Education place of learning)

SHOW SCREEN – READ OUT CODES

Q2. And is your child...

INTERVIEWER IF NECESSARY SAY: If you have more than one child this applies to then please think of the youngest child

01: Planning to attend

02: Currently attending

03: Has attended in the last two years

(DK)

(scripter: display following text item on separate screen)

The Skills Funding Agency are interested in finding out more about the type of information that young people need to help them make decisions about what to study and where. As part of this we are interested in gaining the views of parents.

(scripter: display following text item on separate screen)

I am now going to ask you how useful you find different types of information when helping your child to make a decision about which provider (e.g. College, Sixth Form or Work based learning provider) and/or which course/programme of study (A level's, apprenticeships, NVQs) to choose.

For each type of information please tell me how useful you would find this. So firstly...

(Base all GB adults aged 30 -80 with a child aged 14-21 who will attend/is attending/has attended Further Education place of learning)

SHOW SCREEN – READ OUT CODES

Q3, (insert statement)

INTERVIEWER IF NECESSARY SAY: How useful would you find this when helping your child to make a decision about which provider and/or which course/programme of study to choose.

... A description of course/programme (e.g. what subject/topics will be covered)

... The location of where the course/programme takes place (e.g. college campus, location of provider)

... How to get to the location of the course/programme by car

... How to get to the location of the course/programme by public transport

... The availability and cost of parking at the provider

... The length of the course/programme (e.g. the number of months and years it lasts)

01: Very useful

02: Somewhat useful

03: Useful

04: Not particularly useful

05: Not useful at all

(DK)

(scripter: display following text item on separate screen)

And now still thinking about what information you would useful, how useful would you find?

SHOW SCREEN – READ OUT CODES

Q4. Insert statement

INTERVIEWER IF NECESSARY SAY: How useful would you find this when helping your child to make a decision about which provider and/or which course/programme of study to choose.

... The number of weekly hours of teaching on the course/programme

... The balance of coursework and exams on the course/programme

... The entry qualifications/requirements needed to get on the course/programme

... How much it would cost to do the course/programme

... Whether there would be any financial support available to pay for the course/programme

... Whether there would be any other costs of undertaking the course/programme (e.g. field or study trips)

... A description of the facilities at the provider (e.g. IT, library, crèche/nursery, facilities for religious faiths)

01: Very useful

02: Somewhat useful

03: Useful

04: Not particularly useful

05: Not useful at all

(DK)

SHOW SCREEN –SINGLE CODE

Q5. Here is a list of all the types of information I just mentioned. Which would you find the most useful?

01: A description of course/programme (e.g. what subject/topics will be covered)

02: The location of where the course/programme takes place (e.g. college campus, location of provider)

03: How to get to the location of the course/programme by car

04: How to get to the location of the course/programme by public transport

05: The availability and cost of parking at the provider

06: The length of the course/programme (e.g. the number of months and years it lasts)

07: The number of weekly hours of teaching on the course/programme

08: The balance of coursework and exams on the course/programme

09: The entry qualifications/requirements needed to get on the course/programme

10: How much it would cost to do the course/programme

11: Whether there would be any financial support available to pay for the course/programme

12: Whether there would be any other costs of undertaking the course/programme (e.g. field or study trips)

13: A description of the facilities at the provider (e.g. IT, library, crèche/nursery, facilities for religious faiths)

(DK)

(scripter: display following text item on separate screen)

Now thinking about the reputation of the course/programme and the provider. How useful would you find the following information when helping your child to make a decision about where and what to study?

SHOW SCREEN –READ OUT CODES

Q6. Insert statement

INTERVIEWER IF NECESSARY SAY: How useful would you find this when helping your child to make a decision about which provider and/or which course/programme of study to choose?

... The reputation of the college/ provider (from relatives/friends)

... The reputation of the course/programme (from relatives/friends)

... The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the course/programme

... The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the provider

... The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the standard of teaching

... The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with feedback on work that they had received from tutors/teachers

... The rating of the quality of the teaching (e.g. Ofsted, inspection results)

... The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the support and guidance they had received

... A description of the benefits that the course could provide for the learner (e.g. the types of skills and experience that could be gained)

... The proportion of people who started the course that went on to successfully achieve the qualification.

... The position of the organisation in published ratings or performance tables

01: Very useful

02: Somewhat useful

03: Useful

04: Not particularly useful

05: Not useful at all

(DK)

SHOW SCREEN –SINGLE CODE

Q7. From the following list of the types of information I just mentioned, which would you find the most useful?

01: The reputation of the college/ provider (from relatives/friends)

02: The reputation of the course/programme (from relatives/friends)

03: The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the course/programme

04: The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the provider

05: The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the standard of teaching

06: The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with feedback on work that they had received from tutors/teachers

07: The rating of the quality of the teaching (e.g. Ofsted, inspection results)

08: The proportion of previous learners that were satisfied with the support and guidance they had received

09: A description of the benefits that the course could provide for the learner (e.g. the types of skills and experience that could be gained)

10: The proportion of people who started the course that went on to successfully achieve the qualification.

11: The position of the organisation in published ratings or performance tables

(DK)

(scripter: display following text item on separate screen)

Now thinking about how well learners had succeeded on the course/programme. How useful would you find the following information when helping your child to make a decision about where and what to study?

SHOW SCREEN –READ OUT CODES

Q8. Insert statement

INTERVIEWER IF NECESSARY SAY: How useful would you find this when helping your child to make a decision about which provider and/or which course/programme of study to choose?

... The proportion of learners that had previously dropped out of the course/programme

... What learners who had previously been on the course/programme went on to do afterwards (e.g. jobs, further study)

... What learners who had previously been on the course/programme had achieved (e.g. grades, qualifications)

... The changes in salary after completing the course/programme for students who previously had a job

01: Very useful

02: Somewhat useful

03: Useful

04: Not particularly useful

05: Not useful at all

(DK)

SHOW SCREEN –SINGLE CODE

Q9. And from the following list of the types of information I just mentioned, which would you find the most useful?

01: The proportion of learners that had previously dropped out of the course/programme

02: What learners who had previously been on the course/programme went on to do afterwards (e.g. jobs, further study)

03: What learners who had previously been on the course/programme had achieved (e.g. grades, qualifications)

04: The changes in salary after completing the course/programme for students who previously had a job

05: All the same

(DK)

scripter: display following text item on separate screen)

Now thinking about the types of students that attend a provider (college, sixth form etc)
How useful would you find the following information when helping your child to make a decision about where and what to study?

SHOW SCREEN –READ OUT CODES

Q10. Insert statement

INTERVIEWER IF NECESSARY SAY: How useful would you find this when helping your child to make a decision about which provider and/or which course/programme of study to choose?

... The ethnic background of students

... The proportion of male and female students

... The number of international students

... The age range of students

... The proportion of disabled students

01: Very useful

02: Somewhat useful

03: Useful

04: Not particularly useful

05: Not useful at all

(DK)

SHOW SCREEN –SINGLE CODE

Q11. And from the following list of the types of information I just mentioned, which would you find the most useful?

01: The ethnic background of students

02: The proportion of male and female students

03: The number of international students

04: The age range of students

05: The proportion of disabled students

(DK)

SHOW SCREEN

Q12. What other information do you feel would be useful to you when helping your child to make a decision about what to study and where?

INTERVIEWER PROBE FULLY: WHAT ELSE?

O/E Write in

SHOW SCREEN –SINGLE CODE

Q.13. As a result of the interview you have just completed, York Consulting, on behalf of the Skills Funding Agency, may like to contact you in the next three months about this research. If they contacted you it would be in the form of a telephone interview on this topic. Would it be okay for us to pass your details and the replies you have given in this interview onto York Consulting? Your details would not be used for any other purpose than for market research and would kept in strictest confidence.

01: Yes - okay to re-contact

02: No - not okay to re-contact

ANNEX D:

Information Matrix

Theme	Specific Data/Information to be Collected
Description of course/programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description of the content of course (e.g. subjects/topics covered) • Professional bodies which recognise the course/programme
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course/programme location (e.g. specific campus) • descriptive statement of accessibility by car • descriptive statement of accessibility by public transport • availability and cost of parking
Duration of course/programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • months/years that the course/programme lasts
Entry qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • minimum entry requirements (e.g. previous experience gained, qualifications etc)
Financial considerations/support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cost of course/programme • maximum available bursary for learners • maximum household income eligible for a bursary • additional cost of field or study trips
Method of Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • weekly hours of teaching /contact time per week • mix of exams/coursework
Provider facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • description of facilities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - IT - Library - availability/quality of specialist equipment/resources - Crèche/nursery facilities - on-campus facilities for religious faiths
Course/programme reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rating of the quality of teaching • % of learners satisfied/very satisfied with course/programme • % learners satisfied/very satisfied with standard of teaching • % learners satisfied/very satisfied with feedback on assessment

Theme	Specific Data/Information to be Collected
Provider reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rating of the quality of teaching • % learners satisfied/very satisfied with provider • % learners satisfied/very satisfied with standard of teaching • % learners satisfied/very satisfied with facilities of provider • Ofsted ranking/inspection grade
Retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of students that dropped out of the course/programme
Destinations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on the destinations of learners over the last 2-3 years: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - for course/programme of study - for subject area - nationally
Success rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner achievement over last 2-3 years
Career prospects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of students in employment in 1st year after completing the course
Wages gains (employed adults only)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average salary of learners in the first year after completing the course/programme
Types of Learners at provider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnic mix of students • Proportions of students that are male/female • Proportions of students from different social class groups • Proportion of international students • Age range of students • Proportion of disabled students
Purpose/benefits of course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description of what benefits the course/programme could provide for the learner

Annex E

References

Reference	Document Type	Region	Perspective of...	Method
Spielhofer, T. et al, 2008, Barriers to Participation in Education and Training, Department for Education Research Report (RR009)	Research report	England	Learners	<p>The study involved detailed survey work with different groups of young people and parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • young people aged 16 to 17; • young people with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) aged 16-25; • parents of young people with LDD; • young people in a job without training (JWT) aged 16 to 17; • young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) aged 16 to 17; • teenage parents aged 16-18.
Learning and Skills Council, 2009, Understanding Choice and the Empowered Learner, London; Learning and Skills Council	Research report	England	Learners	<p>This research explored the process of making informed choices for young people and adults and identified that the process is very different for each group. The research included quantitative and qualitative strands, focusing on the following groups:</p> <p>adult learners aged 19 and above;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • those who are considering embarking upon a learning programme; • those who are currently studying on a pre-Level 2, Level-2, Level-3 vocational/work-based or non-vocational classroom-based course; • those who are currently studying for pleasure

Reference	Document Type	Region	Perspective of...	Method
				<p>or leisure (personal or community-based learning);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • those who are not currently studying, but who are open to the idea of learning; • young people aged 15-19; • those studying for A or AS Levels in school sixth-forms and FE or sixth-form colleges; • those studying vocational or Apprenticeship schemes, either through FE college or employers; those on entry to employment (E2E provision); • those who have entered employment and are not currently in education.
HOLEX, AoC, ALP, 2010, Presentation of Performance information by providers in the Learning and Skills Sector – The feasibility, desirability and cost of adopting a ‘course labelling’ approach to the presentation of performance information, NIPB	Research report	England	Employers and learners	This project explored provider performance information based on Framework for Excellence indicators and ‘traffic light’ labelling. The methodology included a short electronic survey of representative organisations and visits to case study providers.
Renfrew, K et al, 2010, Understanding the information needs of users of public	Research report	England	Learners	This mixed method study involved research with both undergraduate and postgraduate students, gathering their views on Higher, rather than Further Education. The method included a document review, interviews with stakeholders,

Reference	Document Type	Region	Perspective of...	Method
information about higher education, report to HEFCE				employers and careers advisers, HEIs and FE colleges, eleven focus groups with students and a survey of 1,926 students across 38 institutions.
Nseir, R., Foggan, K., 2007, Discovery Phase_Online Marketing Interim Report, report to LSC	Research report	North East England	Employers	This mixed method study was commissioned to provide a context for advising and supporting the LSC to launch the North East Employer Guide to Training. The report presents survey findings from a survey of employers in the North East (98 responses) and builds on these findings with qualitative discussion from a focus group of 'individuals who were considered to have sufficient experience in the discipline of learning and development'.
Simmons, E., 2010, Report/presentation for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills: Skills Strategy Consultation, Opinion Panel	Research Report	England	Learners	This qualitative study sampled 30 learners from The Learner Panel and The Student Panel as approached by OpinionPanel. Four focus groups were conducted online with learners who were enrolled in FE.
GHK, 2009a, Effectively publishing and developing Framework for Excellence: Analysis of user needs Final Report,	Research Report	England	Employers, learners and IAG representatives	This qualitative study involved a literature review, stakeholder interviews and focus groups with key user groups – learners, employers and IAG intermediaries. The aim was to find how users choose education and training courses, how such information is effectively marketed and communicated, particularly with relation to

Reference	Document Type	Region	Perspective of...	Method
LSC				Framework for Excellence information.
GHK, 2009b, Effectively publishing and developing Framework for Excellence: Analysis of user needs Report on focus groups with users, LSC	Research Report	England	Employers, learners and IAG representatives	This report feeds into the final report detailed above. This report focuses on the results from the user focus groups however.
Aldridge, F., Casey, L., Jones, E., Law, C., 2010, Understanding and supporting young people and adults not in education, employment and training: Early findings from the NEET National Research Project, LSIS and NIACE	Research Report	England	Learners	<p>The aims of this research included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve understanding of the aspirations, motivations and behaviours of young people and adults who are NEET; • support providers in the learning and skills sector to secure institution-specific evidence to develop their understanding in relation to these issues; • inform individual provider strategies to meet the needs of young people and adults in their locality; and • inform the national strategy (in preparation) for the raising the participation age. <p>The methodology involved learning providers conducting over 2000 interviews with young people and adults.</p>

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This publication is also available on our website at www.bis.gov.uk

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to:

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET
Tel: 020 7215 5000

If you require this publication in an alternative format, email enquiries@bis.gsi.gov.uk, or call 020 7215 5000.

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